

Lost Faith

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Eric Dunning was only twelve and in the last six months had watched his mother Erica waste away with cancer, eight years after the death of his father Jack in the early months of fighting in Afghanistan. Torn away from everything he has ever known, a happy southern California life with his mother and his best friend April, he is sent to the complete opposite side of the country to live with an aunt and cousin he has never met. Enduring one trauma after another, circumstances alter the way he sees life, God, and himself in ways he could never have imagined.

Set against the backdrop of rural northern New Hampshire in the 2010s, *Lost Faith* combines elements of coming-of-age, transformation, self-discovery, and romance, interwoven with a potential answer to the question, "Why does a loving God allow good people to suffer?" It is written as a companion story to the novel, *Every Day is Your Last*.

This book is dedicated to my mother Linda, who loved me enough to make the right decisions for me, even when they felt wrong. It was worth the sorrow and pain of getting here to *be* your daughter.

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130,129 words

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Chapter 1 - Going Home

Eric looked out the window of the cab through rivers of raindrops that ran down the side of the roof in little streams. The sun was just reaching the ebb of twilight in the wet October sky as he opened the cab door and stepped out onto the muddy driveway in front of the house that was to be where he would live from now on. He couldn't call it home; that was back in Newport Beach.

The scent of rain and the faint hint of ozone combined with the imposing edifice, marble pillars standing to either side of four perfect marble steps up to the massive oak front door, to create a frightening scene. The twelve-year-old gulped as he'd had no idea what his aunt Heather's home would be like when he'd left Southern California. He had thought that even in twenty-ten northern New Hampshire would all be farms and rustic shacks made of hewn logs. The *last* thing he had expected was what appeared to him to be a mansion.

The cab driver irately came around the vehicle, stomping through the mud quickly. "Hey *kid!* You owe me another thirty-eight fifty!"

Startled by the man and his situation, Eric lost his footing and slipped in the mud, falling backwards onto his rear. Looking up at the imposing and obviously irritated man as mud and rain soaked into his ratty jeans, he blinked up at him. "I... I gave you all I had *left*." He pointed toward the massive building. "Th-they should be able to p-pay the r-rest, sir!"

Pulling the child up by his jacket accompanied by the sound of seams popping, the cabby growled at him. "They *better* be able to pay kid, or I'm calling the *cops!*" He dragged Eric up the fine marble steps, the youth noting that their passage left the only blemishes on the pristine wrap-around porch. Banging on the door in one continuous stream of noise, the cabby nearly fell through the doorway when it opened.

Eric looked into the house and saw a monstrously huge man in a tuxedo jacket staring at them with a look of near disdain. He was obviously well muscled and very tall, seeming at least half again as tall as Eric's four foot-tent height. He guessed he could use each leg of the man's pant legs as a sleeping bag.

The stranger stepped into the doorway, blocking most of it. "May I *help* you, sir?" he said in low even tones. "What is your *business* here?"

The cabby was initially intimidated, but determined to get what was owed to him. "Look *Jeeves*, you know this kid?" He hoisted Eric onto his tiptoes.

The man in the doorway looked emotionlessly down at the dangling child who had a terrified and broken look in his young eyes. "I have never *seen* him before sir, however..."

Even as he spoke, the cabby lifted Eric up by the jacket with his free hand, popping more seams on the sleeves as he hoisted the child completely off his feet. "You little *thief*! Think I have nothing *better* to do than... Ah!" He screamed as the man in the doorway gripped his arm like a vice, making him drop Eric unceremoniously onto the soiled and torn seat of his pants. "*Lego* of me!" he screamed, finally stepping away as the giant man released him. "What're you, *crazy*!" he yelled.

Clearing his throat, the huge man answered, "I only acted to prevent you from harming the boy, sir." Looking down at the child, he bent at the waist and offered a hand to him. "I am Fredrick, Madame Hargrave's butler. Would you, young sir, be Eric *Dunning*?"

Nodding as Fredrick helped him back up, he stammered shyly, "Y-yes, sir."

The driver moved up again cautiously. "Say...what's the *gag* here? You said you *didn't* know him!"

"I have never *met* young Master Eric before, sir." Fredrick replied smartly, "However, he *was* expected... though not until *next* week at the soonest."

"Well, the kid still owes me thirty-eight fifty for his fare! I hauled him all the way out here from Boston-Manchester and he *shorted* me! I *ought* to call the *cops*!"

"Fredrick?" a light feminine voice said from behind the butler. "What's going on?"

"Just an issue regarding young Master *Dunning*, Madame Hargrave." he replied with a slight turn of the head. "It appears he is here far in advance of when you were expecting him. There is also a... *cab driver*... insisting on an additional fee for the fare, Madame."

Watching as Fredrick moved back into the house, a woman came into Eric's view. Heather Hargrave was dressed in a formal gown of pink satin and lace, organza sleeves extending almost all the way to her fingertips. Her lovely blonde hair was curled and coifed perfectly to frame her beautiful countenance centered around two of the bluest eyes Eric had ever seen. As she looked down at him with a concerned expression, he felt ashamed of his disheveled appearance just being in her presence.

The driver, hoping to just get his money and go, cleared his throat. "*Evening, lady!* I drove the *kid* here all the way from Boston-Manchester and... well... he shorted my *fare*! Then *this* guy grabs me and almost breaks my *arm*!"

Fredrick bowed slightly to her and whispered in her ear. She sighed as she looked at the two strangers before saying, "Very well, Fredrick. Pay him what he is due."

Retrieving two twenty-dollar bills, Fredrick handed them to the driver. "The change and a receipt, *if you please, sir.*" he intoned flatly.

Snatching the money from his meaty hands, the cabby grumbled and went back to his vehicle, Fredrick moving out the doorway to follow him.

"Won't you come in?" Heather said lovingly.

Stepping slowly and cautiously into the house, Eric's shoes squished with each footfall, making him embarrassed for even being in her lovely home. "S-sorry I'm such a m-mess. I... I fell d-down outside... Mrs. *Hargrave*?"

"You may call me 'Aunt Heather', Eric. And don't worry about the mess. Though you *might* want to remove those shoes!" she said lightly. Sweeping her hand toward a marble bench along the wall opposite the door, Eric could now see it was actually the side of an ornate marble stairway.

Making his way over to it, he sat down just as Fredrick came back in; the sound of the cab speeding off into the rainy night.

"*Eric*?" his aunt Heather asked. "Don't you have any *luggage* or *bags*? Were they still in the *cab*?"

He slowly shook his head. "They... they were lost somewhere when I changed planes... *Detroit* maybe? I... I asked the lady at the counter about them. She just gave me a number to call. She... she said they *might* be able to have them in a few days or so."

Heather looked down at the child who she hadn't seen since he was three years old. Her sister-in-law's son, Eric's defeated and vacant visage vaguely resembled both of his deceased parents, but favored Erica and her late husband's side of the family more. *But his hair looks so much like Jack's!* she noted of the boy's bedraggled dirty-blonde locks. Smiling at him sweetly as he started peeling his soggy shoes and socks off, she swallowed back her own inner turmoil over the family's loss and lowered herself down to the floor so she wouldn't tower over him.

"We weren't expecting you until the first of the month, Eric. I *am* sorry that we aren't prepared for your arrival, but I *do* hope you come to love living at Hargrave House, sweetie!"

Eric froze as she called him sweetie, the same thing his mother had always called him. His thoughts drifted to their final time together.

Erica Dunning smiled weakly as her son entered her hospital room. "Hi, sweetie!" she greeted him weakly, barely able to turn her head toward the door.

He swallowed hard, the sight of his mother so weak and helpless making him want nothing more than to just cry, but he made himself smile. "Hey, Mom! Looking beautiful as always! Coming home today?" he chirped.

She tried to keep smiling at him, but her strength was ebbing quickly. Her usual reply of 'Thank you, Eric! I bet I'm home by tomorrow!' was one of the ways they coped with her leukemia, but today she just sadly shook her head, knowing it was simply false hope. "No, sweetie."

Pausing as his smile fell like sunset, Eric shook his head. "No, Mom! You're supposed to say..."

She coughed painfully, reaching a hand out to her only child. "I'm sorry, sweetie! I'm afraid today I will be going Home... to be with your father." Her eyes drifted away aimlessly. "My Jack!" she almost whispered, her heart breaking for him just one more time.

"Mom?" Eric said taking her hand. It was cold and fragile, almost as though if he squeezed it too hard it would crack into powder like fine china. "You... you can't go! I... I need you!"

"I know, sweetie!" she said as a tear ran down her cheek. "I don't want to... but God has other plans for us... and sometimes they're hard to endure. My

biggest regret is that I won't be here for you. Taking care of you, watching you grow, and being there for you when you need me. That and there's so many things I wanted to tell you when you got old enough to understand. About your father, about our family, about love and life."

"There are so many stories I wanted to tell you. Like how you got your name?" She laughed lightly as she remembered the day. "The doctor was so sure you were going to be a girl, we didn't even have a boy name picked! Jack wanted to call you 'Erica Bella'... 'Erica the beautiful'!" She laughed again at the memory of the wondrous sense of humor that was his gift, coughs eventually overtaking the light chuckles. "You should have seen his face when we found out the doctor was wrong and he had a son!"

Eric smiled weakly. "I guess he was pretty jazzed, huh Mom!" He tried to keep his tone up beat.

Nodding, his mother slowly blinked and smiled. "And then stammered like an idiot over what we were going to call you!"

He nodded at her. "I like my name just fine, Mom. Eric Bell is a great name!"

Chuckling once more, Erica's smile evaporated with her waning strength. "There's so much more. Things I wanted you to know about your father. What kind of man he was, why I loved him so much, why he had to do what he did... but it just isn't meant to be, sweetie. I'm sorry... so very sorry!" Her eyes closed long enough that Eric thought she might have fallen asleep, but a moment later she opened them once more.

"How are the Stones treating you, sweetie?"

Eric sighed as he looked down, thinking about his best friend April Stone. Her parents had taken him in six months earlier when his mother had been admitted to the hospital expecting only a short stay, but the longer it had

gone on, the less welcoming her parents had become. "It's OK, I guess. Am... am I going to be staying with them for a long time, Mom?"

She shook her head once more. "No. I've written to your aunt Heather. She was my brother Richie's wife before he and your father died. She wrote me back to say she was going to take care of you from now on. You're going to go live with her in New Hampshire."

His eyes grew wide. "New Hampshire? But... I'll be so far away! Away from April... from my school... from all my friends! Why can't I stay here?" Eric's eyes began to well up with tears. "Why can't you stay here?"

"I wish I could, sweetie!" she said as she weakly released her hand from his and wiped the tear from his cheek. "I really do! But sometimes things happen and we don't get a choice... we just have to accept them. They make us who we are." Her strength gone, her hand slid back down onto her bed lifelessly. "I love you, sweetie. Always have, always will." her eyes closing once more.

"I love you too, Mom." He paused and waited for her to open her eyes again, but the machine next to her bed started beeping loudly. "Mom? Mom!? Mom!" As he watched her, tears dripping down his cheeks, a nurse came and escorted him out of her room for the last time.

"Eric!?" Heather said a fourth time, this time nearly shouting at the child who had gone almost catatonic for several seconds in the middle of taking off his shoes. "Eric, sweetie?" She watched as he blinked back to life, tears forming in his eyes as he resumed his task. "Are you alright?"

He nodded and stuffed his soaking wet socks into his old and worn out ill-fitting shoes. "I... I'll be *fine*, Aunt Heather." he sniffed.

Seeing for herself just how traumatized he was, but wanting to teach him to be a man as Erica had asked in her last letter, Heather stood and cleared her

throat. "Very well. We were just about to sit down to dinner. I *normally* insist that we dress for dinner. It's our tradition, but seeing as you *have* nothing else..." She turned to her butler. "Fredrick, please take him upstairs, draw him a bath, and deliver his clothes to Franchesca for laundering as quickly as possible. Dinner will have to be postponed until he can join us."

"Yes, Madame." he said in his deep monotone. Taking Eric by the hand, he walked her nephew around the railing and up the stairs.

Eric finally started taking in how truly huge his aunt's house was. The entryway emptied out into a large living room with a high ceiling. On the right wall were the expansive front windows he'd seen from the outside. The opposite wall had a spacious archway into another room with a gaping fireplace beyond it. The room was decorated with an openness to it, all with very fine antiques.

Following the huge man up the stairs, he noticed the walls decorated with old oil paintings of people who must have lived long ago. Planters, figurines, and vases filled almost every corner and crevice of what he'd seen of the house so far. Thinking it should smell musty and old, he was surprised that instead it smelled clean and fresh, as though the house had been built only yesterday. Reaching the second landing, he turned to the right, following Fredrick up six more steps, and out into a hallway off to his right. Just as he came around the corner and into the hall, he came face-to-face with a girl.

Drawing in a breath of surprise, Eric nearly shrieked. The girl who stood before him was a miniature version of his aunt Heather. Soft, long, blonde curls fell around her neck and shoulders while vibrant blue eyes stared widely back at him, looking him up and down. Her face was a creamy complexion with a cute nose above pink lips that sat agape.

Mirroring the up and down look the girl gave him, he saw what his aunt had meant when she said they 'dressed' for dinner. The girl wore a pretty

pink and white dress that came down just past her knees, the kind he'd only ever seen in windows of high-quality dress shops when he was out with his mother. White stockings adorned her thin legs and pink patent leather sandals covered her tiny feet.

She recovered more quickly than he did, smiling at him gaily. "You must be *Eric!* I'm Faith!" Her face growing confused, she added, "Mamma told us you weren't going to be here until *after* Halloween."

Recovering the use of his tongue, Eric slowly shook his soaking wet and muddy head. "Um... n-nice to meet you Faith. I'm Eric..." he blushed. "...but... you *know* that. S-sorry." He fidgeted as his torn and soaked jacket dripped onto the pristine marble floor, the scent of rain and mud filling the hall. "So... do you *always* get dressed up like *that*? Just for *dinner*?"

Nodding, her smile seemed almost infectious were it not for the crushing weight of loneliness in his soul. "Uh-huh! Do you like my dress?" Faith spun around and began circling him, looking at his clothes. "Is that where *you're* going? To get cleaned up and dressed for dinner?"

He shrugged absently. "I *guess*. I don't have any *nice* clothes or nuthin' like *yours*, though." He felt like he should make a joke about that, but instead he just apathetically stood there... too hurt and scared to care.

Faith turned to Fredrick. "What'll he wear to *dinner*, Freddie?" she asked him innocently.

"It appears the only option is what he has on *now*, Miss Faith." the muscular butler answered. Turning to Eric, he urged him on as he then turned down the hallway. "This way, young Master Eric."

"It's very nice meeting you, Eric!" Faith sang as she danced around behind him toward the stairway. "I hope you'll *like* it here!"

His eyes were fixed on her as she walked away, slowly following the butler blindly, Faith still smiling at him as he watched her until she disappeared down the stairs. At last turning his head in the direction he'd been walking he saw Fredrick open a door on the left side of the hallway. Following the man into the room, Eric stopped at the doorway, too stunned to move.

The room before him was easily three times larger than his old room and beautifully decorated. Cream silk and white lace curtains adorned the two windows in the far wall and lush carpet the color of beach sand covered the floor. A matched set of antique stained oak furniture decorated the room, and creamy floral wallpaper brightened every wall, reflecting the light from the crystal chandelier in the middle of the ceiling. It was breathtaking.

Turning, Fredrick saw the boy stopped in the doorway. Doubling back, he took the child's hand, leading him between the vanity and dresser that sat along the hallway wall to their left and the four-poster bed on their right. The headboard of the bed was finely carved with vines and roses, and silk pillows decorated it flawlessly along with a comforter that matched the color of the carpet. The blanket was so thick and fluffy that it alone seemed to add six inches to the height of the bed.

"This is to be *your* room, Master Eric." Fredrick said flatly. "And this is your private bath." He led Eric through a doorway situated between the dresser along the hallway wall and the giant bed.

The bathroom light came on with a loud snap, Eric squinting into the room cautiously as though he might have been intruding. Looking ahead of him, he could see white wooden shelves built into the far wall with more on the wall to the left; to the right sat an old but pristine white porcelain pedestal sink. Above it hung a huge ornate wall mirror with a fine stained oak frame and gold piping that ran round the edges. Passing it as he entered, he caught his reflection and turned away at the sight, his dirty-blonde hair, muddy and unkempt, hanging down past his shoulders in a tangled mess.

Opposite the sink he saw more wooden shelves hanging from the wall, each filled with towels, washcloths, and other linens the same beach-sand color as the carpet in the bedroom. The marble tiles in the floor each had an intricate swirl of gray, brown, and dirty orange that seemed to have been matched to the rest of the decor.

Stopping, he watched Fredrick approach the white porcelain clawfoot tub that occupied the entire far end of the bathroom. Nearly six feet long and half as wide, a curtain of white wispy material surrounded it that almost seemed to float in the air with the slightest breeze. Between the tub and sink, along the wall to his right, he saw an old style toilet with the tank several feet above the bowl and a chain hanging down. A finely carved marble handle at the end of the chain matched the marbled pattern on the floor.

Warming the water, Fredrick pulled the curtain and rotated another handle, sending the water up a golden pipe and out the white porcelain showerhead.

"Madame Hargrave called for a bath, however given the late hour, I believe a *shower* would be more prudent." He stood and looked at Eric. "Remove your clothes and place them in the basket there." he indicated a rectangular white wicker laundry basket sitting opposite the toilet. Removing a large cream-colored towel from the shelves, he hung it from the ornate gold rod that resided on the wall between the toilet and the tub.

Moving aside as Fredrick silently exited the room, closing the door behind him, Eric stripped down and dropped his wet and dirty clothes into the hamper. In doing so he saw that the cab driver had torn the sleeves from the shoulders of his threadbare shirt. The pants were iffy at best, with wide holes in the knees, a tear in the seat, and legs far too short for his size, while the shoes that he'd left in the entryway were likewise falling apart. It left him one set each of socks and underwear, the former with holes in the toes and the latter tight fitting. He'd grown several inches in the last six months, but the Stones had refused to pay for any new clothes for him.

Entering the shower, he stood in the warm water and relaxed a moment as the grime of travel began to wash away. Looking around, he saw a small golden shelf on the wall near the faucet that contained a bar of soap, a bottle of shampoo, body wash, and a safety razor.

Picking up the shampoo absently, he washed his bedraggled 'beach bum' hair, as April had always called it. He'd meant to get a haircut before leaving Newport Beach, liking his longer style but wanting it better kept, however the Stones had wanted him out and gone as soon as possible, barely leaving time to pack, let alone see to a haircut.

Idly wondering what city his luggage had wandered off to, he noticed a feminine scent began filling the room. Thinking that his aunt Heather had come into the room, after checking to see he was alone, he brought a hand down to sniff the lather coating it and his hair. Looking again at the toiletries, only then realizing that they were all for an adult woman, not a young boy.

Sighing apathetically, he heard the door open and watched through the gauzy curtain and plastic liner surrounding him as an eclipsing shadow entered, retrieved his clothing remnants from the basket, and exited. Rinsing out his hair, he sniffed it and confirmed his suspicions. His hair no longer stank of mud and sweat, but rather the girly perfumed scent of lilac and roses.

Unfazed, he next examined the body wash and saw it was something called Japanese Cherry Blossom. Not knowing what that was, he set it aside and sniffed the bar of soap and was overpowered with a strong floral scent. Knowing he had to get clean with *something*, he used the soap and turned off the water once he was clean and rinsed.

Reaching out and pulling in the soft towel, he wrapped it around his shoulders and stood in the tub for several minutes until he began shivering. The lights flickered twice as he stood in the damp tub, the sound of the storm outside that had mildly abated on his arrival seemed to regain its strength with every passing minute.

Slowly making his way out, he dried himself, becoming very aware that he was now all alone, in a strange place thousands of miles from everyone he had ever known, and had nothing but a borrowed towel. He missed April terribly, and had been missing his mother so much that he thought he might die of heartache. He also found himself missing all his girl friends from school, and even missed his teachers and April's grouchy parents. Most especially at the moment though, he missed his luggage.

Once dry, he slowly walked back into the bedroom with the towel wrapped around his chest, taking a seat on a small chair. He sighed and looked at the room again. It was then that he noticed that the room had a distinctively feminine style, and even the chair he sat in was for the lady's vanity he sat next to. Sadly, he shook his head. "I'm in a girl's room." he said absently. Thinking that he felt he should be angrier about it than he was, he lacked even the desire to be mad about it.

"I'm sorry, but this is the only available room to *give* you." Heather said from the doorway, a slight bit of irritation evident in her voice. "As I said, we weren't expecting you until *next* week. We thought we had more time."

"*Oh!*" Eric exclaimed, startled at her sudden presence. "I um... I wasn't... just... uh..." He hung his head in shame at seeming to complain about the lavish room she'd given him. "I'm sorry, Aunt Heather."

Entering the room, she sighed wearily. "Always be mindful of what you say, sweetie. You never know who may be listening."

"I know." he shrugged. "I wasn't *really* complaining about the room. It was more just like, a *comment*. It's really *nice*. *Beautiful*, really! I just feel like my entire *life* is one big *disaster*. I mean, what *else* can go wrong?"

Almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, all the lights went out.

Chapter 2 - The Storm

Gasping as the room was plunged into darkness, a crack of thunder rolling over the house several seconds later, Eric thought he heard someone squeal in fear. After it passed, he found himself wrapped in his aunt Heather's arms and he could finally hear the sobs of fright escaping his own lips.

"It's *alright*, sweetie!" she soothed the terrified child. "I've *got* you! You're *alright*!"

Petting his head to soothe him, she noticed the sweet floral scent of women's shampoo drifting through the room. Leaning forward, she was mortified to learn that her suspicions were correct. "Oh, *sweetie!*" she exclaimed. "I think I understand why you were upset before. You had to use the lady's shampoo and soap that was in the shower, didn't you?" Feeling the orphan boy just shrug in apathy, she sighed. "We *really* weren't prepared for you! First thing tomorrow, I *promise* we'll drive down to Berlin and buy you all new clothes to wear and all the other things you'll need like shampoo. How does that sound?"

"You might have to do it *without* me." Eric answered as he slowly pulled away from his aunt. "I was looking at my shirt and pants when I took them off and they got torn pretty good, so I don't think I'll have *any* clothes 'till then." He looked up at her. "What'll I do?"

"I've had my maid Franchesca focus exclusively on getting your clothes repaired, cleaned, and..." She stopped when she had a horrible thought. Just as she was about to say something, a light moved out in the hallway. Turning to look, she watched as Fredrick brought in two oil lamps.

"Pardon the interruption, Madame, but I thought you could use *this*." he said as he handed her one of them. "I have called the power company. There is an extensive blackout over the area that is not expected to be resolved anytime soon. Shall I turn the gas system on, Madame?"

"Thank you, Fredrick," she smiled at him as she took the lamp. "I would appreciate it if you could see to it as soon as possible."

"Francesca also wanted me to deliver a message, Madame." he said bowing to her slightly. "I delivered a lamp to her and Cook, as well as one to Miss Faith. Francesca said to tell you that with the power out she would not be able to launder or dry young Master Eric's clothes and that the shirt and pants will have to be repaired, *if* they can be at *all*. The damage is *extensive*. Even if they *can* be, she advised that air drying in this weather could take *days*, Madame."

"Thank you, I just realized that myself." she admitted. Looking down at Eric, she noticed his eyes were vacant and hollow, not even seeming to care and hardly even noting he had nothing to wear and wouldn't until at least the next day. "Fredrick, please bring me the smallest things you have to wear. I don't care *what* they are, but he needs *something*!"

The butler arched an eyebrow. "Madame, I *will* do as you request, but I'm afraid it will do little good. He is *much* too small for *anything* I have. I will return shortly." At that he turned and left, walking quickly down the hallway toward his own room. Less than a minute later he returned once more with a pair of workout shorts, underwear, and a T-shirt. "As Madame requested."

"*Thank you, Fredrick!*" she smiled. "At least *this* way he'll have more than a *towel*." Handing them to her young charge, she helped him to stand again. "Take these into the bath and put them on, sweetie."

A glimmer of hope fought its way through his despair as he smiled weakly. "Thank you, Aunt Heather." he mumbled. Following her into the bathroom, his aunt placed one of the lamps on a shelf next to the door and left to let him dress. He quickly determined the futility of trying to get the shorts or underwear to stay up, carrying them and the lamp back out into the bedroom wearing only the T-shirt that hung off one shoulder, leaving it bare.

"Aunt Heather?" he almost cried as he handed the bottoms to her. "I... I couldn't get these to stay. They're *way* too big." He pulled up the baggy T-shirt at his neck with one hand to try and keep it over both shoulders. It was thankfully so big he could manage to wear it as an oversized nightshirt, but unfortunately it only came down to the middle of his thighs.

Heather sighed in frustration. Handing the unusable clothes back to her employee, she nodded. "Thank you for the effort, Fredrick. That will be all for the moment. Please see to the lights." Watching the giant man walk silently back out into the hall, she looked at Eric once again. "It's hardly better than the towel, is it?" she asked rhetorically.

Looking at the floor, he just shrugged. "Not really. It won't stay up unless I hold it." His head came up as he heard the sound of clicking approaching the door to his room, a light accompanying it.

"*Mamma?*" Faith asked tentatively as she stepped into the room carrying another lamp. "I'm getting pretty hungry. Can we *eat* soon?"

"Soon." her mother replied simply.

"Is Freddie going to light the lights again?" she asked with a smile.

"Yes, dear." Heather replied. Seeing the confusion on Eric's face, she explained. "Fredrick is turning on the gas for the old gaslight system that your uncle Richard restored after we bought this house. See, back when this house was built, electricity was new and most houses had lights that ran on gas, which is what people used before electric lights."

Remembering with a smile she added, "Richard wanted it for the practical benefit of having a source of light in power outages, but mostly for the pleasure of having a truly historical home that could stand as a testament to old world ingenuity and ideas of beauty." She looked back to Eric ruefully. "But enough of that. We need to get you dressed in *something*." she sighed,

lightning flashing through the windows. "I would give you something of your uncle Richard's, but I gave those away *years* ago."

"What's the *matter*, Mamma?" Faith asked as thunder rolled over the building once more.. "Doesn't Eric have *anything* to wear?"

"Just one of Fredrick's T-shirts, dear." her mother answered. "His clothes are all damaged or missing, and I don't know what else to do."

Looking at Eric carefully, Faith saw he was just about her size. "He could wear something of *mine*, Mamma. *I* wouldn't mind sharing for tonight."

Heather looked up at her daughter and smiled sweetly. "Faith, that's *very* generous of you, but it wouldn't be *appropriate*. I'm not *about* to force him into a girl's *dress*." Mumbling to herself she added, "Jack would never *forgive* me!" She looked over at her departed friend's child who stood there apathetically, not seeming to even notice they were talking about him.

"Maybe you don't have to *force* him, Mamma." Faith opined. "Maybe he wouldn't *care*!" Looking at Eric she asked bluntly, "Would you *like* to borrow one of my dresses? Just to have something to wear for tonight? I think you would look *nice* as a girl!"

He stood numbly, almost unaware of the question. "Huh? Oh." He looked up at his aunt. "I... I don't think Aunt Heather thinks it's a good idea." He blushed heavily as he realized how little he had on and was suddenly grateful that the room was so dark.

Seeing him grip the T-shirt neck even tighter with his one hand and tug at the side with his other to try and make it longer, Heather put her hand to her brow and bit her lip. There was no way she was going to ever suggest putting Jack and Erica's son in a dress, even considering the situation, but she was running out of ideas. *He can't stay up here all night!* she reasoned.

Faith refused to accept the situation as hopeless. "*Mamma!* He's got to wear *something*, right? Besides, Freddie's T-shirt is *basically* a dress! It's even shorter than any of *my* dresses! What *else* can he do?"

"I don't know, Faith dear, but boys just *don't* wear dresses and that's *that*." she answered, almost snapping at her. "It's not *appropriate*. Do you know what would happen if it got out that I had dressed young Eric in girls' clothes? I'd simply *die* of embarrassment!"

Hearing her say she would die put Eric over the edge. He began to silently cry, tears falling down his cheeks, unable to stop them. He tried to pretend it wasn't happening and didn't even try to wipe them away in fear of calling attention to it while his aunt and cousin debated. He hoped that the darkness of the room would hide it, but his hopes were in vain.

Pausing in her argument, Faith looked at him. "*Mamma!* He's *crying!*" she said sympathetically.

Heather turned and saw his noiseless tears, misunderstanding the reason. Moving to her knees and taking him in her arms once more, she tried to comfort him. "Eric, I *swear* to you, I will *not* make you wear a dress! I *promise*, sweetie!" Looking over at her daughter, she shot her a stern look. "Faith! Don't you see how upset it makes him just to *mention* it?"

Shaking his head and trying to form words, the thought of seeing his last living relation die, just like everyone else in his life had... his father, his grandparents, and then his mother... couldn't be pushed from his mind. Death seemed to surround him and follow him like a gleeful tormenter, threatening to leave him utterly alone. "Everybody I know dies." he cried. "I'm gonna be all alone!"

Pulling away to regard him in surprise, Heather realized too late that she'd incorrectly assumed the cause of his distress and quickly hugged him again. "Oh, *sweetie!* I didn't mean *that!* It's just a figure of *speech!* I

wouldn't *really* die from that! Even so, you'll *never* be alone! You'd still have *Faith*!"

Eric took his turn to cleverly misunderstand and got angry. "I *don't!*" he shouted, pulling away from her as lightning flashed through the rain-soaked window. "I *hate* God! He took away *everyone* from me! He left me *alone*! I'll *never* believe in Him *ever* again!" Overcome, he began to sob openly and ran to his aunt's arms as the thunder rolled by, the T-shirt falling off one shoulder again as he released it to hold her.

"*No, sweetie!*" she tried to comfort him, noticing that her daughter was starting to tear up as well. "I didn't mean it *that* way! I *meant* that you would have your *cousin* Faith!" She rocked him gently as Faith came up and held Heather across her back. "Besides, you shouldn't say that. God *loves* us, sweetheart!"

His tears beginning to abate, Eric slowly pulled away from her. "Th-then... w-why...." Unable to continue, he resumed crying as she pulled him back into her arms and held him once more.

Waiting until his tears slowed again, she asked his question for him. "Why does God let bad things happen to us? Oh, *sweetie*! That's a *big* question!" Smiling, she realized she might have an answer for him. "You know, your daddy Jack used to have an answer for that. He used to say, '*All the things that happen to us, good and bad, are what make us who we are. They need to happen or we would end up being someone else.*'"

"I don't know if he was right, but what I *do* know is this. The bad things that happen, like people dying? That's not *God's* fault, sweetie. That's *people's* fault. Either because someone did something bad... like what happened to your father and your uncle Richard... or they *didn't* do something *good* that they *should* have... like not helping someone in need. God wants us to *love* each other and take *care* of one another. It's *people* that let bad things happen. He *has* to let people make their *own* decisions

and live with the consequences. He can't *make* us love each other. Do you understand, sweetie?"

He listened and he understood what she was trying to say, but his pain wouldn't let him accept the answer. Not wanting to upset his aunt again though, he forced himself to stop crying and nod. "Sort of, I guess." he lied.

Knowing he wasn't convinced, she pressed the point. "Your mommy *knew* she was dying. Didn't she *tell* you she was going to go be with your daddy?"

Shrugging, he stifled another sob before nodding grudgingly.

"I know what it's like to lose your parents." Heather shared. "I lost mine when I was in college, shortly before I met your uncle. So I *do* understand, at least a *little*."

He sniffed and looked at his beautiful aunt's face smiling while talking about her own parents' deaths. "Don't you *miss* 'em?" he asked.

Smiling wistfully, Heather closed her eyes. "Of course, sweetie, but I *know* they're here with me, *now* and *always*. When I close my eyes and think about them, I can *feel* them with me." After a moment, she looked at him. "Close your eyes and remember your mother with the *best* memory you have of her!" When she saw him close his eyes, she continued. "Now *see* her in your mind, and *feel* her in your heart, and tell me what you see."

Eric smiled faintly. "I remember our last trip to the beach this Easter. April went with us. She's my best friend. We had *so* much fun! We collected shells, splashed in the ocean, made sand sculptures, and watched the sun set on the ocean." By the time he finished, he had stopped crying and his aunt was wiping away his tears.

"*There!* Feeling better, sweetie?" Heather asked.

Nodding, Eric wiped his eyes with his forearm. "Yeah. I just get *really* sad about it sometimes. I miss her *so* much!" Hearing his stomach growl, he fixed the T-shirt and gripped it again with a hand. Holding his stomach with the other, he looked up at her. "Aunt Heather? Can we go *eat*?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

Having a degree in psychology and being a licensed therapist, Heather could tell he was deflecting, but felt he probably needed to let the matter drop for now. "Well, you *still* have a problem."

"Oh *yeah*." he grumbled. "*Clothes*." Not wanting to leave the darkness of the room in only a T-shirt that barely covered him, Eric chose hunger over potential humiliation. He shrugged, glanced at Faith for a moment, and blushed. "That's OK. I can just go to bed. I can eat tomorrow when I have something to wear. I'm not *really* that hungry." he said as another stomach growl gave the truth to his lie. In reality, he hadn't eaten anything all day except a bag of peanuts on the plane.

Heather turned to her daughter. "Dear, would you please wait outside for a minute? I need to talk to Eric alone."

"Why?" she asked innocently.

"*Faith*." she answered impatiently. "Just wait in the hall with your lamp and close the door." Seeing her daughter close the door behind her, she turned to Eric. "Sit down, sweetie."

Eric shook his head. "I'd rather stand, Aunt Heather." he said meekly.

Seeing him tug on the T-shirt again, it was Heather's turn to blush slightly. "It hadn't occurred to me that if you sit down..."

He nodded shyly as he pulled on the T-shirt again, wishing he could make it stretch to his feet.

"Well, I would get you a robe to wear, but I don't believe Fredrick *has* one. Even if he *did*, it would be *far* too big." she thought out loud, hoping that the process might spark an idea she'd missed. "Any others I could give you would be one of Faith's or mine. At least a girl's robe isn't *too* inappropriate, given the circumstances. Alternatively I could just let you eat dinner up here and make sure you were left alone so no one would be around for you to get embarrassed. What do you think?"

Shrugging absently, he sniffed and held back tears. "I guess I should just eat up here alone. I... I guess I just need to get used to being alone."

Moving down to him and hugging him once more, her heart was breaking for him. "Oh, *sweetie!* You know *I* don't like it any more than *you* do! I... I just don't see any other *options*. I'll leave it up to *you*. What would *you* rather do?"

He thought about what it would be like eating in his room alone in the dark and almost started crying again. "I don't *want* to be alone!"

Rocking him gently, Heather petted his head and held him. "No, sweetheart! You'll *never* be alone again, if I can help it!" Letting go of him while still holding his shoulders, she smiled at him. "I'll tell you what. I'll get you something that can get you through dinner and bed, then in the morning we'll have Fredrick run into town and buy you enough things that we can take a trip down to Berlin to buy you all new clothes! I *promise*, no one will laugh or treat you mean... and you *won't* be alone. *OK?*"

Too numb with grief and despair to care, Eric nodded absently and trudged alongside his aunt toward the bedroom door. As it opened he saw his cousin Faith standing in a brightly illuminated hallway with a concerned look on her face.

"Did... did the power come back on?" Eric asked hopefully as his aunt blew out her lamp and set it next to Faith's on a small table along the hallway wall.

"No!" Faith laughed happily. "Freddie just turned on the *gaslights*! Aren't they *pretty*?"

"Why don't we go into Faith's room for something to cover up with?" the girl's mother suggested, noting that Eric had momentarily forgotten how exposed he was, even moreso in the bright light of the hallway.

Faith's eyes widened as she smiled. "*Really?*" She turned across the hall to her bedroom door and flung it open, racing in and to the right.

"*Faith!*" Heather shouted. "Wait just a minute!" She started towards Faith's room, already lit with its own *gaslights*, but stopped herself as she didn't want to leave Eric alone. "Come on, sweetie. Don't worry. I'll explain it to her." She held out her hand to him.

Taking her hand with his free one, the other still clutching the T-shirt's collar, he let her lead him into Faith's bedroom. Entering, he saw the room was similar to the one his aunt had given him, almost a mirror image, but decorated differently. The walls were a pale lavender with gray carpet, and the bed, a pink and white painted iron canopy instead of an oak poster bed, was on the adjacent wall to his left, the wall to the right instead occupied by two white painted wardrobes and an ornate dresser. There was a cluttered white vanity to his left that sat in the corner against the hallway wall alongside the bed and an ornate white nightstand and lamp between them with its twin on the opposite side.

He looked around further and counted three toy boxes, a *My Little Pony* changing screen, a dollhouse, and a small pink bookshelf, all scattered evenly and neatly around the room. There also appeared to be a doorway through the wall on the right between the dresser and the bookshelf that looked to be entry to another bathroom. Two large windows with lacy white curtains spotted with tiny red hearts were on the opposite wall. As they entered, his cousin had already opened one of the two wardrobes and was pulling out a pink and white satin dress that greatly resembled the one

she wore. Turning to suggest it to her mother, Heather shook her head and stopped her suggestion before it even left her lips.

"*Faith!*" she said trying to keep her temper as she closed the bedroom door.
"I did *not* say he was going to wear a *dress*, now *did* I?"

Once the door was closed, the room seemed even brighter than the hallway. He felt a sudden welling up of fear that made him want to run back to the darkness of his new room and hide, but he was even more afraid to be alone than of being exposed. In some ways the room reminded him of the room April had back in California, only bigger. His aunt's raised voice reminded him of the last time he'd seen his best friend.

April hugged Eric for the third time since they had entered the terminal. Red tear streaks marred her pretty young face as she kept having to push her long black hair out of her damp eyes knowing that her best friend was moving so far away, likely never to see him again. They'd been best friends since before either of them could remember; a permanent fixture in each of their lives. People almost never saw one without the other.

"*It's just not fair, Eric!*" she sobbed quietly in his ear as they hugged goodbye for the last time. "*What am I going to do without you?*"

Eric returned her hug tightly, never wanting to let go. April was the last constant in his young life marred by so much loss and change. Trying not to cry for April's sake, he steeled himself against the onslaught of sadness and the final loss that would end his life as he'd always known it. "It'll be OK, April." he lied. "We have each other's e-mail and we can stay in touch that way. It won't be so bad. And you have lots of friends, still."

She sobbed quietly for a moment before replying, "But they aren't you, Eric!" Suddenly overcome with emotion, April pulled back slightly. Knowing how much she loved Eric, and only just recently beginning to realize she had feelings of more than friendship for him, she was overcome

with the desire to give him his, and her, first real kiss. Just as she started to lean forward to kiss him, her mother pulled her away.

"Come on now, April. He needs to go and so do we!" she chided. "You've said your good-byes three times already!" Pulling on her daughter's arm, April went into hysterics.

"No! Mom! Just one more thing! No! Mom! Not yet! Eric!" April began to sob as she felt her fingertips leave Eric's outstretched hand.

Seeing April's mother pull her away crushed Eric's already breaking heart to dust. He wanted to run back into her arms and just let her hold him forever, but the look on her mother's face said very plainly, 'Don't!' Numbness suffused his being as April cried for him while all he could do was stand there.

Mr. Stone nodded forward. "Go on, boy. Your family's waiting for you. Good luck to you." Turning to his wife he muttered, "Get that girl under control and let's go home. I'm tired."

April's mother dragged her daughter by the arm and threatened her. "April! Stop embarrassing us or you'll regret it when we get home!"

Eric watched as his best friend was carted away, sobbing his name, as he turned towards the social worker there to see him boarded and safely on his way to his aunt.

"Eric?" Faith asked, the debate with her mother temporarily suspended as they noticed him silently crying once more for seemingly no reason.

"S-sorry." he said, wiping the tears away once more with his free hand as his voice remained even and unshaken, despite the tears. "I... I was just thinking about my best friend April and really missing her."

Handing him a tissue, Heather turned to Faith. "Now dear, let me explain. Eric doesn't *want* to play 'dress up'. He just needs something that will cover him while we *eat*. Please put the dress away." Seeing her daughter reluctantly obey, she turned to him. "Alright, sweetie. If you go in the bathroom there, you'll find a robe hanging on the back of the door. Go ahead and put it on and come back out when you're ready. I'll get you something for your feet so you won't get cold."

Nodding vacantly, his memories still threatening to drag him back down into the misery of pain and loneliness, he shuffled into the bathroom and closed the door as lightning flashed outside, another gaslight to the left of the door illuminating the room while the peal of thunder faded slowly away. Looking at the back of the door, he saw the robe and removed it from its hook.

It was white satin with a feminine floral pattern embroidered into it and puffy pink marabou cuffs, hem, and collar. Wrapping it around himself, he tied the knot as his cheeks burned with embarrassment knowing he was going to have to go out wearing it. Sighing in apathy, not even caring if they laughed at him, he opened the door and shambled back out again.

Seeing him wearing Faith's robe almost made Heather tell him to take it off and just *make* him go downstairs in the T-shirt, but she couldn't force him through the kind of humiliation he would endure if he exposed himself accidentally. Given the short length of the borrowed shirt, that eventuality was highly likely. His trauma was too fresh and too raw to force him into a potentially embarrassing situation, and his emotions were too fragile to leave him to eat alone. Sighing in acceptance, she bade him sit on Faith's bed as she slipped the matching slippers on his feet.

Eric tried to keep his legs together, but doing so prevented his aunt from putting on the slippers. "Sweetie, I need you to relax your leg for a moment so we can be done and go eat, OK?"

"Um... Aunt Heather?" he asked. "Could I at *least* wear my underwear? Even if they're *wet*?"

"I'm afraid they're more than just *wet*, Eric." she answered, finally getting one slipper on. "They would have been in the washing machine, so completely *soaked*, and full of soap. Even if we tried drying them over a fire, it would take *hours* before you could wear them. Are you *that* uncomfortable, sweetie?"

"Kinda, yeah." he admitted. "I'd wear them even soapy and dripping at this point, but I guess I'll just have to learn to do without." he finished with a defeated tone.

Faith intervened again. "Mamma, why don't you just let him wear a pair of *mine*? I mean, nobody will even *see* them!"

Heather closed her eyes and tried to control her reaction. She had a viscerally negative view of the idea, but Faith had made a valid point. No one would see them or even be able to tell they were there. The only legitimate reason to deny it would be if he didn't want to wear them. In the end, she turned to Eric. "Alright. Faith makes a valid point, but the choice *must* be yours." Coming up with an idea, she smiled at him as she headed for the bathroom. "Come with me, Eric."

Stopping at Faith's dresser as he followed her, she retrieved a pair of the plainest white underwear she could find and placed them on the bathroom counter. "You stay in here for two minutes then come out. *Nobody* will look to see if you put them on or not and the choice will then be *completely* yours. If you chose not to wear them, simply drop them in the hamper. Only *you* will know what your choice was."

Taking a breath, Heather continued. "If you wear them because it makes you more comfortable than nothing, you needn't feel *any* embarrassment over it because we won't know. If you *don't* wear them, you don't need to

be embarrassed about *not* wearing underwear because we won't know that *either*. OK?" Seeing him shrug, she sighed and closed the door behind her.

Eric looked at the underwear as though they might jump off the counter and attack him. He didn't *want* to wear them, not even sure why he didn't, but not wearing *anything* was beginning to be unbearably uncomfortable. Using a variation of his aunt's idea, he closed his eyes and picked them up, putting them on by feel alone. He figured that if he didn't know what they looked like, he could pretend they were just another normal pair of briefs.

Once he was putting them on however, he quickly figured out that his idea was just wishful thinking. He could feel the lace around the waistband and leg holes and while he didn't know what it was made of, the material was defiantly *not* cotton.

Determining that it didn't matter anyway, he opened his eyes and pulled them on, standing in the T-shirt, robe, slippers, and undies until his aunt knocked on the door. "Coming." he said flatly. Exiting the bathroom, he at least felt more comfortably secure, but weird at the same time as every step made him *know* he was wearing girl's undies. The feminine robe and slippers didn't help matters.

When his aunt looked him over with his long and damp dirty-blonde hair combed back, it was all too easy for her to see him as a young girl, but she repressed the feeling. "I told you I would make it as easy as I *could*." Smiling reassuringly, she could tell by the way that his walk had changed what his choice had been. She didn't let her knowledge show, vowing to herself and his father Jack that she would make it up to him.

"It's fine, Aunt Heather." he mumbled "At least this is warmer than just the T-shirt."

She admonished Faith before they started toward the door. "Now Faith, you *must* remember we are to help young Eric feel comfortable in the

necessity of the moment, not like he's a *plaything* for your *amusement*." Faith damped her excitement somewhat, but couldn't help but smile gaily. While she wasn't as sure as her mother was, she was *fairly* sure what he had chosen, and knowing made her happy. *I was right!*

Smiling weakly back at her, his every step was a ticklish reminder of his situation. While he'd never been a 'rough and tumble' boy and had always preferred the company of April, his mother, or the other girls at school to that of the boys, he couldn't shake the butterflies-in-the-stomach feeling that plagued him. Even knowing it was his aunt and Faith's idea, he had the idea that wearing girl's things was going to get him in trouble somehow. At the moment though, *anything* was preferable to the alternatives... hunger or the horrible loneliness that threatened to consume him.

"OK then. Shall we go eat?" Heather suggested.

Chapter 3 – Dinner by Gaslight

The three exited out into the hallway after Heather turned down the lights in Faith's bed and bath, showing Eric how to do it with a long stick made for that purpose for people not tall enough to reach them.

Near the stairway at the end of the hall the three saw Fredrick adjusting one of the wall-mounted gas lamps. Turning and seeing Eric wearing one of Faith's robes and her slippers, the huge man nearly broke the light's mantle. Composing himself, he calmly finished with the light, adjusted the flow, and replaced the chimney. Turning with his usual grace and dignity, he bowed slightly as the three approached him.

"Is Madame ready for dinner?"

Nodding she replied, "Yes, Fredrick. Please be so good as to advise Cook to serve at her convenience? Thank you." While Fredrick briskly preceded them, the three slowly started down the stairs.

His aunt and cousin descended fluidly, each holding the hem of their skirt to avoid tripping, and before he realized he needed to do something similar, he noticed he'd already been mimicking them with the robe he wore without even thinking.

"I hope you'll come to love Hargrave House, sweetie." Heather said as they came down the stairs. "The house itself is almost one hundred twenty years old. Back then, wealthy people were just starting to install electric lights in their houses. Some, like the people that built *this* house, had both electric *and* gas lights installed."

Reaching the lower landing and turning right, the three went down the few remaining steps into the entryway as Heather finished talking about the house. Turning left and entering the huge living room, Eric saw that a fire burned warmly in the fireplace set into the far left wall, illuminating the

matching white couch, loveseats, and chair arranged in a semi-circle in the far right corner with an antique coffee table in the middle of them. A large ornate rug covered the highly polished hardwood floor of the closer half of the living room, while various shelves and cabinets filled with mementos and heirlooms decorated the walls.

Passing the grandfather clock that sat in a nook around the corner from the lower landing of the stairs, it's slow and even ticking echoing around the silent room, Fredrick emerged from the archway along the left wall. As the butler escorted them into the dining room, Eric looked at the enormous table that occupied it. Eight antique chairs surrounded it, but it could easily accommodate twice as many.

Gaslights lit the room from around the walls while an elaborate electric crystal chandelier hung over the table; the crystals in it refracting the glow of light from around the room making it sparkle even without electricity. A large window took up most of the far wall, beautiful white satin and lace curtains providing privacy, while a white swinging door could be seen in the right-hand wall near the archway.

Hearing the sound of a chair scrape across the polished dark wood flooring as Fredrick seated his aunt at the head of the table, he saw Faith standing next to the left side middle chair as though waiting for something. Moving to sit in the chair between Faith and his aunt, he stopped when Heather cleared her throat. "Yes, Aunt Heather?" he asked.

"A gentleman always seats a lady before taking one himself, sweetie." she answered. "You should also rise anytime a lady enters or leaves the room or when a guest enters or leaves."

"Oh." he replied shyly. "I... I didn't know that." Turning toward Faith, he clumsily pulled out her chair. She sat gracefully as he pushed it in, helping him push it the rest of the way. Then taking his seat with Fredrick's help, he looked over at his aunt. "Did I do that right?" he asked hesitantly.

"It was fine." Heather noted with a sad smile, remembering a similar incident with Eric's father Jack. Meanwhile, Cook brought out their meal of petite sirloin, garlic potatoes, and steamed vegetables.

Eric watched the older woman as she served his aunt first and then Faith. Her short gray hair sat in tight curls and framed her plump face; the gray nearly matching the color of the dress she wore, with a simple white apron tied around her ample waist. Returning to the kitchen she brought out his plate last, smiling at him with compassionate eyes that seemed to understand his fear and loneliness with just a look. Without a word, she returned to the kitchen as Fredrick stood by impassively. Picking up his fork to start eating, having finally remembered that he was hungry, he again heard his aunt clear her throat. Looking over at her he asked, "Yes, Aunt Heather?"

"In this house, we say a prayer of *thanks* before eating." she explained.
"We would have *nothing* to eat, were it not for His gifts."

Watching her bow and clasp her hands in prayer, then turning to see Faith had done the same, he begrudgingly did likewise.

"Dear Lord, thank you for the blessings you have seen fit to bestow upon us, and make us truly thankful for them. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen." she intoned respectfully.

"Amen." Faith echoed and finally Eric mumbled it as well, the entire time cursing God in his mind. While his family attended church on Easter, and he'd been taught to pray at bedtime, they had never prayed at dinner. He'd thought that was only something they did in old movies.

Heather opened her eyes and looked at her nephew, seeing the faintest hint of anger still visible in his expression as he opened his eyes and looked to her. Sighing and silently praying for his wounded soul, she picked up her fork and began to eat while the howl of wind outside could be heard mutedly through the walls. As Eric began wolfing his food down, she

cleared her throat yet again, seeing that she had a lot of work to do to teach him proper manners. "Sweetie, *please* don't eat so quickly. No one is going to *take* it from you."

He looked over and watched Faith taking small bites carefully and slowly, smiling as she looked back at him. Slowing down, but taking larger bites than his cousin, he savored the flavor of the beef and managed to finish his plate while Faith had half of hers left. Still hungry, but not sure how to ask for seconds, or if seconds were even allowed, he sat back in his chair as despair once more threatened him.

"Sweetie? Would you like more to eat?" Heather asked after finishing a bite.

"Please?" he said as he sat forward, his face showing the faintest sign of hope. "Can I have another piece of that meat?"

"*May* you have another..." she corrected him sternly.

"Sorry." he blushed. "*May* I have another piece of the meat?" Eric saw her nod to Fredrick who disappeared into the kitchen for a moment before returning followed closely by Cook. Taking his empty plate and replacing it with a new plate holding only a petite sirloin, she smiled at him kindly and then hurried back to the kitchen.

Resuming his meal, he finished as the others did; the storm raging outside even more fiercely. The dimmer light of the gas lamps wavered slightly as he took his last drink of milk. Picking up his napkin and wiping his mouth, he turned to his aunt. "Thank you for dinner, Aunt Heather. It was very good." he said reservedly.

She smiled at him politely. "Thank you, Eric. You are most welcome." Just as Fredrick came up behind her chair to pull it back out, Eric remembered her admonitions at the start of dinner and quickly stood up when she did. Seeing the pleased look on his aunt's face made him feel the faintest trace

of happiness. Following her as she exited the dining room, he was surprised when Faith came up next to him and took his hand, leading him out and into the living room, shyly smiling at him as they walked.

Heather glided into the living room, the fire warming it against the bitter cold outside, and sat graciously on the loveseat nearest the bay window that faced the fireplace and gestured to the couch that sat against the adjacent wall. Faith made her way there, Eric following in tow to sit next to her.

Turning toward the two, Heather took the moment to explain some things to Eric. "Since you're new sweetie, I should explain our rules and traditions. Breakfast is at seven each morning. When you are not in school, lunch will be at noon. Dinner is served promptly at six. If there is news of importance to share, it will be done *after* grace and *before* we eat. Any matters of lesser importance are to be discussed *after* dinner when we retire here to the living room. If nothing need be discussed, you may feel free to read here or go up to your room to play. Baths will be done and teeth brushed before nine when I will come to tuck you in and kiss you goodnight."

Continuing, Heather's tone turned ever so slightly stern. "I do *not* tolerate back-talk, interruption, whining, or *any* form of disrespectful behavior, to include neglecting your responsibilities such that it would require me to nag you." Looking at Eric, her voice softened slightly. "In exchange I will refrain from speaking harshly or yelling. You are *both* of an age that corporal punishment should no longer be necessary. I *expect* you to act accordingly."

"When I instruct you to do something, I expect *immediate* compliance, not a question about *why* you should have to." she added, glancing at Faith as that was her worst failing. "If, after you have complied, you feel the action requires explanation, I will do so at *my* convenience, not *yours*, but I *will* explain." Thinking for a moment she concluded, "I will permit *one* infraction of the household rules to allow for the fact that *nobody* is perfect, but further infractions will be punished. Do you understand why, Eric?"

"Because if you didn't, we'd just keep breaking the rule, which would mean it wasn't *really* a rule at all. That's what..." His voice trailed off and he sighed. "...that's what *Mom* used to say."

She smiled, knowing that it was Richard who had come up with the rules when he ran the household while she worked as a therapist. She was happy to see that his sister Erica had done likewise in her own home. "Good! Do you think it's a *fair* arrangement?" Seeing him nod absently, she shook her head, thinking that she may have to begin therapy sessions with him to help him through his grief and pain. He seemed so disconnected with life that it pained her to know this was her dear friend Jack's son; the man who had taught Richard to really live and laugh. "So, do either of you two have any questions or points you would like to bring up for discussion?"

"Yes, Mamma." Faith said respectfully. "Two questions and a point of discussion, actually."

"Go ahead, dear." her mother permitted.

"First I wanted to ask about school tomorrow. Is there going to *be* school with the weather this bad?" she nervously looked toward the window.

Shaking her head, Heather explained. "I don't believe so, dear. However, even if they do *not* cancel school, I'll be excusing you from it tomorrow as Eric's arrival will require you to be available. He'll need someone who can show him how we do things here, and I can think of no *better* example than you, dear. Your second question?"

"My second question is to ask if Eric could be allowed to sleep in *my* room with *me* tonight so he won't be lonely." she inquired. "That gets to the point I wanted to discuss. May we discuss it, Mamma?"

Heather had expected her to ask. Taking a breath, she turned to him. "Well, I know you're troubled to be alone, and I don't blame you, sweetie. You've

been through more than many people could *bear* in such a short time, especially at such a young age. What do *you* want to do? Would you rather sleep in your *own* room tonight, or spend your first night here with *Faith*?"

Shocked she would even ask him, Eric shrugged. "Well, I don't *want* to be alone, but I *can't* sleep in the same room as *Faith*, *right*?"

"Why do you say that?" Heather asked, settling comfortably into her therapist's habits of answering a question with a question.

He blinked at her in confusion. Thinking that his aunt wanted him to say the obvious out loud to prove he knew it, he cleared his throat. "Because it isn't right for boys and girls to sleep in the same room together. Like, when I used to stay over at April's house sometimes when my mom would be out of town? Before we turned ten I used to sleep in *her* room. After that, April's parents made me sleep in her older brother's room that he wasn't using anymore since he went off to college."

Arching a brow, she answered honestly. "Well, April's parents were free to set whatever rules they wished in *their* home. I personally *disagree* with their opinion regarding age appropriateness, though. I see nothing wrong with young boys and girls sharing a room, even up to your age. You're *children*, not *teenagers*... and cousins, besides."

Using the opportunity to work out some of his repressed emotions, she covertly changed directions. "*Family* is different. If you had been *raised* here as *our* child, we would have put you two in the same room together growing up. As for *Faith*'s request, I would leave that up to *you* since *you* seem to feel there's an issue." She laid the suggestion out specifically, watching for how he would react to it being *his* choice and presenting that it was *his* opinion, not that of April's parents, that he was stating.

He had been expecting she would disallow it due to their age, but since it was left entirely up to him, he bit his lower lip and tried to think. Whenever

he tried to imagine sleeping in that big room by himself, so far from all he'd ever known, it left him feeling even more scared and lonely.

"Well, I really *don't* want to be alone." he pondered out loud. "If it *were* up to me, I would chose to stay with you or Faith... maybe just for tonight? I *really* didn't know if it's right or wrong. I was just repeating what April's parents told me, but *you* seem to think it's OK, so... *may* I, Aunt Heather?"

She nodded in understanding, happy that he'd asserted a choice of his own, a definite sign of improvement over the apathetic behavior she'd observed thus far. "Very well. You may go up to Faith's room with her. I'll be up in a while to turn down the lights."

Eric gingerly got up and followed his cousin. Seeing her pause to kiss her mother, he stepped up to his aunt and leaned forward to hug her. While she hugged him back, he felt warm and secure; a feeling of genuine affection like when his mother or April would hug him. Kissing her on the cheek as he'd seen Faith do, he stepped back and said, "Thank you for taking care of me, Aunt Heather."

She smiled at him. "Of *course*, sweetie. You're *family!* Now scoot on up to Faith's room! I'll be up soon."

Smiling weakly back, he turned to see Faith holding out her hand to him. Once he took it, Faith led them both to the stairs, Eric holding his robe again as he ascended to not trip on it. She led him by the hand all the way to her room. As they went inside, he watched Faith pick up the long metal stick and use it to turn each of the lights up until the lamps on the walls were lit brightly, giving a soft but warm light to the room.

Faith then stepped over to her dresser and removed some things. Closing the drawer and turning towards the bathroom she said, "I'll be out after *my* bath. You can play with any of my toys if you like! I promise I won't take too long!"

Just after she closed the door, it dawned on Eric that he had no toothbrush; his being lost in an airport somewhere. Wandering around the room aimlessly for a moment, he turned when he heard the bathroom door open.

"Eric?" Faith asked. "Could you help me please?" Going over to the door, he watched her turn away from him, showing him the back of her dress. "Would you unzip my dress for me, please?"

Reaching up, he unzipped the dress, seeing she was wearing another garment underneath it. Overcome with curiosity he asked, "What's that under your dress?"

Faith laughed lightly. "That's my *slip*, silly! Thank you for the help! I *always* have a hard time getting the zipper down! I just can't manage to reach that part of my back!" She gently shooed him back into her room and closed the door once more before he could even ask about a toothbrush.

Resuming his wandering, he looked at her dolls, the items on her vanity, and then went to the large toy chest on the opposite side of the room between the windows. He opened it to find several tea sets, more stuffed animals, many Barbie dolls, and a good-sized box marked 'Doll Clothes'. All were very neatly organized as though each one knew their place and had assumed it before he had lifted the lid.

Closing the box, he went to the toy chest at the foot of her bed and saw it contained a collection of board games and other boxed toys. He saw one that caught his interest, pulled it out, and examined it, not sure what it was. *What's a Spirograph?* he wondered. Figuring out quickly that it was some sort of drawing toy, he took it up on Faith's bed. Lying across the foot of her bed, he determined how it worked and idly started creating many different designs, serving as a distraction from his sorrow and loneliness. Just as he was really getting into using different color combinations, Faith came out wearing a pale blue nightgown with a towel wrapped around her hair. Seeing her, he was suddenly reminded that he was in a girl's room and

wearing girl's panties, robe, and slippers and began to blush. Watching her as she began brushing out her hair, he almost jumped when she noticed what he was playing with.

"*Oh! My Spirograph! I love that!*" Climbing on her bed to join him, she saw he seemed embarrassed. "*What's wrong? I said* you could play with my toys! I don't mind that you were using my Spirograph!"

Fidgeting, he blushed even more. "Oh. It's not *that*. I just..." He was too embarrassed to say the words and really didn't feel like a long conversation about it, but at the same time he was too polite not to answer. Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, he let it all out. "It's just when I saw you I remembered that I was wearing your robe and slippers and stuff. I got so into drawing that I forgot for a while."

Faith dropped down on her elbows next to him. "I think you look *pretty*. Don't you *like* my robe? Doesn't it just make you *feel* all pretty inside?"

"*I guess* it's nice." Eric shrugged, running a finger over the satin. "It's *really* girly though." he pointed out.

Picking up a pencil, she started to draw little pink hearts on a free sheet of paper. "I guess I don't understand. What's *wrong* with being girly?"

"There isn't anything really *wrong* with being girly. It's just... Boys are supposed to be different."

She continued to draw as he resumed using the Spirograph, trying once more to distract himself. "Different *how?*" Faith interrogated.

He started to answer, came up blank, then thought of something. "OK. So my friend April? She likes *unicorns*. I like *horses*."

"I like *both*." Faith smiled wryly.

Sighing, he tried another approach. "OK, she likes playing house and Barbie dolls, I like video games and riding bikes."

She stopped to consider his comparison. After a moment she asked, "Did she ride bikes with you and play video games with you?"

Replying nonchalantly, he said, "Sure."

"Did you play house and Barbies with *her*?"

He stopped and remembered all the times they'd played house with April as his pretend wife. He used to make up long and elaborate stories about their life and problems and it *was* a lot of fun. He also remembered the many times they played with her Barbie dolls, again with him usually driving the narrative that established the direction of their play. "Well... yeah."

She jumped on his confession with a mischievous grin. "Was it *fun*?"

Thinking back, he admitted to himself that April never had to cajole him into playing the games she liked. He liked doing it because it made April happy and he had fun making up stories to go along with it. "Well, when you put it *that* way, I *do* have to admit it was fun *most* of the time, but I..."

Faith didn't give him a chance to rebut. "And did *April* like playing video games and riding bikes with *you*?"

Not really seeing what she was getting at, he replied, "*Sure*. She liked racing through the dirt lots at the end of our street."

"So then I don't get it." she unraveled his argument like an expert in debate. "You say boys like *different* things from girls, but *you* liked doing things *April* liked and *she* liked doing things *you* liked. *She* liked feeling *boyish* sometimes, and *you* liked being *girly* sometimes. So then, what's wrong with feeling *pretty*? You *are* pretty!"

Putting down his pencil, he tried to recover his position. "OK, I'll admit that, but I would never play Barbies if *April* didn't want to."

"Why *not*? Barbies are *lots* of fun! You said so *yourself!*" she grinned.

Dropping his head down on the bed, he sighed out heavily. Answering into the comforter he replied, "I don't *know*, OK? I just know that if *April* didn't like Barbies, I probably wouldn't have played with them on my own!"

Faith tapped him on the back of the head. When he raised his head to look at her he saw her smiling. In a matter-of-fact tone she quietly stated, "Now that you *know* Barbies are fun, why *wouldn't* you want to play with them?"

Dropping his face back into the comforter, he groaned loudly into the bed. Wanting to think of a good comeback, but now lacking the desire to even fight her on the issue, he raised back up and sighed. "OK. *I give*. I *can't* tell you why. I don't *have* any better reason than it just wouldn't be any fun if *April* didn't like it."

Going back to drawing she quipped, "Well of *course!* How could you have fun playing something if the person you're *playing* with doesn't like it? *Duh!*"

At that, Eric sat up, grabbed a pillow from the top of Faith's bed, and bonked her with it gently on the top of her head. Smiling and giggling like crazy, she grabbed another pillow, swinging it wildly at him. The two struggled for a better position to get each other, giggling happily, when the door slowly opened without either of them noticing. After a moment of watching the two, Heather cleared her throat.

The two children looked over at the door frozen mid-play in sudden shock. Faith quickly tossed the pillow back to the head of her bed and dismounted, standing silently next to her bedpost. Slowly Eric did the same until the two were standing next to one another.

Entering the room, her white satin nightgown and robe drifting around her, she crossed her arms. "Faith? You know rough play is not allowed after bath time and *never* in the house."

Hanging her head she admitted, "Yes, Mamma. I'm *sorry*. I forgot myself."

Looking over at Eric standing shyly in Faith's robe and slippers and looking very ashamed, she simply pursed her lips.

Fidgeting with the robe, he mumbled guiltily, "Please don't be mad at Faith, Aunt Heather. I started it. I'm *sorry*."

Seeing genuine remorse in his eyes, she uncrossed her arms, shook her head, and laughed lightly. Petting both on the top of their heads, Heather sighed. "Considering your ignorance, and seeing you genuinely happy for a moment, I'll let it pass this time, but *please* try to remember. This is *not* your old home. We have our *own* rules here. Not too *many*, and none without *reason*, but I *do* expect you to *keep* them. *Alright?*"

Guiltily, he looked down. "I will, Aunt Heather." Looking back up at her he added, "Aunt Heather? I don't have a toothbrush."

Thinking a moment, she realized she had not thought of that detail. "Well, we can get you one tomorrow, but in the mean time go in the bath and use one of Faith's. You'll find an unopened one in the bottom cabinet next to the sink. Please be quick about it. Faith? Please finish brushing out your hair. It's already *well* after nine."

Walking quickly into the bathroom as Faith obeyed her mother, he found one of her unopened pink Barbie toothbrushes. Repressing the feeling that using it was somehow bad, he pushed it aside and began brushing his teeth.

It was unnerving seeing his reflection in the ornate bathroom mirror. Faith's pink toothbrush in his mouth and the girly bathrobe he wore, along with his

nearly dry long dirty-blonde hair combined with the feminine scent of the shampoo and soap he'd used earlier, making him see a girl reflected back at him. He didn't even try to fight it. At this point he was getting used to it and figured that there wasn't much of a choice in the matter anyway.

Tomorrow, he reasoned, *things will be back to normal*. He soon realized that they in fact would *never* be so for him, ever again. He would have to find a *new* normal, the realization undoing all his happiness from earlier. Rinsing his mouth absently, he padded back out into the bedroom and across to the right side of Faith's bed, she having already gotten in on the left side and sitting up waiting for him; the gaslights turned low.

He was about to climb in when his aunt cleared her throat. Stopping to stand next to the bed he asked, "Yes, Aunt Heather?"

"We do not sleep in robes and slippers, sweetie." she pointed out patiently.

"Oh." Flushing once more, he stepped out of the slippers and untied the robe, letting his aunt remove it for him as he clutched the neck of the oversized T-shirt once more.

Heather returned the robe to the bathroom before Faith asked, "Mamma? Couldn't he borrow a nightgown to sleep in? He could wear my *favorite!* Freddie's T-shirt is *awfully* short and too baggy to sleep in." she pointed out.

Returning from the bathroom, Heather considered her daughter's argument. She didn't want him to feel uncomfortable having to wear only a T-shirt and girl's underwear to bed, but she didn't want him to wear a girl's nightdress even more. Thinking he would simply reject the idea outright she asked, "Well, why don't we leave it up to him?" She looked at Eric and smiled. "Sweetie?"

His vacant expression had returned. Having already admitted to Faith that he enjoyed girly things conspired with his thoughts of how his life would

never be normal to make him accept whatever Heather wanted. If that were him wearing a girl's nightgown, he would just accept it as his new normal. "It's fine, Aunt Heather." he shrugged. "Whatever you think is best."

Sighing, she was disappointed that he hadn't taken the initiative to say he didn't want to wear a nightgown. She knew Faith was right. Other than social convention, there really *was* no valid reason to prevent him from sleeping in a long nightgown that was his size and available versus a short ill-fitting T-shirt. Trying to slip one by her daughter, she changed tactics. "It would be silly to have him change when he doesn't have a preference, since a nightgown would only be a bit longer than the T-shirt anyway."

Shaking her head, Faith didn't buy it. "Mamma? My *long* nightgown? My *favorite*? It goes down to my *feet*! It would be *way* better than a T-shirt!"

"Possibly," she said, still trying to find a way out of it. Seeing Eric standing by the bed blankly, she shook her head. "I'm going to call it 'good enough' for tonight. We'll get you boy's pajamas tomorrow. Go ahead and climb into bed, sweetie." she ordered him.

Not really listening to their conversation, and no longer caring what he was wearing, Eric pulled back the comforter and sheet and climbed into Faith's bed. In doing so, the baggy shirt drooped open so that both Faith and her mother could easily see the borrowed undies he still wore. Heather avoided looking by going to the bathroom to dim the gaslights to minimum. Faith however, watched him avidly as he got into bed and adjusted the loose shirt repeatedly, trying to get it to stay on his shoulders.

Approaching the bed, Heather waited while Faith laced her fingers together and prayed silently, finishing with, "Amen." Once done, they looked to Eric.

Seeing them waiting for him to do likewise, he figured it was easier to just fake it rather than fight it, and didn't care either way. Closing his eyes, he pretended to pray for several seconds and then absently mumbled, "Amen."

As the two settled in for sleep, Heather kissed them both on the forehead and returned to the door. "Goodnight, you two. Pleasant dreams." she said softly as she closed the door behind her.

Eric started fidgeting almost immediately. The baggy shirt, as Faith had predicted, turned out to be very difficult to sleep in, making him move to adjust it over and over again.

"Eric? Are you alright?" Faith asked just above a whisper.

"Not really." he answered embarrassedly. "The T-shirt is so baggy it keeps bunching up every time I even *breathe*, but I'll be fine. *Really*."

Quietly slipping out of bed, she tiptoed across the room to her dresser. Coming back quickly, she handed him her favorite nightgown. "Here." she said sympathetically, keeping her voice low. "I don't care *what* Mamma says. *I* think you should sleep in *this*."

Shaking his head he whispered, "I don't wanna make Aunt Heather mad at me, Faith. She said to just sleep in the T-shirt."

"You're gonna fidget and fuss *all night* if you stay in that! Come *on!* Please? Mamma *said* it was up to *you*." she argued putting on her 'cute girl' look.

Seeing her hold it out to him again and knowing she was just going to keep insisting, and not really caring about anything at the moment, he sighed and reached out, taking the garment with his hand. "It's really soft." he mumbled.

Letting him take it, she stepped back and whispered, "I know! And *super* comfy! Well, come on then! Get up and put it on!"

Embarrassed for her to see him, the shirt having ridden up to the point it was exposing the underwear he'd borrowed, he shook his head. "Get back in bed and turn your back?" he stated as though it were a question.

"Why?" she asked innocently.

He was about to explain, but apathy and a desire to just escape reality with sleep made him give in. Getting out of bed, he lifted the T-shirt off with ease. Standing in front of Faith in nothing but the panties he'd borrowed, he quickly slipped into the pink satin polyester nightgown, dropping it over his head and pushing his arms through the elastic banded short sleeves.

Satisfied, she smiled and walked back to her side of the bed and climbed in, settling in facing him this time.

Wearily, he climbed back into bed, having to admit that wearing the fitting nightgown that came down to his ankles was far better than the loose T-shirt. It *was* soft and comfortable, but it felt funny wearing a satin nightie with lace edges and little flowers on the chest, every move reminding him of its presence. Settling in, all Eric could hear was the rain on the roof and the wind howling through the trees. Punctuated by occasional thunder and lightning flashes through the window, he found it difficult to get to sleep.

After a few minutes he heard Faith whisper, "Eric? Are you still awake?"

"Uh-huh." he replied turning to face her. "It's a little spooky here."

Scootching closer to him, she continued whispering. "If I tell you something, you promise not to get mad at me for it?"

"OK. I suppose so. What is it?"

She shook her head. "You have to *promise* first."

Rolling his eyes, he answered, "OK. I *promise* not to get mad. What is it?"

Faith lowered her voice even softer. "I think you look *really* pretty in my nightgown. And I'm glad you chose to sleep here with me tonight."

Blushing, he looked down at the top of the pink nightgown that he could still see above the covers. Seeing the little pink roses on his chest, he shrugged. "If I tell you something, do you *promise* to keep it a secret?"

Nodding she replied, "I promise! What is it?"

Eric sighed and closed his eyes, embarrassed to say it out loud. "It's not *too* bad really, not *nearly* as bad as I thought it would be. I thought I'd *hate* it, but it's actually *really* nice. It's *super* soft and gives me butterflies in my stomach, but in a *good* kind of way. I think I actually *like* it."

His cousin nodded and smiled, sliding close until he could hear her conspiratorial whisper. "Now you know why it's my *favorite!*"

"Remember you *promised* not to tell anyone... *especially* not your mom!"

A giggle escaped her lips before going back to whispering. "I promise! I'm *really* glad you like it though. It's not as *pretty* as some of my other ones, but it's a *lot* softer and more like some of Mamma's grown-up nightgowns. Doesn't it just make you feel all *pretty* inside even *more* than my robe?"

Gulping at the suggestion, he blinked nervously a few times before answering. "Um... I guess so. I... I don't really know what pretty feels like."

"Um... it feels like... well... *pretty!*" Faith stumbled over the words, realizing she couldn't describe it any better than Eric could. "I guess it *is* hard to describe. I bet that's what you're feeling though! Goodnight, Eric."

"Goodnight, Faith." he whispered. "See you in the morning." Rolling over with his back to Faith, he thought about what he was feeling, wondering if Faith was right, then tried not to think too much about anything, but the thoughts came unbidden. *This has to be the worst day of my life.* he mused. *I wish April was here! She'd know what to do.* His eyes closing, tears threatening to pour forth, he wondered, *Could tomorrow be any worse?*

Chapter 4 - Cut Off

Awaking slowly in a dark room, his mind was groggy and dull. The satin pillow and distinctive sweet smell that screamed 'girl' told him he wasn't in his room at the Stone's house. *That* room still stank of teenage boy from its occupant before he'd taken it. Unable to remember where he was, he had a vague notion of going to sleep in someone else's bed and there being a storm. He reasoned that he must have sneaked into April's bedroom last night like he'd done a few times after his mother's hospitalization when he'd been especially scared. April would soothe away his fears and he would sleep on her floor, returning to his own room in the early morning. That's when he remembered he was in a bed and noticed he *wasn't* sleeping alone.

He felt a girl he assumed to be April snuggled up tightly behind him. He could tell it was a girl from the scent of her and the wonderfully gentle touch of her arm wrapped around his body, her delicate hand gripping the front of his nightgown. *My nightgown?* he started, finally awakening fully. Looking down and seeing it with his own eyes, Faith's hand gripping the front of the nightgown he wore, brought reality crashing down on him. His mother's death, the funeral, the tearful goodbye at LAX, his lost luggage, and lastly Faith insisting he wear her nightgown.

Afraid someone would see them sleeping so close and that it was bad, even though he couldn't explain why, he tried to scootch away from her. Her hand tightened its grip and she scooted even more tightly against his back, undoing all his progress. Seeing she would not be moved easily, and now feeling why he'd woken, he almost panicked. Reaching up with his hand, he started to pull her arm off of him when he heard her stir.

"Oh." Faith yawned as he tried to move away, snuggling up to him once more. "It's still dark out. Let's go back to sleep."

"Um, Faith?" he asked. "I have to use the bathroom!" he explained quietly.

"Huh? Oh! Sorry!" she said, releasing him.

Sliding out of bed, he quickly crossed the cold room into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Returning a few minutes later, after learning that he could not relieve himself while wearing a nightgown except by sitting, he almost ran back to the warmth of the bed. "It's *freezing* in here!"

Waiting until he was fully settled back in bed, Faith scooted up close once more and spooned against his back, her arm slipping around his waist and gripping the top of his borrowed nightgown. "G'night, Eric." she yawned.

"Um, Faith?" he inquired to see if she was still awake. Hearing her acknowledge him wordlessly with a hum, he turned his head toward the ceiling so she could hear him more easily. "Y-you should go back to your side of the bed. If your mom saw us sleeping like this, she might get mad."

She picked up her head off the pillow and leaned over him, almost lying on the side of his body. Looking down at him, her face less than an inch from his and her blonde locks gently tickling his face, she furrowed her brow. "Why? It's *cold!* And you're *warm!*"

Feeling flustered with her lying on top of him, her face so close he could feel her breath on his lips, a lump rose in his throat that made it difficult to talk. Turning his head toward the far wall, he stammered, "N-never mind."

Shrugging, Faith lay her head on his shoulder, gripping him tighter than before and draping one leg over his. "G'nite."

Now fully awake and terrified of being thrown out into the cold, the feeling of her laying on him stirred feelings of comfort and affection. He felt as safe and comforted as the times he'd sneaked into April's room where she'd held him while he'd cried. Staring at the darkened window across the room, he apathetically accepted his role as human hot water bottle. Part of him wanted to *make* Faith to go sleep on her own side, while another part was

very much enjoying the secure feeling it gave him. Apathy gave the tie to the latter as he just vacantly lay there, enjoying the feeling of closeness while his heart hammered like a rabbit's.

Pondering his new normal, he felt the rise and fall of Faith's breathing; her breath warm against his neck. Relaxing him, his mind began to drift. *I should hate wearing Faith's nightgown... so why don't I?* he wondered. Looking down at Faith's hand, he actually smiled at the sight of her fingers gripping the satin bodice. Floating in and out of consciousness, he would be awakened periodically as Faith would move slightly or sigh contentedly in her sleep. He was startled fully awake when the door to the room opened, a shrill voice filling the space with the sound of irritation.

"Alright, you two!" the woman barked. "Up! Up! Up! Faith? Time to get up and dressed. Your mother said to pick something warm, we're in for the first serious storm of the season!"

Rolling over and away from him, he heard Faith cheerily sing, "Good morning, Franchesca!" The bed shook as he felt her move off it, listening to the sound of her light footsteps heading for the bathroom. Closing his eyes to pretend he was still asleep, he hoped the woman would just go away.

"Alright, *you!*" Franchesca barked. "It's after six o'clock! Breakfast in less than an *hour!* Mrs. Hargrave wants to talk with you right away, so drag your lazy bones outta that *bed!*"

Eric, afraid to be seen wearing Faith's nightgown, pulled the covers tightly to himself. In a flash, the comforter and sheet were ripped from his grasp; the chill in the air assaulting his body. Looking up, he saw a middle-aged woman in an ankle-length black dress with a white half apron, her ebony hair drawn up in a tight bun, making her long narrow face more pronounced.

"Come *on*, *you!*" she ordered while holding out the borrowed robe he'd worn the night before. "Snap *to it!* I have a *lot* of work to get done and you're

messing up my *schedule*, lazing about!" Believing Heather had told the boy to wear the nightgown out of necessity, she didn't pay it any mind.

Getting up tentatively, he let the woman put the robe on him, sat down, and watched her place the matching slippers over his feet; the marabou at the toes tickling nicely. Seeing her offer a hand up, he took it and smiled weakly, thankful that she seemed to be unaware he'd been told to sleep in the T-shirt.

"That's *better!*" she said, her voice less harsh. "Come along." Taking him by the hand, he had to jog to keep up as she led him out and down the hall to the last door on the right. Knocking gently but firmly, she opened the door after hearing a welcome. "Mrs. Hargrave?" she pushed Eric into the room. "If you won't be needing me, I'll be getting to my *work*, ma'am."

"That will be all, Franchesca." Heather intoned sweetly from her bed. Gesturing for Eric to approach she inquired, "Did you sleep well, sweetie?"

Scared that the robe might come open and show he was wearing Faith's nightgown, he pulled the robe tightly around him as he stepped a few feet from the door into the opulent room. "Y-yes, Aunt Heather." Seeing her gesture him forward again, he resumed slowly walking to her.

The center of her room was dominated by a huge bed made of dark stained oak with four large posts running up to within a foot of the ceiling, making them almost look like support beams rather than furniture. Wrapping around it was an ornately carved headboard with attached nightstands jutting forward from the sides, lovely electric lamps decorated them that, for the time being, served no purpose. The only light in the room came from the gaslights stationed at even intervals around the room's four walls. The large electric chandelier hung uselessly but beautifully from the middle of the room's ceiling and the windows showed no sign of the coming morning yet.

He looked around while making his way to his aunt's bedside, noticing all the furniture was similarly done in dark stained oak and appeared very old

in style, like things you might see in a movie with some fabulously wealthy character. Two dressers, an armoire, three wardrobes, a vanity, and a desk decorated the rest of the room. Elegant wallpaper of deep burgundy with thin gold vine patterns leading to delicate rosebuds covered the upper half of the walls, while the lower half was finished in fine polished oak. The carpet was a deep mahogany, so thick his slippers sank into it with each step.

Reaching the side of the bed his aunt was on, she regarded him with concern. "I need to talk to you. If you like, you may sit on the bed while we talk."

Climbing up on the massive bed, he was careful not to let the nightgown he was wearing show, holding Faith's robe closed in front tightly and keeping the bottom pointed away from her. Sitting on his feet at the foot of the bed, he made sure the robe he wore covered his legs for warmth, modesty, and secrecy, he finally looked up toward her. "Yes, Aunt Heather?"

She smiled, but he could tell she was upset. "Sweetheart, I think you can see that the weather has taken a decided turn for the worse since last night. It's *very* cold out this morning. *Freezing*, in fact."

Thinking she'd been told how he and Faith had been cuddling together for warmth, he was terrified that she was going to eject him from her home for letting it happen. Looking down in fear of her, he was too ashamed to even look her in the eyes. "I... I'm sorry, Aunt Heather." he stammered. "I won't blame you if you send me away to live in a foster home."

"*What?*" she exclaimed in confusion. "Sweetie, what *ever* would make you think *that!* I would *never* send you away!"

His head snapping up at her confused reply, he furrowed his brow. "I... I thought..." Realizing he'd misjudged what she was getting at, it dawned on him that he had given too much away and now would have to tell her what he'd assumed she already knew. He looked away once more, taking a breath. "Um... I thought you were mad at me that Faith was snuggled up

close to me this morning... like kinda almost *laying* on me?" He glanced back toward her, but couldn't keep eye contact. "I... I *told* her you'd be mad about it, but she just told me to go back to sleep. I *know* I should have just *told* her to move, but I *didn't*. I'm sorry, Aunt Heather."

Her confused look transformed into one of understanding and then mild irritation. "I see. I assume she was snuggling for warmth against the cold?" Seeing him nod silently and fearfully, she sighed. "It's alright, sweetheart. I am *not* mad at you, *or* Faith... though I'll have to have a talk with her about intruding on people's comfort and privacy. It's something she's *terribly* blasé about. However, that is *not* why I wanted to talk to you."

Looking up and feeling the burden of guilt released, he smiled weakly. "Oh. What *is* it you wanted to talk about, then?"

"I'm afraid I'm forced to break a promise I made to you yesterday." she said embarrassedly. "I... I told you that I would take you into town today to get you new clothes and the other things you need, but I'm afraid circumstances are going to force me to *delay* my promise." Seeing the dismay on his face and then the vacant look of apathy returning, she sighed in exasperation. "You see, the storm is getting worse by the hour and many of the roads are already closed due to ice. We won't be going *anywhere* until at *least* tomorrow at the soonest, more likely the next day."

Taking a moment before she told him the worse news, Heather steeled herself. "There is a *further* problem. The power is *still* out and the power company says that it may not be restored for *days*. Since we *have* firewood and gas lighting, we are the *lowest* priority for service in an outage. Right now, they're working to restore power to *other* people that are much *less* fortunate than we are... people that *depend* on electricity for warmth and light. Do you understand, sweetie?"

He nodded. "I understand. You mean we're *lucky* and should be *grateful* we have heat and light. It may be *cold* in the house, but it's warmer than it

would be if we needed *electricity* for heat." Realizing what his aunt had been driving at, he gulped again and asked, "Does this mean my clothes *still* can't get cleaned?"

She nodded ruefully. "I'm afraid it does, sweetie. You see, while we have *some* amenities that run on gas, we don't have *any* way of cleaning clothes quickly without electricity. We *can* wash them by hand, I've instructed Franchesca to *do* so, but *drying* them with no electricity in this cold and wet weather could take a *very* long time. It could be *days* before even the few clothes you have here, such as they are, are wearable... and only if Franchesca can repair them, which is doubtful. She's a *housemaid*, not a *seamstress*. On top of the *roads* being closed, it means that, for the time *being*, what you're *wearing* is all there *is*."

Feeling guilty about what it was he was wearing, his despair at the situation led him right back to apathy and guilt that he'd disobeyed her instructions. He almost *hoped* she would be mad and punish him for changing into the nightgown, feeling he deserved it for going against her wishes.

"About that." he started. "After you left last night, I had trouble settling in to sleep. Faith was right. The T-shirt kept bunching up just like she said it would." He gulped in fear that he was going to get Faith in trouble, but he just *had* to tell her. "Faith gave me a nightgown to wear." he said with an embarrassed sigh. "I *should* say though that she *was* right. It was *way* more comfortable and I fell asleep almost *right away*. Also, you *did* say it was up to *me*, right? I... I just decided it was OK. *Please* don't be mad at Faith!"

His aunt sat for a moment in stunned silence. Not that Faith had *done* it, she could *easily* believe she had, but the fact that apparently he'd complied without a fight. "Well... um... *OK*." she said as she tried to think what to do about it. As she looked at him sitting apathetically at the foot of her bed, she reasoned that his pain and grief were so acute he'd lost the will to assert much of any opinion, even willing to wear a girl's nightgown at the slightest prodding. Slowly she began to grasp the depth of his despair.

She'd seen similar behavior from adults who'd gone through severe trauma, but never such depth of pain in a child outside of abusive homes. Normally she would try to encourage talking through the grief, but every time she'd tried it only seemed to worsen, indicating he wasn't ready to face it yet. What he needed was a distraction, an escape, but circumstances were making that difficult, if not impossible.

Trying to work the problem one step at a time, she lifted her chin. "Alright. Well, I don't see that any real *harm* has been done. I'm glad you were able to sleep well and be comfortable. I'm sorry my calling you in here didn't give you a chance to change first. Would you like to return to Faith's room to change back into the T-shirt now?" she asked hopefully.

He shrugged absently, not seeming to care. "It's *fine*, Aunt Heather. Whatever *you* think is best." A soft knock sounded from the ornate door.

"Come in?" she bade them.

Faith walked in happy and smiling, wearing an off-white dress that came down to her ankles. "Good morning, Mamma! Franchesca told me they *did* cancel school today and that it might be canceled the *rest* of the week, so I won't *miss* anything staying home!" Seeing Eric sitting on her mother's bed shyly, she slowed as her smile died. "Is everything *OK*, Mamma?"

"Everything is *fine*, dear." her mother answered frustratedly. "I was just talking with Eric about our plans for today. You see, I promised him we'd drive down to Berlin to get him new clothes, but the storm has the highway closed, so I have to delay my promise." She looked back at him apologetically. "I will *keep* my promise, sweetie. I just can't do it *today*."

"It's alright." he answered vacantly. "You don't *have* to. *Eventually* my luggage will get here and that's good enough for *me*." His emotions were spiraling downward rapidly, certain that soon his aunt would tire of all the problems he was causing and send him away. His only faint hope was that

perhaps she would send him back to Newport Beach where he could be put in a foster home near April. Thinking of her again, his eyes went wide.

"Aunt Heather?" he asked looking up at her sadly. "I jus' realized I fergot ta' call April last night ta' tell her I got here OK. You gotta smartphone I can use real quick?"

Almost flinching at his abysmal use of language, she shook her head. "You forgot to *notify* April that you *arrived safely*, and do I have a cell phone you *may borrow briefly*." she corrected him. "However, the answer would be 'No' either way. There is no cell service here at the house, so I don't *have* a cell phone anymore, nor would it do you any good if I *did* have one."

"Oh." he answered dejectedly. Looking up at her once again he asked, "How about a com..." He stopped mid-question before answering it himself. "...puter, which wouldn't work since there's no power. Do you have a *regular* phone, Aunt Heather?"

"We *do*, sweetie." she answered, giving him fleeting hope. "However, it's only a quarter after three in the *morning* there. I'm afraid you'll have to wait until later in the day."

"That's *right*." he replied, hope evaporating quickly. "I forgot about the time difference, and April's parents don't let her take calls before school anyway, so I can't call her 'til six tonight when she gets home from school."

Faith stood by impassively as he and her mother talked. Noting the time, she waited until she would not interrupt. "Mamma? Breakfast is in less than forty-five minutes and Eric *still* doesn't have anything to wear." she pointed out. "What's he going to do *today*?"

"I really don't *know*, dear. His clothes won't be dry for a few days at *least*, and we have *nothing* for him to wear, except what he has on now. *Speaking* of which, I'm told *you* had him change after I put you two to bed."

"I *had* to, Mamma!" she defended her actions. "He was fidgeting around trying to get comfortable and *couldn't*, isn't that *right*, Eric? He would have kept us *both* awake for *hours*! Besides, he *chose* to wear it!"

Turning to the young boy, Heather could see the defeat in his eyes; willing to be led to almost *anything* so long as it distracted from the emptiness. "I find it hard to believe that a boy your age *chose* to wear a girl's nightshirt."

"Yes, Aunt Heather." He nodded shyly. "I really *did*. It's not like I had *much* of a choice. She was *right*. It's a *lot* better than that baggy *T-shirt*." Wrapping his arms around himself, he shivered. "Sorry. It's *really* cold. I'm not used to it *ever* getting this cold. Cold in Newport Beach is *sixty*, not *six*!"

Faith turned to her mother. "You didn't answer my question though, Mamma. What *is* he going to do today? It's cold enough that *I* didn't get warm until I got *dressed*. You always told me that 'I don't know' isn't an answer, right?"

"Don't be flippant, dear." she retorted. "No, it's *not* an answer, but I don't have one to *give* you. Sometimes even *adults* don't know what to do."

"Then why not have him wear one of my dresses?" she persisted. "I honestly *don't* see what the big *deal* is. Besides, what *choice* is there?"

"He could stay as he is, dear... that *is* a choice." she pointed out. "In fact he could go back to wearing Fredrick's T-shirt and we can try to find some way of getting a pair of pants to fit him."

"*Mamma!*" she said incredulously. "You *saw* him! He needed *my* robe to keep Freddie's T-shirt from falling off! I *don't* understand what's so *terrible* about him borrowing a dress! It's the *only* thing in the house that will *fit*!"

Eric looked over at his cousin. "Don't you have like jeans, or a T-shirt I could borrow? Even if they're girly, that would at *least* be warm... and maybe Aunt Heather wouldn't mind *that* so much."

Faith shook her head. "No, I *hate* pants! So Mamma doesn't make me *have* any. You could wear one of my skirts and a blouse instead of a dress!"

He shrugged defeatedly, his one thought of how to resolve the issue up in smoke. "Anything is fine with me, I guess. Whatever you think is best, Aunt Heather." he repeated as he shivered once more.

Now seriously concerned that he was falling deep into depression and apathy, enough that he may consider harming himself, Heather tried to think of a way to make him assert himself again. Shivering inwardly, she thought of a therapy technique that she felt might have the best chance at success; confrontation and transference.

She could not only *allow* Eric to borrow a dress from Faith, she could *insist* on it until he pushed back at her, transferring his anger with the world and God to her. She had used the technique before, but this was the first time she had actual *authority* over her patient, making it both easier and more difficult at the same time. It was also morally ambiguous and risky, but her training and experience told her that doing nothing would be far, far worse.

"Very well." Heather began. "Faith has made a point I *cannot* find fault with, nor can I think of any *reasonable* alternatives. Since without heat other than the fireplace, you *can't* very well run around the house all day in a bathrobe, and since you *don't* seem to care either way, you *will* borrow clothes from Faith until *yours* are dry. Please go take a bath in Faith's room. Use the toiletries she has available. She and I will be in shortly to help you change." She was almost abrasive in her tone.

"*Really*, Mamma?" Faith asked incredulously, hardly able to believe that her argument had changed her mother's usually unshakable mind.

Shrugging, Eric slid off her bed and headed toward her door. "Yes, Aunt Heather." was his only reply. Feeling completely cut off from himself, like a puppet on a string that he could only control indirectly, he simply obeyed.

He had a fleeting impulse to shout at his aunt, tell her that he wouldn't do it, but his anger was born only out of habit, not any actual desire or preference. Walking down the hall and into Faith's room, he found it odd that he *didn't* really care, thinking he *should* more than he *did*.

Entering Faith's bathroom, he started the water running, warming it up while he undressed. In short order he was bathing using Faith's toiletries. Washing his hair thoroughly, he rinsed and picked up the bottle of Japanese Cherry Blossom body wash. Cleaning himself all over with it left him feeling heartbroken as soon as he recognized the scent.

Sitting on the curb in front of his house in Newport Beach, Eric fiddled with a rock under his shoe, barely noticing when April sat beside him. Finally he smelled something odd and looked to his left.

"What's that smell?" he asked curiously.

Leaning against her best friend, her head rested on his shoulder. "Soap."

"No. I use soap and that ain't it." Eric grimaced.

"OK, so it's girl's soap." April shrugged. "I ran out of my normal bath soap and had to use some of my cousin's that she left here last Christmas."

Nodding in understanding, he went back to rolling the rock under his shoe. "OK." After a span of silence he commented, "It smells nice."

She sighed, worried about him. "Thanks."

After another silent stretch he added, "I just didn't want you to think I thought you smelled bad is all."

Hooking her arm under his, her head never having left his shoulder, after another awkward silence she finally asked, "How's your mom?"

"Not good." he shook his head despairingly. "She told me this morning that she's going to have to go to the hospital and stay there for a while. Maybe even a few weeks. She's inside packing right now."

Sitting up quickly, April turned to look at him. "That bad? I thought her chemo was going well?"

Shrugging as he shot his foot forward, he made the tiny rock under his shoe roll out into the street. "That's what she told me last week, but I guess you just can't tell with these things."

April thought silently for a moment before asking the question she didn't really want to hear the answer to. "So... what's going to happen to you? I mean, if your mom is going to be stuck in the hospital for a while, you can't stay home alone, can you? You're not even twelve, yet."

Picking up another pebble, Eric flung this one out in the street with his free hand. "I guess I'll hafta go to a foster home. At least 'til Mom gets better."

She drew in a short breath. "A foster home? Isn't there any other option? Don't you have any other family?"

"Not really, no." Eric shook his head sadly. "I mean I have an aunt that lives someplace back east, my uncle Richard's widow, but I don't think she'd be very likely to want to take me in. I don't think I've ever even met her. Besides, I need to stick around so I can help Mom get better."

Leaning against his shoulder once more, April tried to figure out a way she wouldn't lose her best friend. Suddenly, she sat up. "Hey! I could ask my mom and dad if you could stay with us! I mean, you've stayed over lots of times when your mom was out of town for work! Why not just stay with us for a few weeks?"

"Do you think they would mind?" Eric perked up.

"Only one way to find out!" she exclaimed, standing quickly and extending her hand down to help Eric up.

As he stood, he caught the scent of her again and smiled a little. "That stuff's really pretty. Your cousin sure must like smelling like a girl, though." he quipped.

"What do you expect?" she retorted as they started walking the short distance to her house. "She's a girl!" After a moment of walking silently together, she added, "Oh, and in case you hadn't noticed, so am I."

Eric smiled at her as they walked up the walkway toward her front door, simply unable to resist the easy joke she'd handed him. "Yeah, but I won't hold that against you!"

His last remark earned him a slap on the arm just as he passed her while she held the screen door open for him, the two entering the house he would live in for the next six months.

Chapter 5 - Visions of Erica Hargrave

Rinsing off the body wash as he remembered the happy exchange that now nearly brought him to tears, Eric's heart ached to see his best friend even though he knew he likely never would again. Draining the tub, he pulled in one of Faith's towels and dried. Stepping out, he pulled the towel around him tightly to ward off the bitter cold seeping in from the outside.

Noticing a small pile of clothes on the counter that weren't there when he entered, he realized his aunt must have placed them there while he was lost in his memories. After drying himself, he absently donned the second pair of panties he'd ever worn, this time pink, but there was also another article present that he recognized, which almost made him balk.

It was a training bra.

Warring within himself, he remembered his aunt's admonition to obey first and ask questions later and pulled it on over his head. Seeing the last garment she'd left for him, it looked like a very plain nightgown. Quickly figuring out it must be a slip like the one he'd seen Faith wearing the night before, he dropped it easily over his head to drape down his body. The war still raging inside him, he hesitated only a moment before opening the door.

Walking out, he saw his aunt, now fully dressed in a beautiful gown of blue and silver, standing next to the chair for Faith's vanity. Shuffling over to sit, he saw his cousin standing next to her bed smiling, her shocking blue eyes following his every move. Once seated, he watched his aunt crouch down and start to push what looked to him like a giant white sock up over his toes. "What's *that*?" he asked curiously, but with a hint of irritation that she was dressing him as though he were baby.

"Tights." his aunt said simply. "They'll help keep your legs warm." Pulling them up over his feet and calves, she stopped when she reached the bottom of the slip at his knees. "Stand and pull them the rest of the way up." she

ordered, warring within herself whether or not she'd chosen the right therapy, as he didn't seem to be struggling against it nearly as much as she believed he *should*.

Vacantly, he did as he was told while Heather turned her back to give him a modicum of privacy. Faith on the other hand watched him avidly as he lifted the slip and pulled the tights up over his rump. "Done." he said as he let the slip fall back into place.

Holding out a thin pink petticoat, she lowered it down to the floor. "Step in."

"What's *that* for? Is it *really* necessary?" he asked with more than a hint of irritation in his voice as he stepped in, remembering the house rules.

Sliding it up to his waist over the slip she explained with a faint smile, seeing that he was, at least vaguely, beginning to resent being dressed as a girl. "It's called a petticoat, dear. It gives the dress the proper shape so it doesn't just hang loosely around the legs." Hoping that the next item would be the final straw that would break his anger out, she went to Faith's wardrobe and pulled out a dress that she was sure would push him too far.

Eric turned and nearly fainted as she lifted the pink satin dress up for him to see. It looked to be the same length and a similar style as the cotton dress Faith wore, but had shorter puffy sleeves, a bodice covered in a swirl of vines and little flowers in a brocade pattern, and tiny pink sequins scattered about it. The neckline was accented in a Peter Pan collar with lace trim and more tiny sequins. The very full skirt was made of pale pink bridal satin and edging around about an inch above the lace-trimmed hem was another band of lace, ribbon, and a floral patterned organza with even more of the tiny sequins scattered around. He also noticed two satin sashes attached to the sides of the dress at the waist.

It was the girliest thing he'd ever seen.

"Point your arms up, sweetie." Heather instructed, waiting for him to balk.

Afraid to say no for fear of being sent away, and not really wanting to say it, he lifted his arms straight up as instructed. He was soon feeling a zipper closing up his back, followed by a tightness around his waist as his aunt tied the sashes together at the small of his back in a perfect bow. Inside he felt conflicted. The thick satin warmed him quickly, for which he was thankful, but the satin and lace all over his skin gave him *more* of that feeling of butterflies in the stomach than the nightgown had.

Directing him to sit back down, his aunt proceeded to brush and comb out his long wet hair. Every stroke seemed to fill the room with more girlish scent, making the butterflies in his stomach change to little rubber balls, bouncing around inside him every time he thought, *I smell like a girl! I'm dressed like a girl!* which he repeated with each brush of his hair.

His conflicted feelings weren't over wearing the dress. He honestly didn't care one way or the other, accepted the necessity, and in fact enjoyed the feeling. It was the *other* things that bothered him. If his aunt had just told him he had to wear a dress for the day, even *this* one, he would have been *fine* with it and perhaps *liked* it even, though he wouldn't tell his aunt that. Insisting he wear a petticoat and bra he didn't really *need*, simply because they were things a girl would wear *with* the dress, made him feel things he didn't want, and wasn't prepared, to face. The war inside himself became a pitched battle, feeling that he must fight to stop his aunt from treating him like a girl, but being treated like a girl gave him a feeling that made him simply give in to the apathy and quietly obey.

"Well," she said after a few minutes, "we can't dry and style your hair properly without electricity, and brushing it out it just makes you look like a boy with long hair in a dress."

"Well *aren't* I?" Eric huffed.

Heather smiled sweetly, certain that he was about to lash out. "Yes sweetie, but I'm sure you don't want to *feel* that way, do you?"

"Mamma?" Faith asked. "He could wear one of my play wigs! The *red* one!"

Believing him to be close to breaking through the apathy and venting his anger out at her, she smiled. "Yes, dear! That *would* work, wouldn't it?" Pushing his boundaries to the breaking point, she coiled his damp hair on top of his head and pulled the auburn wig Faith brought her over it, seeing the anger in his eyes. "*There!*" she made herself say happily as she picked up a brush and did her best to make it look nice. "Take a look!" Heather ordered, preparing herself for the dam of emotion to finally break.

Furious that she'd added yet *another* unnecessary feminine article that made him look and feel even *more* like a girl, Eric angrily turned and regarded his image as instructed. Reflected back at him was someone who only looked vaguely like what he recognized in the mirror, but somehow seemed so very familiar. As the wind howled outside and the beating rain turned slowly to sleet and snow, he realized that he was watching an echo of the past; a ghost reflected back at him instead of his own image.

A chill ran down his spine unnerving him when he realized why the image in the looking glass appeared familiar; not because it was a reflection of him dressed as a girl, but because it *wasn't*. In desperation to escape his tormented life, his broken mind took the reflection that vaguely resembled pictures of his mother as a child and twisted it to make him actually *see* her image as a child reflected back at him. *Mom?*

Seeing his shocked reaction, his aunt readied herself for a full-scale rebellion. "Well?" she asked.

The traumatized child could scarcely speak. After a moment, his expression of anger and shock melted into one of fascination. He simply nodded and murmured, "It's... it's *fine*, Aunt Heather." causing her to visibly blanche.

Watching him, Heather had been certain he was seconds from pushing back; moments from the break that would finally see him pour out his pain, grief, and anger at *her* instead of the faceless world that had been so cruel to him. If he had, she would have been ready to take it all, begin working through his grief, and help him learn to cope with it. Instead, something she hadn't anticipated happened as he just stared at his reflection, mesmerized.

Bringing over a pair of pink patent leather Mary Janes still in their box, Faith handed them to her stunned mother. "You bought these for me for when I grow some, Mamma. I think they might fit her already."

Swallowing hard at hearing himself referred to as 'her', he wanted to turn toward his cousin, but was almost physically incapable of looking away from the vision of his mother as a young girl staring back at him.

Heather was about to correct Faith's gender switch, but it started a thought brewing. "Are you *sure*, dear? You haven't even had a chance to wear them yet. They might get ruined before you even get a chance."

Faith dismissed the idea. "Of *course* she won't ruin them! *Will* you Erica?"

Hearing his mother's name broke the spell and he snapped his head around, thinking that they could see her in the mirror as well. When he saw Faith looking back at him and mentally processing the conversation he'd heard but wasn't listening to, his shock slowly melted away and he shook his head, noticing the strange sensation of the long red curls tickling his neck. "N-no Faith. I promise I won't mess them up for you." he said softly.

Beaming happily, Faith handed the shoes to her mother, who slipped them on the stocking feet without a word. They fit well and his aunt then bade him to stand and look at himself in Faith's full-length mirror, hoping that perhaps the full image would be too much for his male ego to handle.

Stepping in front of the oval freestanding mirror, he got another chill as he once more saw his young mother in the mirror trying to copy his movements, just out of sync enough that he could tell it was her and not his reflection. He no longer cared about the clothes he was wearing or the uneasy feeling looking like a girl gave him. All he cared about was seeing his mother, even managing to smile at the idea that she was here with him once more.

Coming to stand next to her cousin, Faith looked at their reflections, appearing to her, and anyone else who might see them, like a perfectly normal pair of young ladies.

Heather quietly opened the door. Turning in the doorway she said, "I'm going downstairs to let Cook know to start serving breakfast. Please don't dawdle." Closing the door behind her, she was in a near panic. *It almost worked!* she insisted to herself. *It nearly did, but something changed in him. I wonder...* Guessing what it might be, she spotted Fredrick dousing the gaslights in the hallway and approached her butler. "Fredrick?"

Turning to face her he asked, "Is there something you need, Madame?"

Blushing slightly, she steeled herself. "Please inform Cook that we will be down for breakfast shortly. Additionally, I want to let you know something so you don't react negatively. Lacking options, and with his consent, we have attired young Eric in one of Faith's dresses. He was quite unnerved by it, but we didn't have much choice in the matter, given circumstances."

Explaining further, she added, "He didn't want to feel like a boy in a dress, so Faith and I helped to make *her* look more the part, which helped, so please treat *her* as you would any young lady. Can you do that, Fredrick?"

Barely able to restrain his shock, after a moment Fredrick accepted it as simply what his employer, a trained therapist who knew more about these things, desired. "Very well, Madame. How shall I address the child?"

Sighing, she replied, "Miss *Erica*. This should only be for part of today, hopefully. I'm going to go talk with Franchesca. I want you two to figure *some* way of fixing and drying his clothes *today*. Once his clothes are dried and repaired, he will *remain* in them until the roads open... even at night. Please inform Cook of the situation."

Bowing slightly he stated, "Of course, Madame. I shall do my best to make... *her*... comfortable with the situation." At that he returned to extinguishing the gaslights while Heather went off to find her maid. She wasn't sure what was going on in Eric's mind, but she couldn't live with herself if she didn't do everything possible to ensure Jack and Erica's son remained their son.

"Mamma picked my *prettiest* dress!" Faith pointed out after Heather left. "You look *gorgeous* in it, Erica! Do you mind if I call you that?"

Looking back at Faith in the mirror, he shook his head. "I suppose not, Faith. I... I guess *Eric* wouldn't be right... for... for a... a *girl*." A feeling he didn't understand washed over him as he referred to herself as a girl for the first time; a calm unlike anything she'd ever experienced. The war inside her was over. All that remained was the blissful calm. Turning back to marvel at the image of her young mother in the mirror, Faith took her hand.

"We should be getting down to the dining room. Mamma doesn't like it when we're late and it's already seven-thirty... half an *hour* late."

Swallowing hard, she asked, "Can I tell you a secret, Faith?"

She turned and faced Erica's reflection. "Anything, Erica! I promise not to tell... unless it's something *bad*."

She shook her head, this time enjoying the tickle of the hair on her shoulders and neck. "It's not a *bad* secret. When I look at myself in the mirror dressed like this?" She paused and let go of Faith's hands, gathering the nerve to say it out loud and not cry. Closing her eyes and holding her

breath a moment, she finally blurted it out. "When I see myself in the mirror like this, I... I see my *mom* when she was a little girl!"

Faith gasped and her eyes grew wide. "Oh, *Erica*!" She'd seen pictures her father had of his sister growing up and, looking closely, she realized that in the dress and red wig her cousin *did* resemble her somewhat. "Are you *OK*?"

She nodded in fascination as her mother nodded with her. "I... I never noticed how *much* I looked like her before because my mom has red hair, and I have dirty-blonde hair like my father did."

"So I was *right* to pick the red hair?" she smiled.

Erica nodded, watching the youthful image of her mother eerily shadowing her head movement. Fascinated, she turned only her body away from the mirror slowly, continuing to watch her youthful mother following her movements imperfectly. She could turn her body just enough to see the big pink satin bow at the small of her mother's back, its ends trailing down the back of the skirt as though the ghost were a giant present.

Taking her hand, Faith chirped, "Come on, Erica! Let's go have breakfast!"

Entering the hallway, they saw Fredrick waiting for them at the top of the stairs. Erica's cheeks flushed and she felt the urge to run back into Faith's room to strip the dress off, but the impulse to do so was small and distant, like a memory of a desire. Instead, she just let Faith continue to lead her, hearing the clacking of their short heels against the marble floor. It was an odd sensation for her, having never heard her own footsteps so prominently.

When the two reached the top of the stairs, Fredrick bowed. "Good morning, Miss Faith... Miss *Erica*. Breakfast is served. If you will accompany me?"

"*Thank* you, Freddie!" Faith said happily as she released Erica's hand and took his, descending the stairs with the perfection of royalty.

Following, Erica tried to descend the stairs as gracefully as Faith. Passing the framed paintings that hung along the stairway wall, she would occasionally catch sight of her mother in the glass and smile. Slowly, she formed a story in her mind unlike any she'd ever made up. Reaching the bottom, Fredrick held out his free hand and waited. Taking the offered hand gently, she held it the way she saw Faith doing, letting the butler escort them both to the dining room. Entering, they saw Heather already seated at the head of the table.

"Miss Faith and Miss Erica, Madame." Fredrick announced formally.

Nodding to him, Heather gestured to the same places they had occupied the night before. Realizing that she should wait to be seated like Faith, she stood beside her chair while Fredrick assisted her cousin. When the muscular man moved her seat out for her, she smoothed the back of the long skirt and mimicked how she'd seen Faith sit. Sliding into place, she again followed Faith's lead and placed her napkin across her lap.

Waiting patiently, she saw Cook come out with two plates. Serving her aunt first, she again served Faith second. The household cook then left and came back to place Erica's plate in front of her, smiling at her gently, if nervously, the whole time.

"Thank you." she muttered, her voice soft and meek.

"You're quite welcome, dearie!" Cook replied. "Just let Fredrick know if you want any more! There's plenty!"

Remembering dinner, she clasped her hands to pray and bowed her head while her aunt repeated the same prayer from dinner. During the prayer, the broken child imagined she was her own mother, praying as she must have done thousands of times before Erica was even born. It gave her a warm smile that lingered all the way through "Amen."

Throughout breakfast in fact, she was smiling. She hadn't played pretend, creating stories like she used to, since before her mother's hospitalization, but at that moment she was lost in a world where she *was* Erica Hargrave, a twelve-year-old girl visiting with her cousin Faith and her aunt Heather. Imagining it as she ate, she changed the back-story so she was *living* with her 'aunt' who was really her sister-in-law because Richard was her much older deceased brother. She just called her 'Aunt Heather' out of respect because she was old enough to be.

Watching the two eating, Heather noticed that Erica seemed happy, but lost in thought. Worried that she was in some kind of fugue state at the shock of seeing herself dressed as a girl, the therapist decided that she'd made the right decision in arranging to have the boy clothes cleaned, dried, and repaired as soon as possible. *Whatever's going on in his mind seems to have broken through the apathy and depression, so it's done some good, but the sooner he's back in his own clothes, the better. I don't like this...*

When at last the three finished breakfast, Fredrick helped each of them out of their seats in turn. Moving from the dining room into the living room where the large fireplace warmed the house, Heather sat once more on her usual loveseat while the two girls took seats on the other one facing her.

"Well!" she began. "Since there's no school today, and likely not for a few days at least, we needn't worry about getting Erica registered until likely next month." Looking at Erica's reaction, she noticed no change in expression over the use of her name in the feminine form. Needing to see just how badly damaged she was, Heather used her therapist's training and began engaging them in light conversation. "Do you two have any plans for today?" she asked.

Looking at one another, they shook their heads, Faith answering for them both. "Not *really*, Mamma. I've done all my homework, and Erica doesn't *have* any yet, so I guess there isn't anything we *have* to do. Could we just go upstairs and play for a while?"

Her mother shook her head. "I think we should sit here together and talk about a few things. Besides, it's *much* warmer in the living room than in your bedroom, don't you agree?" Turning to Erica, she asked, "Did you have anything you wanted to talk about? You must have a *lot* of questions."

"Not really, Aunt Heather." she said demurely.

"I noticed that during breakfast you seemed to be deep in thought." she probed. "What were you thinking about?"

"Well, I was thinking... um..." she began hesitantly, sure that her aunt would react badly to the idea that she was pretending to be her own mother. Deciding to just let her know *some* of her thoughts, she closed her eyes and took a breath, her way of making herself say something she didn't want to. "I noticed that I look an *awful* lot like... um... my mom... when *she* was younger. I was thinking about *that*." Still sorting out the details of her story, she justified her statement by separating Erica's life into two parts; her old life as a grown up and her new life, reborn in the body of her own child.

Faith looked at her surprised. "I thought you wanted me to keep it a secret?"

"It's alright, Faith." she sighed. "I couldn't very well lie to your *mom*, right?"

"I *guess* so." she replied. Turning to her mother, she asked, "I noticed *I* look a little like some of the pictures of *you* when you were little. Don't *you* think so, Mamma?"

Smiling, Heather turned to her daughter. "*Somewhat*, dear. I also agree, Erica... you *do* look *somewhat* like your mother at your age. How does that make you feel, seeing something of your mother reflected back at you?"

She shrugged absently. "Mostly I like it... like she's still here with me."

Looking at her intently, Heather nodded. "I understand. Well, I see no real harm in it for a while. Maybe it can help you cope with your feelings."

Smiling, Faith turned to her cousin. "Erica? Would you like to play pretend and your name can be Erica while my name can be Heather?"

Shaking her head slowly, she replied, "No, that's OK, Faith. I think you should just be *yourself*. You can still call me *Erica*, though. I *like* it." Even as the words came out of her mouth, she remembered that she was sitting across from her aunt. Looking over at her with eyes wide, she tried to stammer out a retraction. "Well, what I *mean* is... um..." Unable to come up with a convincing restatement of a meaning other than the truth, she finally sighed and looked down in her lap again, waiting for a lecture that she shouldn't be enjoying her predicament. The response she got surprised her.

"That very understandable, Erica." her aunt replied.

Looking up at her guardian, she asked, "It *is*?"

Heather laughed. "Yes, sweetie! You see, from a certain point of view, *Eric* is an orphan boy, uprooted from the life he's always known, and cast into a strange place with family he doesn't know with almost *nothing* to his name. *Erica* is a young lady with pretty dresses, lots of toys, a cousin just her age, and living with loving family and isn't missing *anyone* in her life, because she *has* no life other than what *you* want there to be. Do you see?"

She nodded as she began to see what her aunt meant. "I *think* so. It sounds like something I read in a psychology book once. I think it's called *escapism*. Is that right?"

Sitting forward, Heather was surprised by her degree of knowledge on the subject. "Very *good*, Erica! You seem to have a knack for psychology. Isn't that what your mother did for a living?"

Thinking about her *mother* Erica while *being* Erica was confusing and unsettling. If she was Erica *Dunning*, that meant *her* mother was also *Eric's* mother, therefore her mother was also dead, whereas if she was Erica *Hargrave*, her mother was alive again. Shaking free of that confusing and depressing line of thought, she answered her aunt's question distantly. "In a way, Aunt Heather. I think *she* was called a Human Resources Consultant."

Nodding, Heather already knew that her mother had gotten a degree in psychology; they'd both attended Stanford at the same time, Heather one year ahead of her. She also knew what her sister-in-law had done for a living after her husband Jack was killed overseas. It was all in the letter that the dying woman had written to her asking her to take 'Eric' in. "Well I'm *impressed*, young lady." she complimented.

Faith was bored with the conversation. "So then, can we play down here in the *living room* then, Mamma? If we *promise* to play quietly?"

"In a moment, dear." her mother replied absently. Turning back to her niece, she waited to see if the girl would volunteer anything more.

"Aunt Heather? If what you say is true, about me using escapism? Doesn't it mean I should *stop*? It's not *healthy*, right? Isn't it what *crazy* people do?"

"No, sweetheart. In fact a *little* escapism can be very *healthy*. Actually we do it all the *time*. Sometimes we *need* it the same way a pressure cooker needs an escape valve. When life gets too hard, or changes too quickly, the pressures it can cause can lead to *very* self-destructive behavior. A *little* escapism, like reading a book or watching a movie, is as healthy as a little wine; too *much* and you can't function in the real world... too *little* and you won't have much fun at *all*. Do you understand?"

Erica nodded. "So it's *OK* to be Erica?"

"For a *while*, yes." she nodded and smiled. With an almost laughing lilt in her voice, she added, "We'll see how you feel once your regular clothes are clean and dry and you have a *choice*!"

"Is it OK *now*, Mamma?" Faith sighed.

Her mother looked sternly back at her. "Now Faith, you know *perfectly* well that whining will *not* get you what you want. I think it would be good for you to be *reminded* of that by you two staying down here to read for a while. You may chose from *any* book in your library, so long as you read until ten. Is that *clear*, young lady?"

She'd regretted her impatient tone the moment it left her lips and knew that she'd blown any hope of getting to play downstairs any time soon. "Yes, Mamma." she replied apologetically. Standing up she extended her hand to her cousin, helping her stand in her unfamiliar outfit. "Come on, Erica. We really *do* have a very nice library. Would you like me to show it to you?"

She smiled at the idea as she'd always enjoyed reading. Pausing a moment, she realized she'd missed something. "Wait, you have your own *library*?"

"Well, I *call* it my library." Faith shrugged. "It's just one wall, though."

Her mother intervened, standing next to the two. "That's enough, Faith. Follow me, ladies."

Chapter 6 - Whodunit?

Stepping through the door to the right of the old grandfather clock in the living room, Erica walked into the library. Its dark interior illuminated only by the little light that managed to seep its way past the heavy curtains that covered the room's single massive window, she followed her aunt to the right; rows of bookshelves jutting out from the wall opposite the door.

Following the woman around the corner and further to the right, she determined it had to be directly below the room they'd given her, just as the living room was beneath Faith's and her aunt Heather's rooms. Slowly building a map of the house in her head, she looked around as Fredrick entered and drew back the heavy curtains, showering the room in the light managing to make its way through the heavy clouds and freezing rain.

She had never seen so many books outside a public library.

"This is our library, Erica." Heather said matter-of-factly, having come at last to the other end of the room near the window. "This *far* wall is Faith's library, and now *yours* as well. You may feel free to take *any* book on those shelves. If you want a book that is anywhere *else*, you need to ask my *permission* first. Do you understand?"

She nodded absently as she looked at the wide assortment of books available. "Yes, Aunt Heather." In doing so, she realized she'd mimicked the slight little curtsy she'd seen Faith do every time she said 'Yes, Mamma.' She hadn't actually thought to do it, it just seemed the natural thing to do.

"Richard expanded the library when we bought this house." she reminisced. "Originally, *this* part of the house was a separate room, a *den*, I believe. He combined them, then added the rows of shelves on the south wall to expand the library's capacity. Many of these books have been in my family for generations. The original library could *never* have contained them all. If you *do* request to use any of them, *please* be *very* careful. Some are *quite* old."

In awe of the number of books just in 'Faith's Library', she nodded and curtsied absently. "I will, Aunt Heather." Looking over the collection, she saw nearly every novel ever written for children from the mid-eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth, as well as several sets of encyclopedias.

While Erica perused the books, Faith came bounding up, happy as a lark, having completely forgotten her disappointment at being denied permission to play. "Erica! Have you ever read *this* one? It's one of my *favorites*!"

"*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*?" she read the title. "No, but I've *heard* of it. I think they made it into a movie once." Taking the book graciously, she wandered up and down the shelves, looking for anything that seemed interesting.

"That should be enough time." Heather instructed after a few minutes. "Take what you have to the living room and read *quietly* until ten o'clock."

Not having found anything that had caught her interest, Erica simply took the book Faith had handed her and followed her cousin out to lay on the floor in front of the fire where Fredrick had put a blanket for them to keep warm while they read. The two lying down to read, Heather reading on her usual loveseat, she looked at Faith's book. "What did *you* pick?"

"*Little Women*. I like *Beth* the most, even though it's *mostly* about *Jo*."

Shrugging, Erica settled down on her elbows to read in front of the fire. A short time later she noticed that she was doing something she'd done for years without realizing. The two pre-teens were both lying on their stomachs with their feet toward the fire and at some point Faith had started kicking her feet up as she read, mimicking what Erica had been doing. Imagining how they must look, she thought how it really *was* a very girlish thing to do and giggled. Looking up, she saw her aunt steal a glance at them, making her smile melt as she looked down and resumed reading once more.

Not long after, she heard someone enter the living room from the archway into the dining room and kitchen. Looking around, she saw Fredrick holding some metal racks and standing next to a waiting Franchesca who was carrying a small basket.

"Madame?" Fredrick began. "Franchesca has hand laundered the soiled clothes, however the only place suitable for drying them quickly is in front of the fire. With your permission?"

Not relishing the thought of seeing Erica's boy clothes hanging to dry in her living room, she was however more eager than ever to see Erica returned to her old clothes, mistaking the behavior as Erica slipping too easily and happily into newly acquired girlish habits. "Proceed, Fredrick. Please make room." she directed toward the two youths.

Both children scooted away from the fireplace, leaving room for Fredrick, Franchesca, and the improvised drying rack Fredrick had made out of grills from the oven.

While Fredrick started setting up the racks for drying, Cook stormed in. "*Mrs. Hargrave!* Fredrick has taken *all* the racks out of *my* oven! Without 'em, I won't be able to prepare dinner *or* supper!"

Heather put down her book. "I see." Turning to Fredrick she sighed, "Is there *no* other option?"

"I'm afraid not, Madame." he shook his head solemnly. "I find we are quite unprepared for this circumstance. The fire is the only means of drying clothes quickly, and the oven racks are the only viable means of setting clothes in front of it to do so. The only alternative would be to hang them on lines in the library or spare room, which would take two to three *days* to dry."

Thinking a moment, willing to do whatever was necessary to get Erica back in pants, she nodded. "Very well, Fredrick." Turning to Cook she

sighed, "You'll have to make do without them until later today at the soonest, Cook. Hopefully they'll be available in time to cook supper."

Scowling, she answered, "Yes *ma'am!* But just so you know, I *don't* like it!" Turning to leave, she glanced down at Erica with a pained expression.

Watching her leave for the kitchen once more, Erica wondered what the exchange was about before she looked over at Faith and for the first time saw her visibly upset. Leaning in close, she whispered, "What's wrong?"

Looking close to tears, she whispered back. "Once your clothes *are* dry, you might not want to be *Erica* anymore!"

"I think even if I *have* a chance to go back to... the way I was... I might not." she reached out a comforting hand to Faith.

Taking it, she smiled. "*Really?*"

"I really like being your cousin Erica." she smiled genuinely. "It's a *lot* more fun than when... when I... um... *wasn't*." Leaning in close to whisper even quieter, she added, "*Your* clothes are really nice and pretty!" Faith squeezed her hand happily before Heather interrupted the moment.

"That's enough whispering. Back to reading please."

Letting go of each other's hands, the two went back to their books. When the grandfather clock struck ten, Heather released them both to go upstairs and pick toys or a game they could quietly play in the living room to stay warm; the storm outside continuing to rage as the temperature plummeted.

Several minutes later, Erica stood patiently behind Faith as she rummaged through the toy box at the foot of her bed. "It's funny." Erica noted. "I didn't think I'd like *Rebecca*, but when your mom said we could go play, I was actually kind of disappointed that you didn't want to keep reading."

Looking back over her shoulder, Faith smiled. "It's a *great* book, isn't it?" Going back to her rummaging, she shortly pulled out a board game box and handed it to her slightly younger cousin. "Take this please, Erica?"

Taking the box, she watched Faith put all the other games back. More interested in the fascinating way the bubbly girl packed her toy box than the game she'd been handed, Erica watched as Faith neatly and carefully placed every object back in a specific place, finally dropping the lid when it was done to her satisfaction. Burning with curiosity, Erica asked, "Why do you put everything in a certain way? Doesn't that take a lot of extra *time*?"

Standing up, Faith shook her head. "Not *really*. When I *want* something I know *just* where to get it. Mamma taught me that being organized saves time in the long run because you don't *waste* time trying to find things and cleaning up messes that you wouldn't *have* if you *were* organized."

Walking over to her wardrobe, Faith opened it and revealed a huge assortment of dresses. "See? If I know *what* dress I want to wear, I know *exactly* where it is, saving time trying to find it. Plus, they don't *wrinkle*!"

While Faith talked for a few minutes about organization, Erica looked at her dresses. Only half listening, she was instead imagining what she would look like wearing each of them. Suddenly conscious of what she was doing, and remembering what was said while her ratty clothes were set out to dry, she chided herself.

Faith closed her wardrobe and took the game from her absent hands. Noticing her far away look, she asked, "*Erica?* Are you alright?"

Sighing, she stepped backwards until she felt Faith's bed against the back of her legs and sat down. "I really don't *know*, Faith."

She walked over and placed the game on her bed, sitting beside her. "What's wrong? Are you feeling *ill*? Do I need to get Mamma?"

"No, I'm not *sick*. I'm just... sad."

"Why?"

"I... I mean... *Ugh!*" Frustrated at her inability to express what she was feeling, she flopped back onto Faith's bed, staring up at Faith's pink canopy while her feet dangled from the edge. "I *like* being Erica, a *lot*... but I'm not *supposed* to."

Wrinkling her nose up in confusion, Faith asked. "Why do you think *that*?"

Closing her eyes, she tried to find the words that would make her understand. "Your mom *really* doesn't like me wearing your clothes or being Erica. I can *tell*. I think she's gonna *make* me stop... *very* soon... like as soon as lunch is over. I *really* like being Erica, but I think I *can't* like it. I... I don't want to make Aunt Heather *mad* at me." She left out the part she feared so much she dare not even speak it out loud, that if she displeased her aunt severely enough, Heather would send her away, just as the Stone's had.

Moving the game, she lay down on her side next to her cousin. "Didn't Mamma say it was *good* for you to be Erica for a while?"

"Yeah, but she doesn't *like* it." she mumbled. "She wants me to be a *normal* guy, and normal guys *don't* like dresses. Besides, I have to do whatever she says. She didn't *have* to take care of me, ya' know. I kinda *owe* her. So I'll hafta stop being Erica whenever she *says* to, even if I *like* being a girl."

Quietly, Faith mulled over the idea. "I guess I don't understand *why* she doesn't like you wearing my dresses. I mean, the way I see it, there's *lots* of girls I know that *hate* dresses. Some don't even like *me* wearing dresses! My old friend? Jennifer Wilks? She lives a little ways down the highway. She *hates* dresses! She told me that I should stop wearing them because she says they're... um.... de-grating? So it figures that since not all girls *like* dresses, then not all guys have to *hate* them, right?"

She opened her eyes and turned her head to face Faith. "If a *boy* likes to wear dresses, he gets teased by everyone and called names. If a girl *doesn't* like dresses, nobody *cares*. Girls can wear pants and guy stuff and it's fine, but boys can *only* like boy stuff... *nothing* else. It's just the way it *is*."

Faith sat up. "That's not *fair*!"

Sitting up, she leaned on one elbow and faced her. "No one ever said life was *fair*, Faith." she sighed depressingly. "If it *was*, we'd still have *dads*."

Sighing and lying back on her bed, Faith reluctantly agreed. "I *suppose*. I guess it's sort of like Mamma's friends, Aunt Brooke and Aunt Jenny? They live in a little house just north of here. Aunt Brooke was my daddy's *best* friend! She was in the war with him when he... um... when he died."

"My dad was killed in the war, too." Erica shared. Holding out her hand to Faith, she smiled when her cousin took it.

"I guess I see what you mean about life not being fair. When they got married last year, the ladies at church called them names I'm not allowed to say. Mamma stood up for them, then Pastor gave a sermon about having a splinter in your eye or something and everyone stopped calling them names. Aunt Brooke is *really* pretty, and Aunt Jenny is *super* nice! It *wasn't* fair that they got called names just because they're two married women."

Nodding in understanding, Erica sighed. "So anyway, *that's* what's wrong. I *really* like being Erica, and I *love* your dresses, but I can tell your mom isn't going to *let* me be Erica, *or* let me borrow your clothes, anymore." Pausing a moment, she began understanding herself. "I never really *thought* about it before this morning. I just assumed that because everyone told me to be a boy I *had* to be one, but it's like I was *supposed* to be a girl. That's what the doctor told my parents before I was born, that I was going to be a girl." Turning sullen, she looked down at her pretty dress. "But it doesn't matter. Even if your mom *did* let me be Erica, *everyone* would make fun of me."

Standing and stepping in front of Erica, Faith held out her hands to help her back up. Once she was standing again, Faith put her right hand over her heart. "Erica? I *promise* you that no matter *what*, I will *never* make fun of you liking to wear my dresses *or* for being a girl! I think you're prettier than *anyone* as a girl! I wish you could stay Erica *forever* and would *never* have to wear those ugly *boy* clothes ever again!"

Just as she finished speaking, both of them heard the smoke alarm sounding. Erica ran for the door to her room, but Faith stopped her from opening it.

"*No!* If there's a fire, we're *supposed* to get down on the *floor*!"

The two got down on their hands and knees and waited. When the noise stopped, Faith checked the door for heat. Feeling nothing, Erica reached up and opened the door as the two started crawling toward the stairway where they heard footsteps running up toward them. Looking up as her aunt rounded the corner, Erica wasn't sure what to do and just froze.

"*What* are you two doing?" she asked impatiently.

"What they taught us in school to do in a fire, Mamma." her daughter answered as though it was a silly question.

"You two! Get *up* and follow me!" Heather barked.

Getting off the floor and walking over to her, the irate woman started down the stairs, the two children following. On reaching the living room, it was obvious why the smoke alarm had sounded. There in front of the fireplace was a smoldering pile of cloth with Fredrick pouring water on it to put them out.

Swallowing hard, Erica looked at her aunt. "My *clothes*?"

She nodded. "Your *clothes*. Where *were* you two a few minutes ago?"

The two looked at one another, then back to her. "We were upstairs getting a game, Mamma." her daughter answered shyly. "You *told* us we could."

"It doesn't take *twenty minutes* to get a game and come back down." she said, trying to keep from shouting. "Who *did* it?"

"Did *what*?" Erica asked, a genuine look of confusion on her face.

Faith understood her mother's implication much sooner, her eyes opening wide in shock. "*Mamma!* You *don't* think..."

"Yes, I *do*!" Heather interrupted. "And *now* I have a good idea *who* and *why*!" Walking up to her daughter, Heather took a breath and calmed herself. Folding her arms, she looked down at her daughter. "Faith? Tell the *truth* and your punishment will be *much* less severe. You *know* that."

Scared that she was to be punished for something she didn't do, Faith was near to hysterics. "*Mamma! I didn't! I swear I didn't!*" Unfortunately, her thoughts drifted back to the wish she'd made, wondering if she *had* done it by *wishing* for it. It left enough doubt in her eyes that Heather could see it.

Wanting to help Faith, once she figured out what was going on, Erica got her aunt's attention. "Aunt Heather? Faith and I were together the *whole* time. She *couldn't* have done it. Maybe it was an *accident*?"

Seeing that Erica was showing no tell-tales of a lie and appeared to be answering honestly, she looked at Faith who *had* shown she was holding something back, sure now that Faith had sneaked away without Erica seeing. "I'll give you *one* more chance to come *clean*, Faith. The *truth*!"

Backing away, Faith started breathing heavily. "But... I..." She tried to find the words to make her mother believe her, but it was impossible to prove that she hadn't done it, especially since she thought she *might* have. Thinking fast, she equivocated. "I didn't *touch* them, Mamma! I *promise*!"

"Very well then." Heather said in a menacing tone, her experience letting her see the deception in Faith's body language. "Your punishment..."

"*Stop!*" Erica shouted. "*I did it!*"

Snapping her head around to look at her niece, she saw several tells that told her she was lying to protect Faith. Looking back at her daughter, she scowled. "Are you going to just *stand* there and let your *cousin* take the blame for it, Faith?" she tried shaming her.

"But I *didn't*, Mamma! And I know *she* didn't *either!*" Faith started to cry. "She *couldn't* have! She *never* left the room! I *saw* her the *whole* time! *Erica!* Tell her the *truth!*" she pleaded, but saw her cousin standing rigid as a board with a thousand-yard-stare in her eyes.

"Very well." Heather growled. "Both of you, *go* upstairs and wait in *Faith's* room. I'll be up in a few minutes to *tell* you what your *punishments* will be." Once they made their way up the stairs and were out of earshot, Heather turned back to Fredrick. "Can you *tell* what happened?" she asked.

Turning to her as he ran his fingers over a burnt shirt fragment, he nodded. "Indeed, Madame. I believe *Cook* could shed some light on the issue."

Theresa Cook stood defiantly at the entryway to the dining room. "Yes, I *can*, Mrs. Hargrave!" she snapped.

Quickly making her way to stand in front of her household cook of more than thirty years, Heather spoke in hushed tones. "Explain please."

Heading into the kitchen for privacy, Cook turned as her employer entered behind her. Once the door closed with Fredrick waiting nearby, she stared Heather down, despite her shorter stature. "I poured *lamp* oil on 'em!"

Heather was taken aback. After a moment of silence she asked, "But *why?*"

Theresa never flinched. "You know a *lot* about a *lot* of things Mrs. Hargrave, but what you *don't* know a lot about is *grief*." Seeing her employer about to object, she waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, you know *enough* about it to have *some* sense of it... as an *adult*. I know you *still* grieve the loss of Mr. Hargrave... *and* your parents... *and* you have your fancy degree, but you *cannot* understand the grief of a child who's lost what *that* child has!"

Stiffening at the accusation, Heather scoffed. "Just what gives *you* the right to say I know nothing of *grief*?"

The household cook stalwartly faced her down, wielding a wooden spoon like an accusing finger. "The right of an *orphan*, dearie! I lost *my* parents at the same age as that child! *You* were lucky enough to be an *adult*... with a sizable *inheritance* to get you through it! *That* child is suffering a profound grief that *cannot* be measured... losing your parents before you're ready to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. Then uprooted from all you've ever known, taken in by *strangers*! It makes a child feel unwanted and *abandoned*, no matter *how* many people she has telling her otherwise!"

She poked her wooden spoon towards her employer, coming within an inch of actually poking her with it and making Heather back away. "And *you*! So eager to resume a state of *normalcy* that you'd make *extra* efforts to see to it he can be put back in *pauper's rags* before suppertime! Pushed out of the only thing holding back his grief... his escape into a girl's world! Oh, you make *grand* statements about it being 'his choice' if he wants to play at being a girl for a while, but make *no* mistake! That child *knows* you don't like it and feels so *indebted* to you for taking him in, he'd rather endure the *grief* than go against you! You can *fire* me for doing it Mrs. Hargrave, but before you do, just know this! The deed is *done* and now you're *stuck* with it! So if you think getting rid of *me* will solve things, you better think *again*!"

Silence filled the room like a vapor, threatening to suffocate them. Finally, Cook stepped slowly up to her long time employer and lowered her voice to a caring tone. "You know me, Heather. I've been a part of this family

since you were ten. You *know* I don't act rashly, but this child *needs* this. The idea of making the dear wear *rags* while the rest of us have fine clothes? That poor thing needs an *escape* from all that... and one that can be *counted* on for a while. At *least* until he can manage to swallow his grief and move on. Maybe a day... maybe a week... maybe a *year*. Eventually he'll go back to being himself, but *forcing* it for *propriety's* sake? I think you already *know* it's wrong Heather, but for *once*... put your pride and fancy education aside... and listen to your *heart*."

Heather had been about to fire her, consequences be damned, if for no other reason than for going behind her back, but the more she listened, the more of what Theresa said made sense. Clearing her throat and raising her chin up, Heather addressed her. "I *should* fire you for it, but you *are* right, Cook." Her eyes turning toward the floor, her pride evaporated and she took on the look of the ten-year-old girl Theresa once knew. "I *have* been stuffy and prideful. Richard would be *so* disappointed in me for that!"

Relaxing and taking a seat at the kitchen table, she continued. "Oh, I know it's no excuse, but Erica's death has affected me *much* more than I've let on. She... she was my last tie to Richard... and Jack... and I loved her as though she were my own sister. Now I'm afraid that she's entrusted me with her child and I've let her... *and* Jack... down! I wanted to help him, but it seems like all I've done is *confuse* him. Erica *warned* me that he wasn't very boyish and asked me to make sure he grew up into a good man like Jack, and I put him in a *dress*! And he *liked* it!" Looking over at Theresa, she shook her head in disbelief. "*Lamp oil?*"

"I wanted to make *sure*!" she smiled at back.

Fredrick, who had stood by impassively through the entire exchange, cleared his throat. "Madame? If I may, the children are upstairs awaiting your *adjudication*."

She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, the *children*! What'll I *tell* them?"

Cook walked over to her and rubbed her back gently. "Tell them the *truth*, dearie. I oiled the grills and some of it caught fire. It's a *half* truth, but one that does more *good* than *harm*." Heather looked up as she continued. "Sometimes the *greater* love is to take the sin onto one's *self* to ease the suffering of *others*. I'm *sure* He understands! As for Jack and Erica? The little I got to know them tells me that *they* would understand, dearie. Better to let their child be a *girl* for a time than to suffer *needlessly*."

Standing gracefully, Heather started out of the kitchen. Stopping just short of pushing the door open, she half turned and addressed the woman who'd taken such a great risk for her niece. "I'll deduct the cost of one set of boys clothing from your check..." Pausing a moment, she concluded, "...when *Erica* decides she's ready to be Eric once more and desires them." At that, she made her way up and to her daughter's room. Knocking gently, she opened the door after a moment to see both of them seated on Faith's bed, looking for all the world like convicted prisoners awaiting sentencing.

Walking into the room slowly, she cleared her throat. "Erica? Are you still intent on professing to be the one responsible for your clothes catching on fire?"

She sighed, gathered her nerve, and looked up at her aunt. "If it'll mean Faith isn't punished for something she didn't do, then yes, Aunt Heather. I did it. I burned up my old clothes."

Seeing the anguish on Faith's face, she walked over to the vanity and sat down. "I know that's not true, Erica. I'm afraid I owe you *both* an apology. I erred in accusing *either* of you. The fire was *not* your fault."

Both children looked up at her, astonished that a *grown-up* was apologizing to *children*. Finally, Faith asked, "What *happened*, Mamma?"

Her mother sighed before telling her half-truth. "It seems Cook got some inflammable oil on the oven grills. It became too hot and caught fire."

Looking over at the two relieved children, she sighed apologetically. "Oh, girls! I'm *so* sorry I accused you falsely! Can you *ever* forgive me?"

Immediately, both got up and hugged her, each in turn offering their forgiveness. Faith cried, telling her mother about the wish she'd made, making her think she *had* done it. After a brief exchange of tears, hugs, and kisses on the cheek, Heather looked at her young charge.

"Erica? I want to ask you something and I expect you to tell me the truth." she intoned seriously. Gathering her nerve, Heather remembered what Cook said and just hoped to providence that this was the right course of action. "Do you *want* to stay living as Erica for a while? I mean a *long* while? Before you answer, I want you to know that I *hope* the answer is yes! I have to admit, you *do* look like your mother when she was your age, and it brings me *great* comfort to feel a little of her presence in my home again!"

Erica looked confused, unsure if the offer was some sort of trick. Taking a chance, she asked, "Do you *mean* it, Aunt Heather? It would be OK if I *stayed* Erica? Even once the *roads* are open?"

Heather smiled back at her genuinely. "Yes, Erica! I *really* mean it!"

Throwing her arms around her aunt, feeling jubilation at the idea of no longer being 'Eric the orphan boy' and becoming a kind of reincarnation of her own mother. "Yes, Aunt Heather! I *would* like to stay Erica!"

Hugging her new niece, she felt Faith hug them both while they hugged each other. "Oh, *thank you*, Mamma! I just *know* Erica will be happy here!"

Chapter 7 - A New Morning

Erica awoke slowly, stretching her body and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Next to her, Faith lay sleeping. The room had an odd quality to it as she unwrapped herself from Faith's warm clinginess. Sitting up, she dropped her feet into the slippers that Faith had given her the night before. Crossing the floor toward the window in her borrowed nightgown, she'd finally noticed that the howling wind had subsided leaving an eerie silence to sit over the house. She'd become so accustomed to the howl of the storm, its absence left a void in the perceptions of her surroundings. Peaking out the window, Erica saw something she'd never seen before. Awestruck, she stood in wonderment at the beauty of the sight before her.

Everywhere she looked glistened with the sparkle of fresh fallen snow from the light of the waning three-quarter moon still in the western sky. She'd seen pictures of snow and knew what it was, but never before had her own eyes beheld the beauty of a morning draped in crystal and moonlight. Behind her, Erica heard Faith's early morning groans of awakening.

"*Faith!* Come look!" she cried.

Faith sat up slowly, sleep still blurring her vision. She could see her cousin Erica standing in nothing but her nightgown and slippers next to the window, jumping up and down slightly. Closing her eyes a moment, she moved toward her side of the bed and opened them again as she slid into her own slippers and made her way over to look out the window.

"What *is* it, Erica?" she managed to get out around a yawn. "What's *wrong*?" Looking out the window, she saw nothing unusual. "What?"

Erica continued to jump up and down, giddy as a schoolgirl. "It's *snow*!"

"I *know* it's snow. What's *wrong*? You act like you've never seen *snow* before!" Faith said with a perplexed look.

She shook her head. "I *haven't!* Isn't it *beautiful!* I had *no* idea it could be so... *pretty!*"

Faith shook her head in disbelief. "How can you go your *whole* life and never see *snow*? Don't they have *winter* in California?"

Shaking her head, Erica looked back outside. "Not like *this!* Winter there is *rainy* and *muggy!* Winter here is... is..." The words escaped her as she tried to encapsulate the beauty of seeing her first snowfall. "...it's *breathtaking!*"

Her cousin smirked. "Just wait until you have to walk through half a mile of it to get to the bus stop! *Then* it'll just be cold and wet!"

Even as Faith finished speaking, Erica dashed for the bathroom, grabbed the robe Faith had given her off the back of the bathroom door, threw herself into it, and dashed out the door of their shared room while still tying it shut. Skidding to a stop at the top of the stairs, she went down the steps as fast as her feet could carry her. Reaching the bottom, Theresa intercepted her.

"Hold up there, girl! Where're you off to so fast?" As she spoke, she caught Erica's arm and slowed her race to the door to a stop.

"Oh, *Cook!* It's *snow!* *Real* snow!"

Refusing to release her arm, Cook nodded in understanding. "Yes, dearie... *real* snow, and it'll *still* be there after you put on some *clothes!* You'll catch your *death* if you go out there dressed in nothing but your nightshirt and slippers!" Looking down at the girl's desperate need to see it for herself, she sighed. "Alright, girl! Just *wait* a moment and I'll get you a coat and some proper boots and you can go out for just a *minute* or two, alright?"

Erica could hardly contain herself, but calmed enough to stop trying to pull away and rush to the door. Waiting at the marble bench while Cook went into the closet at the end of the entryway, she looked up to see Heather

descending the stairs in a graceful glide of seafoam green chiffon, silk, and lace. Curtsying slightly, Erica turned to her. "Good morning, Aunt Heather! Did you see outside?"

Heather smiled sweetly. "Yes, sweetie. It *snowed* last night. The way you're taking on you'd think it snowed flakes of pure *gold!*"

She shook her head. "This is *better!* I've never seen real *snow* before!"

Her aunt blinked, then realized the girl never would have, growing up in southern California. Smiling wistfully, she remembered the day she and her husband had bought this home. *You were right, Richard!* When she saw Theresa bringing over one of Faith's winter coats and fur-lined winter boots, she laughed and asked, "What's all *this*, then?"

Cook waved her off. "The girl was so anxious to go out and see it for herself, she nearly ran out in nothing but her *skivvies*. It can do her no harm to see it for herself so long as she's at least a *little* better dressed for it." She slipped the coat on Erica's arms and started to button it.

Scoffing, Heather shook her head. "Oh, that's *nonsense!* She can *certainly* wait until after the sun is up and she's *properly* dressed and filled with a warm breakfast! The snow isn't *going* anywhere!"

"You don't understand, Miss. She *needs* to see it, *now*, while the wonder's still fresh." Cook continued explaining as she had the newest member of their household sit on the marble bench so she could put the boots on. "Remember when you told me about your first trip to Paris? How you couldn't *wait* to get out of the airport and set your own eyes on the Eiffel Tower? You nearly got *arrested* trying to skip the Customs line!"

Heather remembered it like it was yesterday. Smiling, she looked away at some distant place as though she could see right through the world and time itself and look at it once more. "Oh, *yes!* That was *so* foolish of me! I

was just so *excited* I couldn't *think* straight until I'd seen it for myself!" Pausing, she looked over at Cook putting the second boot on Erica. "Oh, but that was *different!*"

Cook shook her head. "Not to *Erica*, it isn't. Snow is *her* Eiffel Tower ma'am, just as wondrous and mystical as that silly collection of iron was to *you* before you laid eyes on it."

Tilting her head to the side, she gave in. "Oh, very *well*." Walking over, she crouched and tied one bootlace while Cook tied the other. Smiling up at the giddy girl, she helped her to her feet and led her to the door. "Now just for a *minute* or two, alright sweetheart? I don't want you out in that cold *too* long without *proper* winter clothes to keep you warm and *safe*. *Promise?*"

"Yes, Aunt Heather! I *promise!*" Erica nodded vigorously.

Nodding in acceptance, her aunt opened the door.

Erica stepped out on the front porch, marveling at the awesome beauty of it all, gazing at the beauty of clear moonlight reflecting off every surface with a gleam like a million diamond flakes scattered as far as the eye could see. Hearing the door close behind her, she exhaled and watched her breath condense into a fog that drifted through the air like smoke rings.

A giddy feeling washed over her as she stepped gingerly out into the cold. She could feel the bitter chill of the air on her ankles and slightly up her nightgown, sending a shiver up her spine. Reaching the edge of the porch where the snow had only accumulated lightly, she knelt down until her fingers could touch it. Scooping some up, she felt the coldness of it bite into her delicate fingers, turning them red.

Rolling the snow over in her hand, she marveled at the simple beauty of it. A few flakes broke away and slipped between her fingers, while others melted against her warm skin. Gathering up another handful, she packed it

together into a snowball, reared her arm back, and let fly with the first snowball of her life with a squeal of delight. Stretching her arms out, she spun around in the cold like a top, exhilarating in the feeling.

Remembering her promise, she drew her arms back in to cover her chest and slowed her spin until she was facing the door once more and slowly started back inside. The door opened for her and she stepped in to see Fredrick holding the door and everyone else smiling at her. Faith, her aunt Heather, Cook, and even grouchy Franchesca greeted her from her first foray into a winter wonderland.

"Welcome back, Miss Erica." Fredrick intoned with his usual grace and refined dignity as he closed the door. "May I take your coat?"

Letting Fredrick take the coat before walking over to her aunt, Erica flung her arms around the woman before standing on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on her cheek. "Oh *thank you*, Aunt Heather! It was *wonderful!* *Cold*, but *wonderful!*" As she turned, she saw Cook take a picture of her.

Grinning at Erica as the girl giggled, Cook nodded toward the housemaid. "Franchesca took a *movie* of you with this thing while you were outside. Lord *knows* how!"

Franchesca snatched her digital camera back from Theresa. "Fat lot *you* know! I'm surprised you knew how to take a *picture* with it!" Turning back to Erica, she almost smiled before returning to her natural grimace. "You just be grateful I took time out of *my* busy schedule to teach these fools that moments like *this* are why we invented *cameras*!"

Erica padded over to Franchesca, slipped her arms around her in a genuine hug, and said softly, "*Thank you*, Franchesca!"

Stunned, and unused to such overt affection, she stood there numbly for a moment, her arms spread in a wide circle around the new member of the

family with her camera in one hand and a dumbfounded look on her face. Finally she closed her arms around Erica and returned the embrace. "You're quite welcome, dear." Releasing her hug, she stepped back, leaving Erica standing there grinning at her. Handing Erica the camera, she said in a snippish tone, "Now don't you go *breaking* that! You can look at the video and pictures, but then I want you to return it to me *post haste*! I'll get you a copy of them, when I have *time*!"

The girl smiled ever wider and said again, "*Thank* you, Franchesca!"

"You can *thank* me..." she quipped as she headed up the stairs, "...by keeping your *room* clean so *I* don't have to!"

Stepping up next to Erica, Faith joined her in watching Franchesca ascend the stairs. Once she'd disappeared around the corner of the upstairs landing, Faith said, "Wow! She *hugged* you? She must *really* like you!"

Everyone except Fredrick giggled at Faith's remark, and even *he* cracked a half smile, removing it before anyone noticed.

Heather directed Erica back to the bench to remove the boots, while the two young girls looked at the pictures on Franchesca's camera. Once done, Fredrick took the outerwear to put away while Heather directed both girls upstairs to change for breakfast. The two raced upstairs, ran to their now shared wardrobe, and flung the doors open to decide what they should wear.

Erica was torn. On the one hand, she wanted *desperately* to go out and play in the snow for the first time, which necessitated a warmer winter weight outfit. On the other hand, it would be the first time she could chose a dress to wear for herself and wanted it to be pretty.

Faith made several suggestions before Erica found one dress that she felt could fit both desires. It was a heavier broadcloth, so it was warm and soft

to the touch. The design was a simple girl's A-line with mid-length eyelet sleeves, a scoop neck with a V-shaped lace fringed white eyelet collar with a thin pink ribbon woven though the eyelets at the edge. Darts at the waist of the skirt flared to a wide hemline trimmed in a floral lace that came down to mid-calf. The material was patterned in pink and white gingham, giving it an older but very pretty look with the accents. It also had a sash tie at the waist to draw in her figure, which helped to offset the child-like style that would otherwise make Erica look younger than her age.

Once the two girls had picked their outfits, Faith started to undress at her bedside as she always did. Erica blushed as she gathered up her things and started for the bathroom.

"Why are you taking your clothes in the bathroom?" Faith inquired. "I'm going to *need* that in a few minutes!"

Biting her lower lip, Erica was suddenly very self-conscious of stripping bare in front of her cousin. "Um... I just thought..."

Faith interrupted her stammering. "Just get dressed out here with me! It's *warmer* out here than in the bathroom!"

Trying to figure a way out of her predicament, Erica dropped the majority of her clothes on the bed except the bra, panties, and slip. Taking just those into the bathroom, she stated, "I'll be out in a minute or two!" and closed the door behind her. Undressing quickly and dropping her dirty clothes in the wicker hamper, she donned her undergarments as fast as she could manage. While struggling with the bra, a gentle knock came at the door.

"Are you almost *done* in there?" Faith asked.

Struggling with the training bra, she answered brokenly. "Just... give... me... another... minute!" she panted.

While Erica continued to struggle, the door cracked open. Seeing her cousin facing away from her and having so much trouble, Faith entered the bathroom and came up behind her. "Here, let me help." she said blandly.

Erica nearly jumped out of her skin as Faith spoke and suddenly, without any warning, started pulling at the straps of her borrowed training bra. "Yeeeaaahhhh!" she cried out.

Her eyes widened and Faith stepped back, startled at the reaction. "*Erica!* You scared me!"

Having nearly climbed the far wall over the pedestal sink, Erica slowly slid back down. "*I scared you? You* about scared the *life* out of me, Faith!"

Undaunted, Faith put her hands on Erica's shoulders, spun her around to face the sink, grabbed the back of the training bra, and pulled it down. Smoothing out the twists in the shoulder straps, she bade Erica turn around to face her. Seeing Erica blushing profusely as Faith straightened out the cups of the bra against Erica's non-existent breasts, she smiled shyly and tried to console her cousin. "*I know* you don't have anything up *front*, Erica. It's no *secret*! It's also *nothing* to be ashamed of! *Lots* of girls our age haven't started to develop yet! You're *still* the prettiest girl I know!"

Feeling her heart in her throat as Faith futzed with the bra overly long, Erica just stood there like a silly lump and let her do whatever she wanted.

"Take your slip out with you. I need the bathroom." she demanded. "I'll be out in a few minutes to help you get dressed!"

Erica grabbed the slip and stepped out sideways to avoid bumping into Faith, facing away from her the entire time. After stepping back into their shared room, she went over to the bed. Deciding to wait on the slip as it would make putting on tights more difficult, she picked up the white tights and sat at the vanity.

Following the example her aunt set the morning before, she started putting them on. She was just pulling them up over her rear when she heard the toilet flush and the sink faucet turn on. Hurrying, she dashed over to the bed and grabbed the slip, pulling it over her head just as the bathroom door opened and Faith returned to their bedroom.

Smiling as she passed Erica, Faith picked up Erica's dress, unzipped the back, and held it up as high as she could. "OK. Put your arms up and step in." she instructed.

Faith's shorter stature conspired with Erica's lack of experience at putting on dresses, making her lean too far forward trying to push her arms up the dress and into the sleeves. Losing her balance, Erica fell into her cousin, knocking Faith back and onto their bed while she slipped down the side.

Mortified, Erica could scarcely move, now trapped by her awkward position, the side of the bed, and Faith's legs. For her part, Faith found the entire situation hysterical and began giggling, which did nothing to help Erica's embarrassment. After a moment, Erica felt Faith's legs move off her back, finally freeing her to be able to stand once more, albeit with some difficulty as her arms were still trapped sticking straight up in the bodice.

"Here. Let me help." smiled Faith. Coming around behind Erica, she put her hands on Erica's waist, steadyng her until she could stand on her own. Taking the sides of the hem in each hand, she tugged the dress down until it settled into place and Erica could lower her arms. After she closed the zipper up the back, Faith suggested, "Maybe next time we should just try having you *step* into the dress. You can't do that when you're wearing a petticoat, but this dress has *crinoline* built in, so you can just *step* into it."

"Why didn't you say that *before*?" Erica giggled lightly.

She paused in the middle of tying the sashes into a bow. "I guess I just didn't *think* of it. Can you grab the knot with your fingers so I can pull it tight?"

Reaching behind her back, Erica fumbled around until Faith directed her hand to where the loose knot was. Pinching it, Faith drew the sashes together, tightening the dress around Erica's waist and narrowing it like a corset. "Does it have to be so *tight*?" Erica begged.

"Yup." Tightening the bow in place Faith said, "OK, you can let go now." Fiddling with the bow for another minute she exclaimed, "There! All nice and pretty! Now you can help me, and then we'll do each other's hair!"

She followed Faith around to the side of the bed nearest the vanity, the one they agreed would be 'Faith's side'. Watching her cousin walk ahead of her in nothing but her undergarments gave Erica a funny feeling. The swish of her own dress's crinoline against her legs as she walked seemed to make it even more acute. Holding her belly she noted, "I wonder if I might be getting *sick*. I feel sort of *queasy*."

Faith immediately stopped and turned around to face Erica. Putting the back of her hand against Erica's brow, she waited a moment before putting a hand on Erica's left chest, just over the training bra. "Well, you *sort* of feel *warm* to me, your *cheeks* are flushed, and your heart is beating like a rabbit! You should tell *Mamma*."

Erica's eyes grew wide. "But she might make me stay *inside*! I just *can't*, Faith! Not *today*!"

"I guess I understand." Faith shrugged. "I think if I were in California and about to take my first trip to see the Pacific Ocean, I wouldn't want to tell Mamma I was feeling ill." Turning back to finish walking to her side of the bed, she picked up her tights, donned them in seconds standing in place, and then dropped her slip over her head. "What are you going to do?"

Erica noticed that once she was focused on the snow outside, her stomach quieted down, her cheeks felt cooler, and she couldn't feel her heartbeat in her neck anymore. "That's weird! It's *OK*! I'm starting to feel better."

Looking back at her cousin with a smirk, Faith picked up her own dress. "Uh-huh! *Suuuure!* I promise I won't tell!"

While Faith stepped into her dress, Erica came up behind her to help the same way Faith had. "No, *seriously*. Maybe it was falling down and getting frustrated that made me feel sick. I feel *fine*, now." Erica zipped up Faith's pale blue dress with Faith holding her long blonde curls away from the back of her neck. She watched as Faith spun in place and kissed her on the cheek with a giddy smile.

"Thanks, Erica!" she sung. Faith watched as Erica's cheeks, which just moments ago were indeed no longer flushed red, blushed again and she could almost see Erica's pulse rise on her thin neck. Puzzled, she cocked her head to one side again. "OK, that *is* weird! You *did* look fine for a second, then when I kissed you, you got all red and flustered..." Stopping mid-sentence, her eyes grew wide and a smile crept back across her pink lips. "Are you *embarrassed* that I *kissed* you?"

The slightly younger girl shook her head as she walked over to the vanity once more. "Not really *embarrassed*... it's just..." She searched for the right words as she took her seat. Faith came up behind her, picked up the brush, and started brushing out Erica's dirty-blonde hair.

An eternity passed while Faith waited for Erica to explain her reaction before Faith offered her own. "Come to think of it, you were like that when I was helping you get dressed. You got all red then too, which was *before* I kissed you."

Erica shrugged as Faith worked on a knot in her hair. "Like I said... it's not *embarrassed*... it's... something *else*. I don't know *what* it is, but it happens whenever I see a pretty girl."

Swallowing hard, Faith stopped brushing. "You... you think I'm *pretty*?"

Looking in the mirror at her cousin, Erica nodded. "Sure! You're *more* than pretty! You're *beautiful!*"

This time it was Faith's turn to blush and get a fluttery feeling. Looking down and feeling shy, she replied, "You're just *saying* that!"

Erica shook her head and turned to face Faith directly, looking up at the blonde girl with a slightly dreamy expression. "Oh *no*, Faith! I really *mean* it! I think you're about the most *beautiful* girl I've ever known! Even prettier than..." As she spoke, a wave of sadness crashed over her entire being as the memory of the night before came back into her mind.

Chapter 8 - Painful Memories

Erica bounded into the living room, gay as a lark. It was just before six o'clock and she knew April would be home from school by now. "Aunt Heather? It's almost six. I know it will be time for dinner soon, but before dinner, can I call my friend April and let her know I'm OK?"

Her aunt Heather sighed. "May you call her..." she corrected.

She calmed herself and rephrased her request. "Before dinner, may I call my friend April and let her know I arrived safely?"

Still getting used to the bubbly little girl before her who stood in stark contrast to the broken and lifeless boy she'd met less than a full day earlier, Heather conceded. "Very well, but please keep it brief. This is not a cell phone. Long distance calls cost money, and I won't have you making dinner late."

"I promise, Aunt Heather! Just a quick word to say high and let her know I'm alright." Pausing she asked, "If I give April your phone number and tell when it's OK to call, she can call here and it won't cost anything, right?"

Heather disliked giving out her phone number to strangers, but she determined that giving it to a child could do little harm. "Very well, Erica. The number is on the telephone. Please tell her not to call during meal times or after eight thirty. Is that clear?"

Curtsying slightly, Erica replied with a smile. "Yes, Aunt Heather. May I call her now?"

With a simple nod from her aunt, Erica stopped herself from squealing and running across the room to the old style rotary telephone. She'd never seen one before and found its use charming and elegant. Over the last several hours, she'd reconciled the details of her life. She was Erica Hargrave, her

own mother. After she died of leukemia, to keep her child from being alone, she'd been reborn into 'his' mind. Now they were simply one girl.

Making herself cross the room at a walk, she sat gently on the couch, lifted the receiver, and started to dial April's cell phone number. She was dismayed when it gave a message that the number was no longer in service. Hanging up, she dialed April's home number and waited as it began to ring. She waited nervously as the phone rang and was startled slightly when she heard the other end pick up.

"Hello?" April's mother said.

"H-hello Mrs. Stone. Is April there?" Erica asked nervously.

The voice on the phone seemed irritated. "Who's calling?" she asked.

Being her own mother, the 'boy' April only ever knew as Eric, and Erica, she wasn't sure how to answer. Barely managing to stammer out a reply, she said, "It's Eric...a Dunning."

Listening, she heard April's mother say, "It's that Dunning boy!" to someone, then the sound of the receiver being passed around, followed by a strong masculine voice.

"This is April's father, Eric." he boomed. "We don't think it would be a good idea for you to talk to April."

Erica felt her heart drop. "W-why, sir? Is she sick?" Thoughts of losing her best friend not only to distance but also illness or death flooded Erica's mind, nearly driving her mad at the thought of losing yet another part of her old life.

"Now listen here, boy." April's father growled as Erica listened in stunned silence. "We put up with your dead-beat butt for six months! Fed you,

clothed you, paid for your school supplies, and we never even got half of that back from your mom's probate!"

As she listened in shock, she heard April's mother. "Dear! That's not the boy's fault! Just tell him what we talked about and hang up before April hears and comes down!"

Finally, he lowered the axe. "I know what happened isn't your fault boy, but April's been a wreck since you left! In time, she'll get over it and forget all about you. You talking to her will just drag it out longer. It's best if you just go about the rest of your life your own way and let April go hers. You'll never see each other again anyway, so best to make a clean break of it and stop ruining her future by making her cling to a wimp like you!"

Pausing a moment, there was some concealed conversation before he finished his cruel one-sided conversation. "Oh, and don't try emailing her, texting her, or calling her. We've had all that changed. So good riddance and don't call here again!"

Hearing the connection terminate, Erica dropped the receiver as tears began streaking down her shocked face.

Seeing the stunned and hurt look on Erica's face, Heather raced to her side. Returning the receiver to its cradle, she asked, "What happened, dear? Is she alright?" While she generally tried not to eavesdrop, she couldn't help but overhear Erica asking about April being ill.

Erica turned to her aunt and buried her face in her loving shoulder, the older woman taking the girl up in her arms as she began to cry like a baby.

Worried that the damaged child had been made to endure yet another trauma, all she could do was rock her in her arms and pet her head, telling her, "It'll be OK, sweetie! I'm here! Just let it all out!"

She cried for a full ten minutes, Faith standing in the living room the whole time, waiting to find out what happened. Fredrick merely stood impassively next to the entryway to the dining room, waiting for things to settle out before his employer would give the word for the delayed dinner to start. When the ordeal had begun, he'd taken it upon himself to tell Cook that dinner would be late and that something was terribly wrong with the newest member of their household.

As she sobbed, she whispered to herself, "I'm Erica Hargrave!" over and over, unaware that her aunt could hear her. Finally, the tears dried up and Erica was so numb she couldn't cry anymore. Leaning back, she eventually said between sobs, "I'm... s-sorry, Aunt H-Heather. I... I... didn't m-mean... to g-get... you... all w-wet... and m-make... dinner l-late!"

Heather consoled the devastated youth. "Oh, don't worry about that, sweetheart! You're much more important than my dress or dinner. Now, can you tell me what happened?"

While Erica told the tale, Faith just stood by in wide-eyed horror. Fredrick remained standing impassively, but was nearly overcome with the desire to find these heathens and teach the man of the house a lesson in what it feels like to have your heart broken by breaking a few of his ribs. Theresa had entered just as the story began and couldn't contain her tears. Even the frosty Franchesca, standing at the top of the stairs and listening, was moved so much that she couldn't bear to hear the whole thing and ran off before she could be seen crying her eyes out.

She managed to finish the tale just as the crying began anew. "And then he... he said n-never... to call back a-again... and h-hung up! I... I... I n-never... even g-got... to s-say g-goodbye... to h-her!" Resuming her place on her aunt's shoulder, she continued to cry for some time. Meanwhile, Faith slowly walked up to her mother and cousin and gently placed her hand on Erica's arm, just so the girl would know that she was there.

Eventually, the tears subsided once more and Fredrick was ready. Handing Mrs. Hargrave tissues for herself, Erica, and Faith, he returned to stand next to the doorway alongside Cook, handing a tissue to her as well so she would stop using her apron.

After the crying ebbed, Heather addressed Fredrick and Cook. "I'm afraid we'll have to postpone dinner once more. I apologize for the inconvenience it may cause you two."

Fredrick spoke for them both. "Think nothing of it, Madame. I took the liberty as I could see there were more important matters to deal with."

"Thank you, Fredrick." Heather replied. "Now, Erica. There's nothing I can say that will make this better right now. Just know that in time, you won't feel the hurt so badly anymore. It will never go away, but you will survive it and one day it will be bearable!"

She understood her aunt was trying to help, but nothing seemed to make the pain lessen. "I know, A-Aunt Heather. Th-Thank you. It just h-hurts so bad th-that I couldn't e-even t-tell her I w-was OK! She'll n-never know!"

Heather petted her head gently. "I know, sweetheart! I know! I wish I could fix it for you!"

Smiling weakly, Faith offered, "Couldn't you write her a letter?"

The devastated youth shook her head, her tear-soaked cheeks making her shiver. "No. Her parents would see who it was from before she ever got it."

Crestfallen, Faith's voice turned sullen. "Oh."

Eventually, after getting cleaned up, the three solemnly headed for the dining room. Erica was impassive and vacant, eating only when reminded to and even then just enough to satisfy her aunt. Finally, after Faith had

been done for nearly ten minutes, Heather said, "Well, I guess that's enough for tonight. Maybe your appetite will return in the morning."

She looked down at her plate, feeling guilty that she failed to eat the meal given to her. I don't think I'll ever be hungry again! she mused. Not wanting to upset her kind and gracious aunt, she nodded weakly and said, "Yes, Aunt Heather. May I be excused?"

Erica felt her chair being pulled away from the table and then felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. Looking up at Fredrick's impassive face, she took the other offered hand and let him help her stand. Slowly, she followed her aunt back into the living room with Faith taking her hand as they walked side by side behind Heather.

Her aunt sat on the loveseat as usual and Faith let go of Erica's hand, hugged her mother, kissed her cheek, and said simply, "I love you, Mamma."

Returning the hug and kiss with much more care and affection than normal, she replied, "I love you too, Faith. Very much!"

Slowly shuffling up to her aunt, Erica resumed her place where she'd spent so long crying before dinner. Hugging her earnestly, as though she were the last person on Earth, Erica could hardly make herself let go. Finally, she released her aunt, kissed her on the cheek, and said with every good feeling she had left, "Thank you, Aunt Heather. I love you so much!"

Heather nearly burst into tears herself, seeing the desperate love, adoration, and gratitude young Erica showered on her. "Oh, sweetheart! I love you, too! I'll be up in a while to tuck you both in, OK?"

She bathed in the guest bathroom, just as she had the first night. Before the fateful call it had been decided, mostly by Faith, that Erica and she should share the girl's room from then on. Though her mother was hesitant to agree, Faith got her way by asking questions and refusing to accept an

answer that was essentially, 'because you're not supposed to' or 'it's just not done that way'. Lacking any valid reason to keep the two separate, and since Faith's wardrobe was going to have to be shared by the two for a time, putting them in one room was just the logical choice.

The only concession Faith made was at bath time. Since both needed to bathe at the same time, it was decided that Erica would bathe in the guest bathroom, while Faith continued to use her own. Even Faith had to admit that seeing her cousin completely naked was 'bad', which itself took half an hour to get her to admit, without explicitly stating why.

While Erica finished washing, she noticed the hair on her legs was growing slightly noticeable. Taking the lady's razor, she shaved her legs for the first time, enjoying the smooth feel of them when she was done.

Pulling the plug on the tub, she stepped out and dried off, making sure to wrap her hair in a towel the way she'd seen her mother and Faith do. Her hair was just long enough to make it stay, and she felt quite grown up as she pulled on her fresh panties, nightgown, and robe. Slipping her feet into her slippers, she deposited the towels and dirty laundry in the hamper, the dress she'd worn that day having already been taken off in their bedroom where she'd donned her robe and slippers.

Shuffling her way to her shared bedroom, she was pleased to see Faith was only just then coming out of the bathroom herself. Concerned that she'd taken too long to get clean, she was content at least to know that she'd not dawdled. The two girls were solemn as they got into bed after drying their hair as best as they could and then brushing each other's hair out in silence. A few minutes after they got in bed, the door opened and Faith's mother again glided in to share prayers with her two girls.

Faith looked over at Erica sadly before saying her silent prayer. After she said "Amen.", she and her mother turned to Erica.

The girl simply sat there, impassively staring off into empty space, her pain acute and raw. She felt cold and alone, certain now that even if there was a God, He was a cruel and sadistic monster that enjoyed watching people suffer in torment.

Heather cleared her throat. Once Erica looked over at her she said, "Erica? Won't you say your prayers?"

She bridled at the suggestion that she bow in supplication to a God that would let her suffer so much pain and loss. "Why? So He can kick me in the teeth again?"

Faith's eyes widened as her mother shook her head solemnly. "So you're going to blame God for the actions of two foolish parents?"

Feeling the wind knocked out of her sails, Erica was prepared to fight her aunt, but she'd just made an unassailable point. I'm not really mad at God, I guess, not for this anyway. Directing her thoughts at the Creator, she shouted in her mind. Letting my mother die for no good reason is enough reason to hate You! I don't need to blame You for April's parents being cruel! Though You supposedly made them that way, right? You made everything!

Feeling guilty for shouting at God while her wonderfully kind aunt waited, she decided it would do no harm to please her, laced her fingers together, closed her eyes, and pretended to pray. After what she thought was enough time she simply said, "Amen." quietly, opened her eyes, and looked at her aunt while smiling weakly.

Sighing as she guessed that Erica was just humoring her, she accepted the old adage. Fake it 'till you make it. Smiling back, she bade both girls to lay down. Once they were settled, she kissed them on the forehead, first Faith and then Erica. Pausing as she sat on the bedside next to her niece, she tried to soothe the young girl's aching soul.

"You know, I remember when I went away to college, I had a best friend, too. Her name was Lydia and she and I did everything together, but her parents wanted her to go to Columbia, while I was headed to Stanford. I used to be so mad at them for breaking up our friendship, but it turned out for the best. When Lydia and I were together, we didn't need anyone else! If she had gone to Stanford with me, I would probably have never gone to the party where I met your uncle Richard."

Erica wasn't sure what her aunt was driving at. Finally she asked, "So now you're glad they split you up?"

The older woman shook her head in the dim light of the moon coming through the window. "No, not glad per say, but I'm not mad at them for it anymore. Because you see, we don't know why things have to happen the way they do. We just aren't smart enough to see the future and know what good things can come from the bad things." Pausing, she stood up and concluded, "And who are we to say that the bad outweighs the good? After all, if you hadn't needed to come here, we would never have been able to know and love you, Erica."

The devastated girl felt a tear roll down her cheek as her aunt kissed her on the forehead and walked to the door. As she looked over at her aunt silhouetted by the dim gaslights in the hallway, she heard her say, "Goodnight, girls. Pleasant dreams and may God bless."

"Erica?" Faith asked, wondering why her cousin had suddenly become so sullen. Going back over their conversation, Faith realized Erica had been about to say that she was prettier than April, reminding her cousin of the heartbreak of the previous evening. "Oh, *Erica!*" Moving around behind her again, Faith began to brush out her cousin's hair, still damp from the previous night's bath, until she was ready to put the wig on.

Thinking of how to cheer her up, Faith smiled. "Hey, Erica? I think you have *really* pretty hair. Maybe when we can get to town, Mamma can get your hair *dyed* and you can have your *own* hair just like *your* mamma's!"

Perking up and breaking from the depressing lows of the previous evening, Erica looked at her cousin's reflection. "What was that, Faith?"

She pulled the red play wig over Erica's head, settling it in place and tucking little strands of dirty-blonde hair out of sight before inserting the bobby pins to hold it in place. "I was saying that maybe once we can get to town, Mamma can get *your* hair dyed the same color as *this* hair."

Looking in the mirror, once more Erica saw the vision of her young mother. Smiling she tried to imagine her own hair the same shade of red as her mother's without having to wear it. "I would *like* that!" she purred.

Once Faith finished settling Erica's hair in place, they switched and Erica followed Faith's instructions as to how to brush and style her hair. She found the experience relaxing and fun. Faith's hair was very fine and naturally curly, so using only a curling brush, she managed to restore most of Faith's curls. As she was nearing completion, her aunt entered their shared room after a light knock on the door.

"Well!" she complimented. "You've done a *very* nice job, Erica! Now *I* don't have to tend to Faith's hair in the mornings!"

Her daughter stood as soon as Erica finished. "Mamma? I thought of a way to *thank* her!"

She smiled down suspiciously at her suddenly generous daughter. "And how is *that*, dear?"

Looking back at Erica she said, "I think we should get her hair colored the same as her mamma's was!"

Heather looked at Erica's reaction and saw her smile at the prospect. "Well, we'll *see*. Until the roads open once more, it's a moot point, though."

"I know." Faith nodded. "I just think she would look a lot better with her *own* hair that color. Don't *you* think so, Mamma?"

Her mother regarded her niece, not wanting to commit her to a change that would have lasting effects should she decide that she was ready to move on from her escape. "Yes, I think it would be *most* becoming, but then I think we can also do a *lot* with her natural hair color. Dark blonde hair with the proper style can be *very* pretty!" Walking up to Erica she asked, "What would *you* like, sweetie?"

Blushing, she looked down and fidgeted with her fingers. "I *do* like it most when my hair is *this* color, Aunt Heather." Toying with the hair tickling her neck she added, "But this wig can get awful *itchy* sometimes!"

Laughing lightly, she took both girls in her arms. "Come on you two! Lets go down for breakfast and afterward we'll get you two set up to go out and enjoy the first snow of the season!" Starting toward the door, she noticed Erica's dress. "That dress is *lovely* on you, sweetie. Did *Faith* pick it out?"

Erica shook her head as they entered the hall. "No, Aunt Heather. *I* did!"

Walking slowly toward the staircase, she smiled. "Well, I think it shows you have *wonderful* taste!" As they descended the stairs, she noted absently, "Once the roads are clear, our first priority will be to get you some new *clothes*, Erica. Have you thought about what you'd like?"

Slowing as she followed Faith and her aunt down the steps, after a moment of gathering her courage, she resumed their pace and replied. "I was thinking some dresses, not the same as Faith's, but different? I mean, Faith looks *great* in her dresses, and I don't think she should change her style at

all, but I think I'd like some things that are... um... different, Aunt Heather. I don't know how to describe it. I guess I'll know it when I see it."

Reaching the base of the stairs, her aunt nodded. "Very well. I'll think on it."

After an uneventful breakfast, old music emanating from the restored Victrola in the kitchen, the three sat in the living room once more, her aunt seated on the loveseat and the two girls seated on the couch. After settling in, Heather asked, "So you think you will want to stay Erica for a *while*?" It was the first time since her aunt agreed to let her be a girl that she'd broached the subject of how *long* she wanted to stay that way.

Faith put her hands on her hips, giving her a furious look. "*Mamma!*"

Heather held up a hand to forestall Faith's objections. "Now dear, I have *no* intention of pushing Erica into *anything*, but she *must* get her *own* clothes. She cannot just continue to wear *yours*. True?"

She looked back at her mother suspiciously. "Yes, but..."

Once more she stopped her daughter's retort. "...but I *must* know *Erica's* intentions... not *yours*." She paused to let it sink in before returning to her sweet mothering tone. "Erica is *not* your plaything, Faith. Circumstances demanded Erica dress in your clothes, and she has decided to live with us as Erica... *for now*. I believe some *good* can come of it, and *hope* she decides to *stay* living as Erica... while it is *helpful*... but your desire to have a *sister* should *not* enter in to *her* decisions about what is best for *her*."

Pausing a moment, she collected her thoughts. "I can even say that *my* love for Erica as she *was* shouldn't sway her decisions." Heather admitted. "Erica *must* feel free to make that decision for *herself*, to determine on her *own* what *she* needs to do. I will *not* have you pushing her to be what *you* want her to be just to make *you* happy. Is that *clear*?"

Faith's anger at her mother for what she felt was pushing Erica to go back to being a boy melted in the face of her own desire to ensure Erica stayed a girl indefinitely. "Yes, Mamma. I'm sorry if I disrespected you. I'll *try* to do better."

She smiled at her daughter. "I know, dear. You *always* wanted a sister, and now *here* you are with a cousin and you want things to stay the way they are, but I *must* know what *Erica's* needs are and plan accordingly." Turning to face the girl who'd said nothing during the exchange, she motioned for Erica to come sit next to her.

Standing and gingerly walking over to the loveseat, Erica sat facing her aunt. "Yes, Aunt Heather?"

"Erica sweetheart," Heather began, taking both of Erica's hands in her own, "I *know* this is difficult, but soon the roads will *open* again and we'll go into town to buy the things you'll need to live here. I *must* know how long you want to live here as *Erica*." Glancing at her daughter she added, "With *no* pressure *either* way. *Right* Faith?"

Standing back up, Faith looked at her cousin solemnly. "Erica? You know I *love* you just the way you are, and I would *love* it if you stayed this way, but I'd *still* love you if you don't."

Her mother smiled and turned back to Erica. "And I'll love you *just* the same if you stay this way or not. What do *you* want to do?"

The new girl took a moment before answering. "I think I know, Aunt Heather. I know it's kind of escaping from my troubles, but if it would be alright, I'd like to live here as Erica."

Her aunt smiled. "I *know* sweetie, but I need to know for how *long*?"

"I *really* don't know, Aunt Heather." Erica admitted. "The way I feel right now, I can't see me wanting to *ever* go back to the way I was." Closing her eyes, she gave it serious thought. After a few moments she opened her eyes and said, "I know you need a *time*, but the best I can say is that I want stay Erica for as long as you'll *let* me. Does *that* help?"

She patted Erica's hand. "It helps *enough*, sweetheart. I'll plan accordingly. I think I know what you need. Will you trust me on that?"

"Yes, Aunt Heather!" Erica smiled. About to get back up, she sat down again and asked, "Aunt Heather? I know it may be asking a lot, but I really *do* want to have red hair. *May I?*"

Sighing, she gave in. "Very well. I'll look into it."

Leaping into the air, Faith cried, "Yippee!"

Her mother tried to be stern with her, ordering her to sit back down, but her jubilance was too infectious and could not be contained. Soon the three were laughing and, after a moment, Heather rose to her feet. "Well girls, I have some things to attend to, and *you* two have a field full of untouched snow waiting for you!"

This time it was Erica's turn to jump up, but in her case it was to head to the closet for her outerwear. About to run past her aunt, Erica doubled back and hugged her. "*Thank you, Aunt Heather!*" At that, she practically skipped over to the front door as Fredrick waited to assist with coats and boots.

Chapter 9 - Winter Wonderland

Erica stepped out onto the front porch again, this time fully decked out in dress, tights, bloomers, coat, scarf, hat, mittens, boots, and a burning desire to run out into the front yard, plow through the knee-deep snow, and bury herself in it. Carefully making her way down the front steps, Faith by her side, she still couldn't help but giggle at the sense of wonder she felt experiencing her first snowfall.

Now that the sun was up, the magical beauty of the fresh snowfall was magnified a thousand times, turning every tree branch and rock into a dazzling display of twinkling brightness. Blinking against the blinding whiteness of the sun, Erica was awestruck with every step.

Reaching the bottom of the steps that Fredrick cleared before breakfast, Erica couldn't contain her excitement any longer and ran to the closest drift of snow she could find. Wading into it, she giggled as she flopped backwards into it, relishing the feel, even as cold as it was.

Right behind her cousin, Faith yelled, "*Erica!* Wait for me!" Watching Erica drop into the snow giggling, she giggled as well. "Oh, *Erica!* Now you're all snowy and *wet!*"

"I don't care!" she retorted between giggles. "This is like *magic!*"

Jogging up to stand next to her prone cousin, Faith held out a mittenend hand. "Come on! Let's go make *snow angels!*"

Pulling herself up with the offered hand, she followed Faith around to the north side of the house opposite the garage where the lawn lay dormant beneath the untouched snow. Erica watched as Faith lay down and splayed her arms and legs out, wiping them back and forth until she had carved out a perfect snow angel. Helping Faith back up, Erica looked down at the pattern and smiled.

"That's pretty *neat!* Let *me* try!" she said through her smile. Finding a clear patch next to Faith's angel, she lay down just as Faith had done and repeated the process, getting up to admire the two patterns with their apparent hands joined together. Spending the next ten minutes making more, they finally looked back on their works of art.

Erica looked at her cousin. "That was *so* much fun! What *else* can we do?"

She shrugged. "We could build a snowman!"

Nodding vigorously, the two spent the next half-hour rolling snow and stacking it into a body and head. Using rocks for eyes and loose sticks for arms, Erica made a smile out of gravel from the driveway before taking off her scarf and wrapping it around the neck. The two girls laughed at the sight as it was barely half their height, lumpy, goofy looking, and not at all what you see in movies and TV shows, but so much better because they'd made it. They laughed so hard their sides ached when they noticed the rock eyes made it look cross-eyed.

Starting back to the house, Erica noticed how wet they both were. "Aunt Heather isn't going to be *mad* at us for getting wet, is she?" she chattered through cold lips.

Faith turned around and walked backwards through the snow toward their front door. "Mamma *said* we could go out in the snow, she *knows* that means getting wet, and *cold*. Cook will probably have hot *cocoa* for us to drink in front of the fire so we can get warm again!"

"It sure *is* cold! I bet it *stays* this cold until spring, huh?"

Her cousin turned back around to see where she was going. "It might not. Sometimes we get a snow like this and the next week it'll turn warm and melt everything, but we'll get *more* snow by Christmas, *that's* for sure."

Reaching the foot of the steps leading up to the front door, Erica watched Faith stamp her feet and wipe her arms and sides of her coat to remove the snow. Doing the same, she helped wipe snow off of parts of her cousin that she couldn't reach as Faith did the same in return.

"Hey, Erica?" Faith asked while she was getting brushed off. "Do you know what you want to be for Halloween? It's this Sunday, only three days *away*!"

Shrugging, Erica finished brushing Faith off. "Nothing, I guess. I haven't dressed up for Halloween in *years*. That's for little *kids*."

Turning, Faith looked at Erica with a hurt expression. "Oh. Never mind."

Seeing she'd accidentally hurt Faith's feelings, Erica apologized. "Faith? I'm *sorry*! I didn't mean to..." Even as she spoke, she watched Faith ascend the steps in a sullen waddle. "Faith! Come back! I'm *sorry*!"

Hurt turning to childish anger, Faith spun around, looked back at her cousin, and spat her reply. "Well, maybe in *California* it's for little *kids*, but *here* it's for *everyone*!"

Erica moved slowly up the steps towards her. "I'm *really* sorry, Faith! I didn't *know* you liked Halloween so much!"

"Erica, that was *mean*!" Faith crossed her arms. "I'm *not* a little kid and I *love* to dress up for Halloween! Even *Mamma* does, and we have *lots* of fun at the Halloween party!"

Hanging her head, Erica stopped on the steps. "Faith, I *swear* I didn't mean to make you feel *bad*! Back home, almost *nobody* does Trick-or-Treat... except little *kids*. They don't even go to people's *houses* anymore! They have Trick-or-Treat at the *mall*. I didn't know it was *different* here! Will you *please* forgive me?"

Looking at her cousin warily, Faith judged her explanation as if to search for hints of lies in it. Satisfied Erica was sincere, she uncrossed her arms and nodded. "Well, *OK*." Her sullen expression slowly breaking into a smile, Faith giggled. "I can't really stay mad at you *anyway*, Erica!"

She finished climbing the steps and hugged her slightly older cousin. "Thank you, Faith! I really *am* sorry. I'll try not to assume so much in the future. It's just... *really* different here."

They took each other's hands and walked up to the door, which opened for them as they approached.

"Welcome back, Miss Faith, Miss Erica." Fredrick greeted them. "Did you quite *enjoy* yourselves?"

"*Quite!*" Erica nodded with a grin. "Thank you, Fredrick!"

"You should call him Freddie, like *I* do, Erica." Faith offered as she sat down on the marble bench to take off her boots. "I think he *likes* it!"

She looked up at the huge man and noticed only the slightest remnants of a smile fading to his normally emotionless expression.

"As you like, Miss Faith." he replied. "However, I should say that Miss Erica should be free to refer to me as *she* prefers."

Thinking as Fredrick helped her out of her coat, Erica turned and looked up at him. "I'd like to call you whatever *you* like."

Fredrick raised an eyebrow in surprise, having never been asked what he liked to be called. Thinking honestly a moment, he looked down at the child before him. "I think I like you referring to me by my full first name, Miss Erica. It seems to *suit* you."

Smiling, Erica stood tall and tried to sound formal and dignified as best she could. "Then Fredrick it shall *be*. Thank you for helping me with my *coat*, Fredrick!"

"My pleasure, *Miss Erica*." he replied with only the slightest hint of a smile. He found it odd that he was actually beginning to think of Erica *as* a young girl, but he understood it was what she needed to be for now. Guiding her to the marble bench, he knelt and helped both girls off with their boots and mittens before helping them put on their indoor shoes. Looking around briefly, he asked, "What has happened to your *scarf*, Miss Erica?" The mention of its absence caused both girls to giggle at the memory of their ridiculous looking snowman that now wore it.

Making their way into the living room, the two saw pillows and a blanket placed in front of the fire. Rushing forward, stopping at the fireplace for a moment to warm their hands, they sat on the pillows just as Cook came out of the dining room with a tray. Lowering it down so they could each take a steaming cup of cocoa, she smiled at the girls.

"Did you have fun Erica?" Theresa asked.

Nodding, she smiled. "Don't you *know* it! I didn't know it could be so much *fun* to do something as simple as making a *snowman*!"

Leaning in next to her cousin, Faith bumped shoulders with her, giggling conspiratorially as she sipped her cocoa. Repeating the process over and over, she kept bumping shoulders with Erica as the girl described her first time playing in the snow to Cook and her aunt. Finally, she'd managed to irritate her cousin after five or six bumps.

"*What?*" Erica fumed, turning to look at her just as Faith crossed her eyes and grinned like an idiot, mimicking their snowman. Erica stifled a laugh, her ire loosing out to her funny bone. Finally, the two were forced to put their cups down, rolling on the floor and giggling like crazy.

Their giggle fit was infectious as both Cook and Heather couldn't help but chortle at the two of them, the room filled with the sound of giggling girls. Even the unflappable Fredrick couldn't help but let out a few repressed chuckles before composing himself as he entered the room.

When Heather saw Fredrick standing and waiting for her attention, she asked through her mirth, "What is it Fredrick?"

With only the faintest hint of a smile and a glance at the two laughing hyenas in front of the fire, he bowed slightly. "Madame, I wish to inform you that the main highway is open once more. I will have the driveway cleared within the next thirty minutes."

His news halted the laughter at once as Faith rolled over on her stomach to look back at him. "So soon?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss Faith." Fredrick nodded curtly. Knowing what the girl was thinking from experience, he added, "Though I do believe school is still unlikely to be resumed until Monday the first, at the soonest. Too many in the area are still snowbound."

"Thank you, Fredrick." Heather nodded in understanding. Turning to Erica, she could see mild fear in the girl's eyes. Having already considered how to proceed, she smiled at her niece. "Erica? Are you ready to come with me into town to get some clothes of your own?"

Faced with the prospect of leaving her safe and loving environment, Erica gulped as she shook her head slightly. "Do I *have* to, Aunt Heather?"

Looking at Cook, Fredrick, and then Faith, she cleared her throat. Without a word, all three knew at once that she wanted to be alone with her niece.

Erica watched as Faith stood up and grudgingly left for the kitchen with Cook and Fredrick. Standing, she walked over to her aunt where she

beckoned Erica with a patting of the loveseat's cushion. Nervously, she sat down as Heather turned to face her.

"Erica, I *know* you're happy here, and you're happy being *you*." she began.
"Is there something keeping you from wanting to go with me into town?"

Fidgeting with her fingers, Erica was terrified to say out loud what she was feeling. After a moment, her aunt took her hands to quiet their restlessness. Without a word, she looked into her aunt's vibrantly blue eyes and wished that Heather could read her mind so she didn't have to say it out loud.

"I see." her aunt said, knowingly. "You're scared that people will 'know' and that you'll be made fun of, aren't you?"

Tears welling up in her eyes were Erica's only response.

"Oh, *sweetheart!*" her aunt consoled, drawing her into a comforting hug. Holding her lovingly for a few minutes to quell her fears, she finally pulled back and regarded her niece. "How about this. Before we go shopping, I'll take you to a friend of mine who runs a beauty salon. Her name is Brooke Hathaway and she lives just a short way down the road. I can call her up and I'm *sure* she'll be happy to help you feel much more comfortable as Erica so *no one* will know. Would that be alright?"

Drying her eyes with a tissue, Erica nodded. Curious, she asked, "Did... did she used to be Uncle Richard's friend?"

Surprised by her niece's knowledge of Brooke's connection to her late husband, she was stunned speechless for a moment. Finally she asked, "How do *you* know about that?"

Sniffing, Erica shrugged. "Faith told me that a lady that lives nearby named Brooke was in the war with her daddy."

Heather smiled sadly. "Yes, she *was* in the service with Richard. She and your Uncle Richard were *very* close friends for *many* years! Brooke was also a *very* dear friend to your father and mother. In fact, she sort of *introduced* them to one another, from a *certain* point of view." Heather barely managed to hold back her tears as she remembered that day with a sad fondness.

Turning around, Heather smiled as she saw the three people she was waiting for enter. New Years Eve nineteen ninety-five just wouldn't be the same without her sweetheart to kiss at midnight. Making her way to the door, she saw him notice her approach and her heart fluttered with anticipation.

"Richard! I'm so glad you could make it!" she said as she got close enough for him to hear.

Richard Hargrave, a Sergeant in the United Stated Marine Corps, smiled his rugged smile as he saw her approaching. He removed his cover and ran his free hand through his short-cropped red hair. At just over six feet with classically handsome features and a muscular ex-football player's build, he was what most women would die for in a man. That he was also charming, witty, gracious, and kind made him the target of much of the female population around the college.

For his part, Richard couldn't believe he'd ever managed to attract the eye of Heather Moore, the most beautiful girl he'd ever known. She wasn't the most popular girl, nor the most outgoing, but in his eyes no woman could ever compete with her stunning beauty, quick wit, intelligent mind, and graceful charm. "Hey, beautiful! Couldn't leave you alone! You might come to your senses and realize you could do way better than me!"

Heather smiled coyly as she wound her arms around his waist. "Better than you? Who? Adonis? Apollo? John Wayne?"

Jack peered around his best friend's shoulder, having been standing next to him and being quietly ignored by the two lovebirds. "Ah, come on! This jarhead? I just don't get why you threw me over for that! What do you see in him when there's me to be had!"

Sergeant Brooke Hathaway tapped him on the shoulder. Jack turning to face her, the woman Marine looked him up and down, then likewise with Richard, shaking her head. "Sorry Charlie, but even I can tell he's got you beat."

Jack, ever the comedian, took off his cover and held it to his heart. "Brooke! My sweetness! Say it ain't so!"

Pushing past Jack and snaking around Richard, Brooke smiled and hugged Heather. "Hey, beautiful! Still sure I can't tear you away from this clown? I can really make it worth your while!" She arched her eyebrows at Heather in a comically seductive way.

While Heather was much more curvaceous, Brooke was no less attractive. At five foot eight, she stood taller than Jack even without the aid of her two-inch heels. Her legs long and muscular, her waist tapering nicely into rock-hard abdominals, her shoulder-length ebony hair curly and framing her face perfectly, and her lips full and beautiful.

"You make an awfully tempting offer, Brooke..." she said in her low throaty voice. Releasing her and returning to Richard, she hooked an arm through one of his. "...but alas my heart is already spoken for."

Jack turned to his best friend. "Say Rich, you wouldn't mind if Heather took a little break from you, would you? Just a short one? Like say for an hour? Oh, I don't mean for myself, but think of poor Brooke!"

Turning to his best friend, Richard smirked at him. "Yeah, I know who you're looking out for, Jack."

Pleading as the four made their way through the other guests, Jack begged, "Oh, come on Rich! Give a guy a break! Just let them go upstairs, alone, for ten minutes! I swear, you can even handcuff me to the front door! I just wanna know it happened!"

Brooke slugged Jack in the arm hard enough to bruise. "Can it, clown! I'm not your personal masturbation material."

"OK, OK. You know I was only kidding around." Turning to Heather Jack smiled sincerely. "So how've you been?"

She put her other arm through Jack's as they walked slowly. "Can't complain, Jack." Thinking of how to segue into what Brooke wanted to talk about, she asked innocently, "Seeing anyone?"

He jerked his thumb at Brooke and Richard. "No one but these two yahoos. Alas, you were my last and final hope. My heart can never love another!"

Smiling, Brooke hoped to not give too much away. "Well, that's too bad. I was hoping you could help me with a little problem."

His smile melted immediately. "What's her name?"

Laughing, Heather reached the end table where she'd put her drink and the ones she'd already gotten for the trio. "Oh, Jack! Here I thought I'd ruined you for all other women!"

He nodded. "True, true, but what's her name Brooke? Her name!"

Looking at him, Brooke smiled. "Her name's Erica. She's sweet, but shy. I met her while waiting for Heather at the campus library. I kind of got my signals crossed and thought she was hitting on me, but she was really just wanting to ask about my service. She was doing some psychology paper on the effect of women in predominantly male occupied professions."

Wincing as he picked up a beer bottle, he opened it and handed it to her. "Please! Not another she-woman man-hater! I don't care how cute she is, they're more trouble than they're worth! You sure she wasn't hitting on you?"

Taking a drink, Brooke shook her head. "Positive. And she's not a left-wing wacko feminist, either. Her professor probably is, so it's the assignment she got, but she's actually quite nice, loves the armed forces, and even thanked me for my service."

Shaking his head as he took his own beer, Jack swigged it. "Then her old man's probably a swabbie at the base."

While Brooke laughed, Richard, who'd not been listening to the conversation, asked, "What about swabbies?"

Taking another drink, Jack grinned. "Nothing, Rich. Just go back to ogling your girlfriend."

Picking up his own beer, Richard glared at his best friend since age fourteen. "I wasn't ogling her, I was admiring her beautiful eyes!"

Nudging him in the shoulder, Jack quipped, "Sure, sure, Rich. Increase your scanning elevation about twenty-five degrees to find her eyes."

His comment brought a laugh to the three and a blush to Heather's cheeks before Brooke turned and looked toward the door and checked her watch.

Noticing the action, Jack shook his head. "Oh, no! You didn't! Brooke! Say it ain't so! You set me up without even asking?"

She shrugged as she took another drink. "You'll love her, Jack. I swear."

He nodded. "Uh-huh. How many eyebrows does she have?"

"Three, one for each eye." Brooke smiled sweetly. "But you'll never notice because the hump on her back will draw all your attention." Almost sensing more than hearing the front door open over the clamor of conversations and the music, she turned and smiled when she saw Erica look into the throng of partygoers. Handing her beer over to Heather, she didn't even look back. "Excuse me." she said as she headed for the door.

Thinking she might've come to the wrong address before she spotted Brooke coming toward her, Erica smiled and embraced her. "Hi! I thought I got the wrong place. This is your party?"

Slinging her arm over Erica's shoulders, Brooke grimaced. "Not exactly my party, but I was invited, so the invitation is yours as well. Come on!" She leaned in close to whisper, "Keep calm, girl!"

Making their way through the crowd, Brooke walked toward the trio with her guest. Heather and Richard were looking at each other with stars in their eyes; Richard's back turned to their approach.

Jack was the only one who saw them coming. The two getting closer, his heart skipped a beat. Suddenly the room seemed very quiet, the noise and laughter seeming to fade into the background. He wasn't even seeing Brooke anymore, just the girl she was with. She was thin, but not skinny, with well-rounded hips and bust and a narrow tapering waist. The T-shirt she wore under a see-through white jacket emphasized her gracious curves, and her jeans covered long legs that Jack could tell were well formed and sexy. Her shoulder-length red hair bounced with every step, framing her beautiful face and haunting green eyes.

For her part, Erica saw Jack at the same moment and her breath caught. He was not ruggedly handsome, nor especially well built or tall. His dirty-blond hair was almost non-existent, cropped short and spiked up out of his head like tiny porcupine quills. His face was neither exceptionally attractive nor homely, hands callused and scrawny. It wasn't his looks that had always

taken her breath away. It was him. Most especially now, with a room full of half naked women surrounding her Jack, his eyes were locked on her and only her as though she, Erica Hargrave, were the best looking woman in the room.

Brooke stopped in front of him. "Jack? This is Erica." Seeing the two staring into each other's eyes and not even noticing her, Brooke pursed her lips. "Well, I can see you two don't have any further need of me." she said as she turned toward Richard and Heather, trying keep them distracted to give the two a moment alone in a crowded room.

Erica spoke first. "Hi!"

"Um... hi!" Jack swallowed hard. Gathering his composure, but still unable to tear his eyes away from hers, he stammered as he held out his hand. "Jack, Jack Dunning. Lance Corporal, USMC."

She smiled and took his hand gently, only just then realizing that he didn't know who she was. "Erica... Erica Hargrave. Student. Stanford." Her eyes smiled along with her lips and she could feel her hand nervously sweating in his.

Just then, Jack heard from behind him, "Erica!?"

The young woman's eyes were torn away from Jack's enchanting stare when she heard the one voice that had been catching her attention her entire life. Looking over Jack's shoulder, she saw her brother looking at her in sheer astonishment. "Richie!? Brooke didn't say you were going to be here!"

Jack was confused as her full name hadn't even processed in his mind yet. In point of fact, Jack hadn't done much actual thinking since he first saw her. Suddenly, it all dawned on him, his eyes grew wide, and he looked at her again. "Erica... Hargrave? But... Rich's Erica?" The last time he'd seen his best buddy's little sister was over five years earlier at Richard's nineteenth

birthday. He'd only showed up long enough to gather up his buddy for a night on the town. What he remembered of her was the image of a little girl. Now before him stood a vision of lovely young womanhood.

Her brother pushed Jack aside. "What are you doing here, Erica? You're not twenty-one yet! You can't be here!"

Brooke halfway interposed between the siblings. "She's my guest, Rich! And she turns legal in like a week, so back off!"

"That's OK, Brooke." Erica's eyes flared. "I can see I'm not going to be allowed to have any fun here tonight. Maybe you can take me to another party? I can be your date!"

Pulling Richard aside, Jack tried to convince him to let her stay. "Listen! Rich! Come on, man! Let it be! If she stays here, you can keep an eye on her, and so can Heather, Brooke, and I, right? If she leaves, God knows what trouble she could get into! Think, man!"

Turning back to his sister, Richard lowered his gaze. "Look, Erica. I'm sorry. Just forget I said anything, OK? I... I overreacted. Please stay." He looked up at her as he finished his plea.

Her fury at still being treated like a child by her older brother melted quickly. Never one to carry a grudge long, she eyed him suspiciously. "Fine! But I don't want Sergeant Ramrod killing my good time, is that clear?" She poked him in the chest as she finished.

Raising his hands defensively, Richard backed away. "I give! I give! Why don't I get you a beer?"

"I'll get it!" Jack offered, his voice nearly cracking comically. Turning to Erica, he smiled. "Don't move a muscle, my angel! I'll be back to worship the ground you walk on in a flash!"

Erica looked to Brooke and her brother with a wistful smile as Jack ran to the bar. "Isn't he funny?"

Brooke tousled her hair. "Unfortunately, looks aren't everything."

"Don't let his outward clownish charm fool you, sis." Richard warned. "He's still the same Jack Dunning you've known for years."

Biting her lower lip, Erica swayed gently. "He always seemed really sweet to me."

"The word you're looking for is 'desperate'." Brooke said as she took another drink. "We call him Corporal Strikeout for a reason."

Erica shook her head, inwardly hopeful. "Doesn't do well with the ladies then?"

"He does fine at first." Heather interjected. "But once girls stop laughing at his jokes, his lack of things like a car or money, and thereby his ability to take them out, tends to make them lose interest quickly."

Furrowing her brow, Erica fumed. "Well that's awful shallow of them!" Pausing, she asked, "Is he very bad with money?"

"Not really." Brooke shook her head. "He's just overly generous. He sends most of his pay to the place that's taking care of his mom."

Her heart melted, remembering the few times she'd met Mary Dunning and how torn up Jack had been about moving her into a home before he'd left Pittsburgh. "Oh! That's so sweet!"

"Yeah, other girls think it's sweet too." Richard smiled. "Until it's time for their second date and he still can't afford to take them anywhere, let alone have a car to take them in."

She slapped her brother in the chest. "You know, you could be a little more generous with your dough back home, Sergeant! Daddy's not getting any younger, and he's about killing himself trying to put me through school!"

He nearly choked on his beer. "Hey! I send what I can! More than Jack!"

His sister crossed her arms. "But he makes less! I bet he leaves less to spend on himself than you do!"

"You're right, he does!" Heather nodded. Turning to Richard, she smiled as she draped her arms over his shoulders and around his neck. "You really should help your family more, Richard. Your money doesn't impress me!"

"Good lord!" Brooke rolled her eyes. "If this gets sweeter, I'm gonna barf!"

Nearly running back to the foursome, Jack handed Erica a beer and smiled. "Here! My treat, my beauty!"

Nodding at Erica, Brooke joked, "If she's Beauty that makes you The Beast."

Putting the drink down, Erica smiled. "That's very sweet of you, but you don't need to buy me drinks! I think I'd like to stay clear-headed." Slipping her arm into Jack's, she looked around. "Is there someplace quiet we could talk?"

"You could take him upstairs!" Brooke smirked.

"Brooke!" Richard barked as he nearly turned white, knowing what most couples went upstairs to do. "Over my dead body!"

Erica stiffened her back. "Is that so, Richie?"

Lowering his voice desperately, he leaned in toward his sister's ear. "Are you crazy? Do you know what Mom and Dad would do to me if they found out I

let you 'go upstairs' with Jack?" he emphasized with air quotes. "I'd never live to see morning! Mom'd kill me over the phone!"

Erica tilted her nose up. "Well, Mom and Dad aren't here, Richie! So unless you want me to just leave and take Jack somewhere more private, he and I are going to go upstairs!" She paused to let her brother squirm. "...and talk!"

At that, Erica took her brother's beer, took a swig from it, handed it back to him, and practically dragged Jack toward the staircase.

Looking back at his best friend, Jack just shrugged. "What can I do, Rich? Buttons' got me hooked!" referring to the nickname he'd given her on the first day they'd met when she was only ten and he was almost fourteen.

Richard looked over at Brooke as the two disappeared up the stairs. "What the hell, Brooke? You set my sister up with Jack?"

"Would you rather I set her up with Corporal Strikeout, or have her end up with someone like you, Sergeant Trouser Snake?"

Heather turned his head to face her. "Relax, darling. I'm sure she's perfectly safe with Jack. Now would you mind not thinking about your sister and turn your attention back to me? It's kind of creepy if I kiss you while you're thinking about your sister."

"Ha!" Brooke busted out laughing. "Maybe that's why he's so protective!"

He pushed Brooke's shoulder. "Cram it, Brooke! That's not even funny! I'm just looking out for her is all!"

Once more, Heather turned his head back towards her. "I'm over here, dear!"

As he finally returned his focus back to his girlfriend, Brooke sighed and took another drink. "Great job, Brooke." she said to herself as she looked up

the stairs where Jack and Erica had gone and then to Heather and Richard starting to dance. "You've managed to help find love for everyone but you."

Heather shook her head to clear it. "You see, Erica... Brooke, your father Jack, and your Uncle Richard were already good friends when I met them. Brooke was the one who set your parents up on their first date. A few months later they were married, and then two years later *you* were born!"

The girl weakly smiled, unnerved by her aunt's story that showed she wasn't actually Erica Hargrave. She finally understood that, as her mother had told her, there was so much about her family that she didn't know. *Maybe this Brooke lady can tell me more about dad... and me.* she thought. "I think that would be OK." she said after a brief pause.

Her aunt nodded. "You can join Faith in the kitchen for lunch, sweetie. I'll call Brooke up and see what she says."

Erica hugged her aunt before heading to the kitchen. "*Thank you, Aunt Heather. I love you!*"

She hugged the girl back. "I love you too, sweetheart. Now scoot!" Heather watched the girl head through the dining room toward the kitchen, moving over to the couch and picking up the receiver for the old phone. She hadn't told Brooke yet of Erica's death, not knowing how to break the news. Dialing quickly before she lost her nerve, she didn't have to wait long before it was answered.

"Hello?" Jenny Hathaway answered.

"Hello, Jenny? This is Heather. Is Brooke available?" she queried.

"Oh, *hi* Heather! Yes, just a moment!"

Heather listened silently to the woman on the other end of the line.

"Honey? *Heather's* on the phone for you!" Jenny called out.

After a short wait, she heard the phone being handed off with a murmured comment.

"Oh, stop it! Heather is *not* my girlfriend! Hello?" Brooke answered.

"I'm not your *what*?" Heather probed.

"Oh God, that *wife* of mine! Anytime you call lately, she's taken to saying, 'Your *girlfriend's* on the phone!' Honestly!"

Heather could hear Jenny in the background. "Well she *calls* you enough to be her girlfriend! I think you talk to *her* more than you do *me*!"

Brooke lowered her tone. "Honey, I do you *way* more than I talk to her! Ow!"

Listening to their exchange, Heather had second thoughts about breaking the news to her best friend. "Brooke, if this is a bad *time*..."

"*Nonsense!* What's up?" Brooke asked happily.

Sighing, Heather prepared herself to break her friend's heart. "It's about *Erica*. I... I have some bad news."

Knowing exactly who Heather was talking about without having to be told, Brooke was silent a moment while she sat down, hearing the pain in her voice. "What's happened?"

Heather took a deep breath. "I don't know how to put this any *easier*, Brooke. I'm just going to *say* it. *Erica... died...* of leukemia... a few weeks ago. Her and Jack's... child... has come here to live with us."

The woman on the other end of the phone couldn't breathe. Both Jack and Richard had been her best friends in the Marine Corps and afterwards. Their loss was hard to take, but Erica was Richard's sister, Jack's wife, *and* one of her best friends. "No!" she whispered. With the discipline of her Corps training, she cleared her throat and wiped away the escaped tear, pushing aside her pain. "Are... are you *OK*?"

"Thank you dear, but if anyone is hurt *most* by this, it's their... *child*. Before Erica died, shortly before your wedding, her parents Frank and Judith were killed in a car accident. Eric's life has been thrown into *chaos*. Now he's *here, thousands* of miles from the only home he's ever known, *orphaned*, scared, lonely. I tell you Brooke, he's *traumatized. Badly.*"

"I can only *imagine!*" Brooke replied. The line went silent for a moment while Brooke explained to her wife what was going on. After a moment, Heather heard an extension pick up.

"Heather? This is Jenny! I'm *so* sorry to hear what's happened! Erica was *such* a nice woman! How can we help?"

Heather explained. "Well, Eric arrived Tuesday evening, a week early and with nothing but the soaked and ruined clothes on his back. He lost *all* his luggage when he changed planes. We tried laundering what little he had, but the power went out before they could be washed and when we tried to dry them near the fire, they were burned beyond use. He was effectively left with *nothing* from his old life. No clothes, no pictures, *nothing*. It seems the medical bills for Erica took everything Jack and Erica ever *had*."

She paused a moment to let the situation sink in before explaining further. "We just gave him one of Faith's robes to wear for lack of anything better. To make a long story short, he's sort of... escaped... into a fantasy world where he's a twelve-year-old incarnation of his own mother. He... he thinks he's *Erica*." Static filled the line as she waited until one of them responded.

"Well... that's... um..." Brooke broke the silence.

"What can we do to help?" Jenny repeated her earlier question.

"I was hoping to bring 'Erica' over to see you Brooke, so you could help her."

Brooke knitted her brow. "You mean like... snap him out of it?"

Disagreeing, Jenny caught on quickly. "I don't think that's what Heather had in mind, love. I think she means for you to give him a makeover."

"*Her.*" Heather corrected her only slightly.

"Um... OK." Pausing, Brooke asked, "Are you *sure* that's the right thing to do, Heather? We're talking about Jack's *son!*"

Answering for her, Jenny insisted, "Of *course* it is! We'd be *happy* to help."

Smiling, Heather replied, "Thank you, Jenny. Brooke? From a *psychological* point of view, this kind of temporary escapism *is* healthy in the long term. After a while, she'll come to terms with her grief, give up the fantasy, and want to go back to being Eric. She just can't *handle* it right now. It's... it's too *painful*. What she needs *now* is to feel *safe*, and right *now* that means being more at ease with her identity, more like a *girl*. Will you help?"

"Of *course* she'll help, Heather." Jenny answered. "Won't you, love?"

Brooke growled at her wife. "I can answer for *myself, love!*" Pausing a moment, she finally did. "I'll help, Heather. If you *really* think this is in his best interests, I'll do what I can."

"*Thank* you, Brooke!" Heather beamed. "I *really* appreciate your help with this! We'll be over at your place in say, half an hour?"

"That's *fine*, Heather. I'll get things ready. Anything in particular?"

She ticked off each item with her fingers. "Hair... cut, color, and style. Nails and any makeup and styling advice you can give her."

Brooke took notes. "OK. Hair. What color?"

"Do you remember Erica's hair color? That shade of red?"

"Yeah. I *remember*." Brooke nodded once more and swallowed hard, holding back her tears as a hundred happy and painful memories flooded her mind. "Let me *think*. Yeah, I have something that can work for that. It won't be *wash* away though, it's *permanent* hair dye. It'll be *staying* until it grows out, say twelve to twenty weeks at minimum. Is that *alright*?"

"It will be *fine*, Brooke. I don't see her giving up this fantasy for at *least* that long. She's just... *lost*. She's even lost her faith in *God*. She's so *angry* with Him that before she retreated into her fantasy, she was cursing His name. She has a *lot* of pain and loss to work through."

Brooke frowned so strongly that Heather could hear it over the phone. "I see. Well, I should have everything ready by the time you get here. We'll see you soon."

"Thanks *ever* so much, Brooke! Love you and see you soon! And thank you *too*, Jenny!"

She listened as Brooke hung up, hearing Jenny say, "*See?* I *knew* she was your *girlfriend!* 'Love you, Broo...'"

Chapter 10 - Transformation

Sitting in the back of her aunt's limousine, Heather across from her and Faith next to her, Erica's nerves were on edge knowing she was going to meet someone who knew her father... and her from her old life before she was reborn in the body of her son. The butterflies were gone, replaced with raging wildcats clamoring around inside her stomach.

Clearing her mind, she focused on who she 'really' was; Erica Hargrave. She was once more twelve years old, but living with her aunt Heather and cousin Faith. She now thought of her aunt as *also* her sister-in-law; that part of her fantasy shifting to adjust to her situation. She had actually *joined* with her own mother, Erica *Hargrave*, living her life over again, but was simultaneously still Erica *Dunning*, her own child.

When the car turned a corner, she felt the bump of leaving the paved road and making their way up a short, snowy, gravel driveway. Soon enough the car stopped and she waited while Fredrick got out and opened their door.

"Thank you, Fredrick." Heather said as she exited first.

"If you won't be needing me Madame, I'll wait in the car while you attend to your business with Mrs. Hathaway."

"No Fredrick, you head home. We'll be a few hours, so I'll call when we're ready to be picked up." Waiting as Faith followed her out, she watched a timid Erica slowly climb out of the car. Taking her hand, she led both girls up to the front door and rang the bell just as the car started to pull away.

Erica couldn't get her stomach to settle. While in the kitchen she'd eaten a PB and J sandwich that she was now thinking had been a mistake, certain it was going to come back up at any moment. After a moment's wait, she saw movement from within the small white two-story house. The door opened to reveal a lady dressed in a blue knee-length dress with a black waist

panel. She was shorter than her aunt Heather, but still most of a foot taller than her or Faith. Curly brown shoulder-length hair framed her round face, which smiled down at her.

"*Hi, Jenny!*" her aunt greeted the lady. "Thanks for having us!"

"Come *in!* Come *in!*" she said quickly. "It's *freezing* out there!"

After the three ladies entered her home, she closed the door behind them. "Here, let me help you off with your coats." she offered, helping Erica with hers last. Once done, she crouched down and greeted her. "Well! You must be *Erica!* I've heard a *lot* about you!" She extended her hand to the girl. "I'm Jenny Hathaway, but you can just call me Aunt Jenny! I'm *very* pleased to meet you!"

Slowly taking Jenny's hand, Erica smiled shyly. "Pleased to meet you as well." she replied, almost too quiet to hear.

Once Heather hung up her and Faith's coats, the three followed Jenny into the kitchen where a taller woman waited. The woman smiled as they entered, her shoulder-length ebony hair falling in natural curls to stand in perfect contrast to her milky complexion. Wearing designer jeans that accentuated her athletic curves, a pretty white tank top partially covered by a simple cotton button-up blouse was left to hang open loosely in front.

"Good morning, Heather! Faith!" Brooke greeted them. "Pleased to meet you, *Erica.*" She looked at the child standing before her and, seeing both her mother Erica and father Jack in the child, nearly brought her to tears. "Well... *Erica,* I... I understand you like your fun red hair so much you want your hair to look just like it? Why don't you come sit here and I'll see what we can do."

Erica smiled weakly as she sat in the chair and Brooke covered her with a cloth. "Thank you, Miss Hathaway."

"You can call me Aunt Brooke." she offered, gently pulling the play wig off Erica's head and examining the girl's natural hair color and length. *My God!* she thought. *It's the exact same color as Jack's!* Needing to compose herself, she turned to the girl's aunt. "Heather? I need to mix up the color. Can you give me a hand?"

Heather, having never touched hair color on her life, was stunned for a moment, but quickly caught on. "Oh! Sure, Brooke! I'd be *happy* to help! After all, you're helping *me*... and *Erica*!" She followed the brunette into her storage room where the Marine-turned-beautician kept all her salon products. After Brooke closed the door, she turned to her friend.

"Oh *God*, Heather!" she whispered, tears forming in her eyes. "I don't know if I can *do* this! He has Jack's *hair*!"

Taking both of Brooke's hands in hers, Heather tried to calm her down. "It's *all right*, Brooke! Calm down! Jack is *not* going to be *mad* at you, I *swear*! Erica *needs* this. She *needs* to feel comfortable living in this fantasy. She's *hurting* Brooke, *far* more than you or I, and she's *much* too young to handle it! I tried to fight it at first, tried to push her away from it, but she just can't *handle* being Eric right now. She can barely tolerate being *Erica*, but it makes her feel like her mother's still here with her. For now... it's enough."

Brooke ran her fingers through her hair, blowing out a breath through pursed lips. "You keep calling him *her*, even when *he* can't hear you!" she said angrily as a statement, but obviously intended as a question.

Her oldest friend frowned. "She already *knows* I want her to go back to being Jack and Erica's son, Brooke. I can't *afford* to slip up. If I do, it would be as though I were trying to tear down her fantasy before she's ready. She'd see it as an attack on her *identity*, so I *have* to think of her as though she's just a normal *girl*. If I think of her as Eric at *all*, I'll use 'him' by mistake and it will *all* come crashing down... with potentially *disastrous* results!"

Closing her eyes, Brooke took a deep breath. "You're *sure* this is the right thing to do? Won't this *confuse* him?"

Heather shook her head. "No. People can't be *made* to think they're another gender, Brooke. It's innate. So unless the potential for gender dysphoria was *always* in her, it's almost *impossible* to confuse her. *Please*, Brooke! If you *can't* do this, if you can't *look* at her and think of her as being a normal *girl*, as Jack and Erica's *daughter*, tell me now and I'll make an excuse as to why we have to leave. I can't *let* her face the kind of trauma challenging her fantasy would bring right now! Not this soon after... after Erica's death and being ripped away from the only life she's ever known!"

Turning away from Heather, Brooke crossed her arms to hold herself as though if she didn't she might fly apart. Steeling herself, she turned back toward her best friend's widow. "OK. I... I can do that. I can just think of her as Erica and Jack's *daughter*.... but you have to *promise* me that you *won't* allow this to get out of control. No turning hi... her... into a girl with hormones or anything like that!"

Putting her hands on Brooke's shoulders to help calm her, Heather nodded. "Brooke, I *swear* to you on my *soul*, I'll *only* let this continue while I think it's a healthy coping tool, not a *minute* longer. Even if she *wants* hormones or something more permanent, I won't *allow* it. I *know* that after a time she'll finally be able to process her pain, move on, and will *want* to be Eric again... but we can't *push* her to it! She has to return to it on her *own*."

Brooke sighed. "Alright, I'll trust you... for *Jack's* sake if nothing else. I still owe him one and I know it's gotta be *killing* him to see... *her*... hurting so badly." Composing herself, Brooke picked up the bottle of hair color. Taking a breath, she pasted a fake smile on her face and opened the door, heading back into her kitchen. "Sorry it took so long, Erica. I couldn't find the right color." Examining Erica's hair, she nodded to herself. "Yeah, I think this will take *very* nicely! Are you ready, sweetie?"

The girl nodded, eager but nervous. She watched Brooke mix the color into a bowl with a brush, then scoop some of the color onto it, and start painting it into her hair. After a short time, she felt a mild sting on her scalp.

"Aunt Brooke? Is it *supposed* to feel like this? Like a sunburn?"

The hairstylist nodded as she finished applying the color. "A little, sweetie. It might itch a little too, but you *can't* scratch it! Can you do that?" Seeing Erica nod slightly, Brooke finished the color and wrapped a plastic shower cap over the girl's hair. Then, coming around front, she looked at her and smiled. "How would you like pink nail polish to go with your dress?"

Erica smiled back genuinely and started to reflexively reach up to scratch her head that was starting to itch. Stopping herself, she was rewarded with another wide smile from Brooke, Jenny, and her aunt Heather.

While Brooke filed and shaped Erica's nails, Faith came up beside her. "Does it itch really bad?" she asked.

"Uh-huh!" Erica nodded vigorously. "I *really* wanna scratch it!"

"I bet you must have the most self control in the *whole world!* If I get an itch, I can't *help* but scratch... no matter *what* anyone says! Remember that time I got poison ivy, Mamma?"

Heather laughed. "Yes, dear! I *do!* I nearly had to tie your *hands!*"

Shaking her head in frustration, Erica twitched. "Can we talk about something *else*, please? All this itch talk is making it *worse!*"

Her aunt began talking to Jenny about the power outage and the hardships it was causing, heading out to the living room. Meanwhile, Faith wandered off to read the book she'd brought, bored with watching Brooke give her cousin a manicure. That left Erica alone with Brooke for the first time.

An awkward silence rose up between the two. Erica knew that the woman had known her father and wanted to ask questions about what he was like, but couldn't figure out how to broach the subject while she was herself the living spirit of Erica Hargrave, her father's wife.

For her part, Brooke simply bit her tongue, trying to keep herself from telling the child to 'man up' and go back to being Eric. After a short time, she could tell something was on Erica's mind, but was afraid to speak up.

"So, *Erica*. Did you know I knew your uncle Richard?" she asked as she buffed the girl's nails.

"Uh-huh." she nodded. "Aunt Heather told me. She said you also knew..." She struggled with the words, having difficulty coping with the concept that Jack Dunning was both her father and late husband to her older self.

Brooke looked up at the girl and realized she'd found a crack in Erica's fantasy and wanted to tear it open. "Yes, I also knew *Jack*. *Jack Dunning*. He married your uncle Richard's *sister*."

Erica's breath grew short, her fantasy threatening to fly apart at the seams and leave her bare and exposed. Trying to calm herself, she stammered out, "W-what was he l-like? J... Jack... D-Dunning."

Slowly, she stopped buffing Erica's nails. Looking at the child seated in front of her, she could see her shaking, close to a complete mental breakdown. Her heart ached to comfort her best friend's child, but she could see the emotional scars were too new; too raw to even touch, let alone begin to heal. Picking her words carefully, she smiled and resumed buffing her nails, trying to undo the damage she'd already done with just a few words.

"Well, I met your uncle Richard and Jack while we were all assigned to Alameda Naval Air Station back in the nineties. They'd been friends for years before that. They met in high school and went through Boot together.

Richard was a born leader and Jack followed him! Richard was handsome and charming, Jack was quick-witted and funny. They made a good team. They both enlisted after high school, same as I did, to be able to afford college, but it ended up only *Richard* followed that dream." She switched to Erica's left hand before she continued. "After a four year cruise, Rich started at Menlo College because it was near Alameda and they had a business degree program."

"I think it was Labor Day in ninety-five when your uncle Richard met your aunt Heather. She was going to Stanford, that's close to Menlo, and there was a party Jack wanted to go to. Richard and I tagged along and your aunt Heather was there." She smiled and looked off into the distance. "Actually, Jack had already *met* Heather and found out she was *going* to that party, and was there to ask her *out*... but when Heather met Rich, it was all over."

She resumed buffing Erica's nails as she continued once more. "Jack was upset, but he loved Rich so much he was happy for them. Jack was *always* looking for the future Mrs. Dunning!" Brooke laughed. "But he had the *worst* luck with girls! *Poor* Jack! In fact, it was *him* that I met first. He was trying to ask *me* out, but then he asked out almost *every* girl he met... that is, until he saw Rich's sister all grown up."

Brooke finished buffing, picked up a milky white base coat, and started to cover the girl's nails. "I think she was the *best* thing to happen to Jack. She didn't care that he couldn't afford things. She only wanted to *be* with him. They used to spend time in the park feeding geese day-old bread and other silly and romantic things like that. I remember the last time Jack proposed to her. I say the *last* time because Jack proposed to her at the end of *every* date, including their *first*!" Brooke chuckled at the memory.

Jack walked out the door with Erica's arm hooked under his. It was three in the morning and the New Year's party had broken up nearly half an hour earlier. Richard and Heather were behind them, while Brooke waited at the bottom of the steps next to Richard's car.

"Come on Jack!" Brooke nagged. "We have to get back to The Bricks!"

He looked down at Brooke. "Will you be quiet for just a minute!" he barked. Turning to look back at Erica, Jack smiled. "I do have to go Buttons, but I want to ask you something first." He stopped and faced his best friend's sister, blocking the doorway.

Erica wore a smile that shone from her eyes. "What is it?"

"Will you marry me?" he grinned.

Richard shoved Jack's shoulder. "Come on Jack, quit clowning around! That's my sister!"

Clownishly, Jack stumbled sideways as Erica laughed. After her brother and Heather came out and walked between the two, Jack raced up to Erica as soon as they moved down the steps that led from the street to the door.

"I know it's sudden and all, but you've completely captivated my heart!" While he spoke, Jack exaggerated his every move to comic effect. Bending down on one knee, he took Erica's hand. "Please, my love! Marry me, and I'll take you away from all this!" Sweeping his hand in a great circle, he indicated the lavish grounds that surrounded them.

Erica snickered. "Why Jack! This is all so... so sudden!" she mimicked his comedic overacting. "However, I fear my father will not grant you my hand! I'm needed too much on the farm, what with my eighteen brothers and sisters to take care of! Not to mention my mother!"

He stood and looked at the ground, as if thinking. "That's right! Your mother... the dark fairy Maleficent! We'll elope, then!"

Coming up the steps, Richard grabbed his arm. "Come on, Casanova. You can propose to my sister tomorrow, after I tell her about you."

He jerked his arm free and stood in comic defiance. "Tell her what about me? I'm as good as anybody! Don't I need love, too?"

Erica moved up to Jack and took his arm again. "Oh, I think I already know what kind of man Jack is, Richie! The kind I like!"

Turning away, Richard walked back down the steps with Heather. "Great, just what the family needs... another mouth to feed!" As he reached the bottom, he turned to see his sister looking up at Jack with a giddy expression on her face as they followed. "Oh, Jack! Now look at what you've done! You've gone and made my sister all swoony!"

"Yeah?" Jack smiled. He looked down at Erica who was looking up at him. "What, over me?"

Nodding, Erica turned to face him. "Mmm hmm!" Putting her arms over his shoulders, she looked slightly up at him with stars in her eyes. "You know, I knew I was coming to meet you when Brooke 'introduced' us, right?" She smiled and lowered her voice, telling him of the same thing she'd told him when they were alone upstairs. "I have a confession to make. I've had a crush on you since I was ten!"

"Who? Me?" Jack answered back stupidly.

Richard tapped Jack on the shoulder while Brooke started Richard's car, then leaned over the roof. "Come on, lover boy. Tick-tock!" she shouted.

Pushing her brother away, Erica glared at him before turning back to Jack. "Back off a sec, Richie! I want to kiss my Jack goodnight!"

"Oh, Erica!" Richard groaned. "I don't want to see that!"

Never looking away from Jack, she shot back, "Then turn around!"

Heather pulled at his arm, turning him away from his sister and best friend. "Why don't you give me a proper goodnight as well and leave them be!"

Even as Heather pulled him down into a loving kiss, he tried to strain his neck sideways to watch over his little sister until Heather made him forget about his brotherly protectiveness.

Tilting her head sideways, Erica leaned up until her lips met Jack's. It was a simple kiss, neither passionate nor long, but one that made both of their hearts race.

Backing away from the kiss, Erica smiled. "Still better than I ever imagined it would be!"

Jack looked around, then pointed at his chest with his thumb. "Who, me?"

She nodded. "Keep asking me and I might surprise you!"

Stunned into idiocy, Jack stammered. "What? Who? Ask what?"

Erica laughed as she slowly pulled herself away from him. "You'll see! Goodnight, my handsome young knight!"

Unable to tear his eyes away from her as she turned to join Heather, walking towards Erica's car, Jack shook his head to clear it. "Wow!" he mumbled, watching Erica sway her hips as she walked away. Leaning slightly towards Richard, he spoke in a daze. "Rich? I know she's your sister, but I have to say it. She's hot!"

Grabbing Jack in a headlock, Richard dragged him toward the car where Brooke waited impatiently. "Don't get any ideas, Snuffy! I may face a General Court Martial, but I'll kill you where you stand if you mess with my little sister!"

Pulling free, Jack stumbled back and into a phony fighting stance. "Put 'em up! Put 'em up! I'll fight with one paw tied behind my back for her hand, even if it kills me, which I'm sure you'd be happy to do... again!" He bumped Richard's shoulder as he stopped his clowning and opened the rear passenger door and climbed in.

Brooke shook her head as she climbed into the driver's seat. "You know, I'm starting to regret setting you two up!"

She finished a child-appropriate version of her story and the base coat at the same time, putting Erica's right hand into a battery-powered nail dryer. While it dried, she began on the left hand. "Jack was *always* clowning, trying to make *everybody* laugh. He was *great* that way. If you were feeling down or upset, he'd go out of his way to help you *forget* for a moment."

Erica smiled, wishing she had the chance to know him. Slowly sadness crept over her face. "Aunt Brooke? Can I ask you something?"

Glancing up, Brooke didn't like the look on the girl's face, but just looked down at her nails again. "I'll do my *best*. What is it?"

Swallowing hard, Erica worked up the courage to ask her fateful question. "How... how did he *die*?"

Reliving the horrible memory of the day she found out, Brooke's voice turned clinical. "Jack and Richard were both killed when the HumVee they were in hit an IED... an explosive." Holding back the tears she added, "They were both killed instantly." Taking Erica's right hand out of the nail dryer, she put the left one in and started to apply the color coat, but her hands were shaking. Taking a breath, she cleared her mind and tried again, the shaking gone.

Several minutes passed without a word from either one. Finally Erica said quietly, "Thank you."

Looking up as Brooke finished the clear outer coat, she furrowed her brow. "For what, sweetie?"

"For telling me." Erica sighed. "No one would ever *talk* about it."

She smiled at the young girl. "Anytime, sweetie. Maybe *someday*, when you're *ready*, I'll tell you *more* about them." Brooke could barely maintain her composure. More than anything, she wanted to tell Erica about Jack; how he lived, what kind of man he was, and what her friendship with him had meant. She just couldn't figure out how to do it while Erica was lost in a fantasy world where she was her own mother.

"*Done!* Now we move to the sink and rinse out your hair." Brooke ordered. "Remember, don't let *anything* touch your nails. They're still a little wet."

Nodding, Erica followed the older woman to the sink. Stepping up onto a stool, she turned her head upside down over the sink and felt the warm water pour through her hair as Brooke's gloved fingers massaged out the coloring agent. Within a few minutes, Erica felt a towel wrap around her head and Brooke led her back to the chair.

After a while of clipping small amounts of hair to style it into a more feminine shape, Brooke picked up a curling iron and hairdryer and plugged them into a black box near her back door. "We have a generator, so we have *some* power. Not enough to run *everything*, but at least we aren't stuck in the dark ages!"

Erica sat and endured having her hair pulled, curled, brushed, and blown for fifteen minutes. Finally, Brooke gave Erica a hand mirror. "Well? What do you think?"

Once more the child was stunned by her mother's image reflected back at her, this time without the wig making her scalp itch. After a few minutes of getting some makeup advice and Brooke applying a minimal amount, the

actual image that reflected back at her was nearly indistinguishable from that of her mother at that age. Looking up at Brooke, she smiled broadly. "Thank you, Aunt Brooke! It looks *perfect*!"

Brooke wiped a tear away, seeing for herself the remarkable resemblance between the twelve-year-old and photos of the young woman she knew as Erica Hargrave before becoming Erica Dunning. "You're very welcome, Erica! Now, let's go show everyone!"

Hopping down off the chair, Erica followed Brooke back out into the living room. Faith was the first to see and drew in a sharp breath.

"Erica! You look *beautiful*!" she exclaimed.

Her aunt Heather rose and examined the transformation. "Very nice work, Brooke! She looks *lovely*!"

Jenny was proud of her wife. "She *is* pretty amazing!" she remarked, coming up in front of her wife and wrapping her arms around her. Silently she mouthed, "Are you OK?" Brooke simply nodded and wiped another tear away.

After a call to let Fredrick know they were ready to be picked up, the five sat and talked, mostly the adults talking about old times. A short wait later, they heard the car pull up outside and the three thanked Brooke and Jenny for their hospitality.

Once the door was closed, Jenny took her wife once more in her arms. "I'm *proud* of you, love. I won't pretend to know what you're going through, but I *do* know that wasn't *easy*."

Brooke nodded. "It's *fine*. I'm just not sure it was the *right* thing to do. I mean... how can *that* be *right*? How..."

Jenny placed a finger on Brooke's lips, silencing her. "It *was*. I can't *imagine* the pain that girl's going through right now. If pretending to be her mom for a while helps her get through it, then it's for the best. I'm more worried about *you*, honey. Seeing her must have dredged up some serious feelings and terrible memories. I know how close you were to Jack... *and* Erica. I only got to meet them both at Heather's wedding, and again when they lost their second baby and found out she couldn't have any more, and then only Erica once more... at Arlington... but I know they meant so *much* to you."

She kissed Jenny delicately. "I'm OK... *really*. I just hope Jack isn't mad at me for helping to feminize his *son*. I... I pray he understands."

Jenny laid her head on Brooke's shoulder. "Probably a lot better than *we* do, love."

Chapter 11 - Out and Around

Enjoying the ride in her aunt Heather's limousine, Erica was finally much more comfortable in her fantasy. Now fully immersed in *being* Erica Hargrave, she relished the view out the window, watching the countryside blanketed in snow glide by them. After a while she realized they'd been driving for far longer than the trip back to her aunt's home.

"Where are we going, Aunt Heather?" she asked innocently.

"Into town." she replied flatly. "I want to get you some things you'll need."

"*Oh.*" the young girl responded. "Can I get my own toothbrush?"

Heather laughed. "Of course, sweetie! We'll also get you some clothes of your own so you don't have to keep borrowing Faith's."

"Mamma?" Faith asked. "What are you going to buy for her?"

Her mother answered nonchalantly. "Just some basics... underwear, day clothes, boots, a coat, toiletries... that sort of thing." Noticing the worried expression on her daughter's face, she shook her head and laughed lightly. "Oh, *sweetie!* Stop assuming the *worst!* They'll be nice... and *pretty!*"

A look of relief washed over Faith's countenance. Meanwhile, Erica felt like the butt of some joke she didn't get, her old life as Eric all but forgotten as her mind tried to blot out the numerous causes of pain that tormented her. Turning back to look out the window she smiled at the beauty surrounding her.

Driving for nearly an hour, the bare countryside started making way to more urban surroundings. Entering the city of Berlin, Erica noticed women wearing much more modern clothes and started to fret over her appearance. Looking over at her aunt Heather and Faith settled her nerves somewhat,

seeing as they were as finely dressed as she was herself. "Aunt Heather? May I ask where we're going?"

Heather answered vaguely. "To a shop that does special order clothing, sweetie." Turning down another road finally led them to a small white building that looked more like someone's private residence than a business.

Faith finally brightened up. "Oh! We're going to Miss *Fuller*'s shop!" she chirped. Looking over at Erica she smiled. "You'll *like* Miss Fuller! She's makes *any* clothes you can *imagine*!"

The car pulling to a stop, Heather corrected her daughter only slightly. "Well, she doesn't make *everything*, dear. She special *orders* many things. However, she *does* make special occasion dresses and other specialty items. She *is*, after all, a seamstress by trade."

Fredrick got out and opened their door, the three ladies exiting quickly. A cold breeze sent shivers up Erica's spine as they walked up to the front door, noticing a few people on the street giving them looks as they went in. Blushing, Erica entered last and was glad to be out of the cold, and the gaze of strangers. Looking around, it looked like the living room of someone's home, but with a front counter installed. Hand sketches of many different dresses, suits, and outfits decorated the walls, in addition to several large plants and a few chairs, giving the feel of a doctor's office or similar local.

She caught the sound of the small bell chime as the door closed, drawing the attention of the proprietress. "Just a *minute!*" she called out from somewhere upstairs. Footfalls coming down the steps, Erica finally saw the woman as she descended.

"Mrs. *Hargrave*! And *Faith*! So good to *see* you again!" The woman was marginally heavyset and round, but cheery and pleasant. She wore a simple dress of blue cotton with an apron draped around her neck that wasn't tied in back. Pins were stuck through the front of the apron in various places,

and a pair of shears hung out from the front pocket. Her round face smiled at Heather, framed with brown curly hair pinned back behind her head.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, Janet Fuller noticed the third member of their party. "Well! Who is *this*, then?"

Heather pulled Erica in front of her. "This is my niece Erica, Miss Fuller. Her parents are both gone now, so she'll be staying with us for some time and I'll need to get her a proper wardrobe."

The seamstress examined Erica. "I recognize that *dress* she's got on. I *made* that for Faith just this spring!"

"Yes, she only arrived on Tuesday with almost *nothing* to her name. Her old clothes were... *ruined*, so Faith was kind enough to share. I want her to feel comfortable and see to it she wants for *nothing* from now on."

Janet looked at Erica closely. "My, she *is* pretty. That red hair *really* brings out the green in her eyes." Leaning down, she took a tape measure out of her apron. "Well let's see..." She measured Erica's height and other simple measurements before straightening up. "Well, she's *very* close to Faith's measurements. Do you want a style similar to what Faith prefers?"

"Not *necessarily*, Janet." Heather shook her head. "Erica is free to pick her *own* style, *like* Faith's or *not*. I just want her to have her *own* clothes and not feel like she's getting Faith's hand-me-downs. Do you see?"

Nodding, Janet Fuller looked up at the taller woman. "I understand. Well, lets get started then. Follow me, Erica." She turned and walked around behind the counter and led the girl into what appeared to be something like a den redecorated into a fitting room. When Heather and Faith started to enter, Janet stopped them. "You can wait here. I'm sure she'd like some privacy while she changes into a fitting gown." Drawing a curtain that gave them a sense of seclusion, she turned and faced the nervous girl. "Now

then. Go behind that changing screen there, take off your dress, and put this on." she ordered kindly, handing the timid girl a fitting dress.

Nervously, Erica walked behind the changing screen and unzipped her dress while listening to Janet moving about the room. Finally down to just Faith's tights, undies, and training bra, she dropped the fitting gown over her head and it settled into place around her. Peaking out she murmured, "Done, Miss Fuller."

"Very well, child," she replied. "Come on out and step up onto the platform." Erica complied, nervously holding her arms across her chest. Stepping up, she watched as Miss Fuller knelt down in front of her and started pinning the simple gown.

While she pinned, the thinness of the fabric covering Erica allowed her to see things that confirmed her suspicions. In a soft tone, she started probing gently. "So, your name's *Erica*? Is that what you *like* to be called?" Seeing her nod, she continued. "Well Erica, I can tell you're a *special* girl." Dropping her voice to a whisper she added, "Don't worry! You're very pretty as a *girl*! No one will *ever* be able to tell!"

Erica's eyes grew wide as she realized that Miss Fuller somehow knew the secret of her former life.

Seeing fear in the girl's eyes, she smiled. "It's *alright!* I *understand!* You see, my younger sister is the same as you! We all used to think she was a boy, *too*. Do you *like* Faith's pretty dresses?"

Nodding some, she wasn't so much afraid as near to a mental breakdown at the challenge to her identity. Trying to shake off the distress, Erica followed it up with a shrug as she finally spoke. "I... I guess. I mean, she has a *lot* of really pretty dresses, but nothing like *jeans* or stuff that are easier to play in, ya know?"

A pin sticking between her teeth, Janet nodded back. "Yes, don't I *know* it! Now hold still a moment." She turned Erica in place and ran a tape measure around her waist, then up to circle her chest, then around her hips. "Well, you're a little larger around the *middle* than Faith, and I can see you haven't started getting your *womanhood* yet, but don't let *that* fret you, dear. Are you taking any pills yet?"

The girl's face scrunched up in confusion. "*Pills?*" she asked innocently.

"Never mind, dear." She waved a hand dismissively. "Your *aunt* would know about them. Maybe your doctor wants you to wait until you're *older*." Finishing with a measure around Erica's forehead, she tapped the girl on the butt. "OK, go and take that gown off and get back into your dress, sweetie. Bring the fitting gown back out with you when you're done. Careful not to pull any of the pins out or stick yourself!"

Tentatively going back behind the screen, she cautiously removed the gown and laid it aside. She could hear whispering near the door as she donned Faith's dress once more. Just as she was getting to the point of needing help, she overheard her aunt Heather.

"No, Janet. She *won't* be doing any of *that*. Her being Erica isn't *permanent*. Just a *coping* mechanism."

She stiffened her back as she realized they must have been talking about her. *Not permanent? I am Erica Hargrave! I am! And I always will be!* Anger rising, she came back around the changing screen. "I'm almost done, Miss Fuller. Would you help me with my dress?"

Moving quickly back to the girl, she smiled. "Sure, dear! Let me *get* that for you." Closing up the zipper, she quickly retied the sashes into a pretty bow. "*There!* All *fixed* again! So let's go out and look at some styles and we'll get you all situated. OK, sweetie?"

Raising her chin defiantly, she followed Janet back out to her office, sitting on a couch. Heather and Faith joined her a moment later; Erica moving slightly away from her aunt as she sat next to her.

While the seamstress was in the back getting her stylebooks, Heather could feel Erica's anger coming off the girl in waves. Realizing she must have overheard their hushed conversation, she closed her eyes and chastised herself for being so careless. Gathering her composure, she was more determined than ever to make Erica feel welcome in her home, however she needed to be at the moment.

Clearing her throat, she tapped Erica on the shoulder and tried to sound just as loving as though Erica was her own daughter. "*Erica*, sweetie? I've been thinking about school. Do you *want* to go to regular school, or would you prefer to be *home*-schooled? Whichever you *choose* would be *fine* with me."

Erica was still fuming, but slowly became conflicted. *She talks about me like I'm going to change my mind about who I am, but she obviously loves me and wants me to be happy...* She looked at herself in the mirror that made up the entire wall opposite her and once more was satisfied to see the ghost of her young mother staring back at her. Her new hairstyle perfected the image and made her anger toward her aunt melt away. *Aunt Heather didn't have to treat me to a makeover. She must have done it because she loves me and wants me to be Erica... why else? Maybe I misunderstood.* Clearing her throat, she smiled weakly up at her aunt. "Whichever you think is best, Aunt Heather. I *trust* you."

Hearing Erica put her fate in her hands, and seeing the anger wash away, Heather smiled back at her sweetly. "Alright. If you don't *mind*, I'd like you to stay as close to me as possible for a while. Would you *mind* being home-schooled? It means harder work than *public* school, and you won't meet many children to make *friends* with, but you'll learn a lot of things they *won't* teach in school; things you might enjoy *more*! I'll get you *any* material that interests you that isn't already in our library. Would you *like* that?"

Erica's weak smile was replaced with a happy one as she nodded. "I know *Faith* goes to regular school, but I think I *would* like to stay home with *you* for now." Pausing, her smile dropped as she built up the courage to ask her a question. "Aunt Heather? May I have a *special* dress just for school time? The kind girls wear in *private* schools? I know it's kind of *silly*, but I *like* the idea. I think it would help me stay focused on schoolwork more, even though I'll be at home."

Stunned, Heather's breath caught a moment before she smiled and took a tissue out of her purse to dry away the forming tears.

"Did I say something *wrong*?" Erica's eyes widened. "I don't *have* to get a school dress! *Honest!* I'm happy with *anything* you let me have!"

Her aunt shook her head in denial. "It's not *that*, sweetie. It's just that... that's the first time you've called this place '*home*'! It just makes me *happy* to know that you can feel like this place *is* your home!"

Listening quietly to her cousin and mother, Faith saw a lull in their conversation and asked curiously, "Mamma? Do I have to keep going to regular school too? May I be home-schooled like Erica?"

Her mother finished dabbing at her eyes. "Well, I suppose it would be alright. Since I'll be setting up schooling for *one* of you, *two* wouldn't be any harder. I *am* worried that you won't get enough social interaction not going to school, but for the time being, and since you're both in the same grade, you can go to school with Erica at home until *next* year. We'll set up a part of the library for you two to study in. How does that sound?"

Faith smiled and hopped up and down in her seat. "Oh, *thank* you, Mamma! May I have a school dress, too?"

The two looking at her expectantly, Heather gave in. "I suppose it would be alright. We'll talk to Miss Fuller when she comes back in, alright?"

As if on cue, Janet came out from the back. "Well, I got a few stylebooks and we can go through them and see what you like, Erica!"

"I'll also want to see about some school uniforms. I'll want to order several for both of the girls."

Janet smiled a toothy grin, seeing that this was going to be a lucrative day with her best customer. "Alright then! Does the school have specific requirements and colors? They *usually* do."

She shook her head and explained what their plans were to Janet while Erica and Faith looked through the stylebooks. Within thirty minutes Erica was once more in the fitting room to try on a few off-the-rack dresses that Miss Fuller had on hand in her size. She was used to seeing girls wearing jeans and shorts, but now that she had the opportunity, she found them unappealing and in fact made her uneasy, too close to boy's wear.

Three hours later, after a trip to the local department store for nightgowns, undergarments, shoes, boots, jackets, a few skirts, matching blouses, and some clip-on earrings that Erica seemed to like, Faith tapped her mother on the elbow as they were making their way back out to the car.

"Mamma? Halloween is this Sunday and Erica's going to need something to wear. We're still *going* to the Halloween party, aren't we?"

"Why yes, dear." Heather nodded. "Honestly with all that's been going on it *had* slipped my mind." Turning to Erica she asked, "Is there something in particular you'd like to *go* as, sweetie?"

Erica fidgeted as they walked, unsure of her answer. "Well... what are *you* two going as?" she asked tentatively.

"I'm going as a nurse this year!" Faith beamed. "Mamma's going as Glinda, the Good Witch. I *was* gonna be Dorothy, but I changed my mind."

Looking over at her aunt, Erica blushed. "If it would be OK, could I be your Dorothy, Aunt Heather?"

She smiled as Fredrick opened the car door. "I would *love* for you to be my Dorothy, sweetheart! Fredrick? We'll need to go back to Miss Fuller's before we head home."

The three talked in the back of Heather's limousine while Fredrick drove them back to where they'd started. Janet was surprised to see them again, but thrilled when she learned that the Dorothy costume she'd made for Faith wasn't going to go to waste.

"I'll have to make a few adjustments to fit Erica's measurements, but the rest you can take with you now. I'll have the dress ready by Saturday."

Heather nodded. "That will be *fine*, Janet! I'll have Fredrick come get it when it's ready."

Her eyes bulged as she remembered something. "Oh! I wanted to tell you! I was able to order *all* the school dresses you wanted for Erica and Faith from the outlet I buy from! They'll be delivered Monday morning! My son will be running a few errands for me up that way, so I can just have them brought to *you* as soon as they get here and I've cleaned them! Now, let me go get the accessories for that costume!"

It took a few minutes to re-fit Erica for Ruby Slippers, the ones purchased for Faith being slightly too small. Janet had substitutes in many sizes, but they were all tap shoes. "It's really the only *call* for red glittery girl's shoes!" she commented.

"I guess they'll have to do." Heather shrugged. "We don't have *time* to order anything and get it by Sunday. Go ahead and put them on my bill, Janet."

She grinned at yet another sale. "Alright then. I'll see you girls later! And Erica? You look *lovely*, dear!"

Wearing one of the off-the-rack outfits that they'd bought from her earlier, Erica looked down at the pretty white long-sleeved blouse with lace around the high neckline and the long black pleated skirt and black ankle boots. "Thank you, Miss Fuller." Erica blushed.

Between herself, her aunt, and Miss Fuller, they had settled on a femininely conservative look for most of Erica's wardrobe. Mid-calf A-line dresses and skirts with a simple style and older cut would make Erica look a little older than her true age of twelve. It was what she told her aunt was the reason she liked them. That it was her mother's preferred style, the *real* reason Erica had pushed for it over Faith's objections, she'd kept to herself.

After they'd left and were headed home, Erica looked over at her aunt. "Would you mind if I ask you a personal question, Aunt Heather?"

Looking at her niece, she furrowed her brow. "You may *ask*, but I may not *answer*. What *is* it, sweetie?"

Erica looked down at her skirt. "I really love my new clothes and everything else Aunt Heather, but... isn't all this a little bit *expensive*?"

"My parents were very wealthy, Erica." Heather blushed. "While I never intended to need it, when they passed on, I inherited quite a lot of money from them." She looked out the window as she continued. "After I graduated college, I worked as a therapist. I helped people with their problems, overcoming their fears, and with getting over severe trauma. I *enjoyed* my work and continued it for years after Faith was born. Your uncle Richard loved being a 'stay-at-home father' and retired from *his* job."

Her tone turning melancholy, Heather continued after a short pause. "When he left for active duty again, I *knew* I had to make Faith my highest priority

while he was away and took a sabbatical from work. That's a kind of long vacation." she explained on seeing Erica's confusion. "When he... when he didn't come home, I just never went back. I never needed or used any of the money I'd inherited, so it had grown to more than I would ever need, or even likely spend, in this lifetime."

Looking out the window, mirroring her aunt's posture, Erica's voice turned sorrowful. "I'm sorry if that made you feel sad, Aunt Heather."

She looked at her niece and smiled; her eyes damp with unshed tears. "It's *fine*, dear. I just miss your uncle Richard *terribly* at times. The point is, you need *never* worry or fret over what I decide to *buy* for you, sweetie. You let *me* worry about it!"

"Mamma is *very* generous." Faith added. "She gives a *whole lot* to people that *need* it. *Don't* you, Mamma?"

Her mother dried her eyes with a handkerchief. "It's not something to *brag* about, dear. If you give *charitably*, it should be *private* or *anonymous*. If people *know* how charitable you are, then the *accolades* become your reward. The *real* reward should be doing what you know to be *right*... helping people. *My* reward should be in the *next* life, not *this* one."

She flumped back in her seat. "I wasn't *bragging*, Mamma. It just makes me *proud* of you."

Heather explained to the two girls. "Yes dear, but I don't want you two to *share* that fact with *others*. I only tell *you* so *you'll* know how *you* should use *your* wealth when *you* grow up and it becomes *your* responsibility."

Faith conceded. "Yes, Mamma."

The remainder of their trip back was spent in near silence with only the hum of the engine and the road vibrations filling the void. Pulling up to the

house just after five, the sun was getting low in the sky and the temperature was dropping quickly.

"Alright you two." Heather ordered as they got out. "I want you to help bring Erica's things in, go upstairs, get clean for dinner, and be down by six. Understood?"

The two practically ran to the trunk of the car as soon as the door was opened, eager to take everything upstairs even if they had to carry them all themselves. Making their way up the stairway to their room, Fredrick behind them carrying the majority of their things, Faith turned to Erica.

"*I still* think the dresses you picked were too grown up, Erica. I'll look like a little *girl* compared to you... and we're the same *age!*"

Erica shrugged as they reached the upper landing. "I just think I need my *own* style. If I wore dresses just like *yours*, everyone would think I don't have my own clothes. Besides, I *like* the dresses I picked! Yours are *prettier*, but I think mine are more... well... more *me!*"

Opening the door to their room, Faith waited while Fredrick placed the packages and bags on the bed and left, closing the door behind him. The two then spent the next twenty minutes unpacking everything and another half an hour re-organizing Faith's wardrobes to fit it all. When at last they finished, the sun having already set, they ran to wash up and barely made it down in time for dinner.

Cook brought out their dinner of lasagna and steamed vegetables while the three chatted about the upcoming holiday.

Faith fidgeted with her feet under the table. "Mamma? I think I want to change my nurse outfit a little. Can I change it to be a therapist costume?"

"Therapists don't wear anything special, dear. Just normal clothes."

Her daughter looked disappointed. "Oh."

Erica looked at her cousin. "I think nurses are just as important as *doctors*, Faith. Without *nurses*, doctors couldn't do *their* job."

The reinforcement cheered Faith up quite a bit. "I think so, *too!*"

"So... there's a Halloween Party?" Erica moved on as she turned once more to her aunt. "Where *is* it, Aunt Heather? *Here?*"

"It's at a neighbor's house." Heather answered as she placed her napkin on her lap. "The Dempsey Ranch. They have seventeen acres near Lake Francis. They have a *lovely* ranch house and barn near the lake and enough grazing area to keep a dozen ponies. Every year they throw a Halloween party for invited guests. Your uncle Richard was *very* good friends with Mr. Dempsey, and his wife Emma and I grew quite close in that time."

After Cook made her way back into the kitchen, the three bowed their heads in prayer. This time however, Erica found herself really praying; her anger at God feeling distant, as though it were part of a dream. When she said, "Amen." she smiled genuinely and waited for her aunt to begin before starting herself.

Making her way through dinner, she tried to remember why she'd been angry with God in the first place. *I have a beautiful home, pretty clothes, and a family that loves me. Why was I mad at God?* She wracked her brain, trying to remember, but it just wouldn't come to her. Finally shrugging her shoulders, she finished her dinner just as Faith was about to clear her plate.

Heather was even more worried than before. While she watched Erica eat, she noticed that her niece was different. *She seems too happy... as though she's retreated so far into her fantasy that she doesn't even remember who she is or what her problems have been.* After they finished, Heather waited while her daughter and Erica were unseated, then made her usual way to

the loveseat. When the girls approached her, she motioned to the couch for them to sit. The firelight mingled with the gaslights to cast a somber mood over the room.

"What is it, Mamma?" Faith asked.

"Tomorrow is Friday." she began. "I'll be out of the house for some time, taking care of some things that need my attention." Looking at Erica, she watched her reactions. "I need to set up for you to begin home-schooling after the holiday, and I'll be gone until dinner time. In the interim..."

The lights came to life with a flicker, having never been switched off.

"Well, then!" Heather let out a relieved sigh. "Back from turn-of-the-century living!"

Faith jumped off the couch. "Hurray! The *power's* back!" she shouted gleefully.

While Fredrick began dowsing the gaslights, Heather resumed her discussion. "Please sit back down, dear. Thank you. Now as I was saying, in the interim I want you two to help Franchesca set up your study area in the library. Make sure you have plenty of workspace for books, papers, writing utensils, everything you would have at your desk at school."

"Faith? I'll be going to your school to collect your things and let your teachers and principal know not to expect you Monday. I want you *both* to be on your *best* behavior tomorrow. Do what Franchesca and Cook *tell* you to do and help out with *whatever* they need. Now that the power is back on, they'll be very busy trying to catch up on work they've not been able to do these last two days. Any questions?" she asked.

Erica raised her hand. "Aunt Heather? May I take some time to go on the internet tomorrow? I won't take *too* long. I *promise*."

Heather nodded and smiled. "Of course, sweetheart. Just ask Franchesca."

Smiling back, Erica said, "Thank you, Aunt Heather! I promise I'll be super helpful tomorrow!"

"Alright, give me a kiss and then off to your room. I'll be up in a while to tuck you in."

After the two girls kissed her, they practically ran upstairs, laughing and talking about the Halloween party. "You'll see, Erica! It's so much fun! They do dances, bobbing for apples, the apple sack race, pin the wart on the witch, and they tell *ghost* stories! They also have a pumpkin patch, a hayride, and you can feed apples to the ponies and even *ride* one!"

Erica smiled, but then had a thought as they reached their room. Her smile melting away, she asked hesitantly, "Faith? You said they do *dances*. That's just for the *grown-ups*, right?"

Shaking her head, Faith dropped onto her side of the bed. "No, it's for *everyone*!"

"Um... Faith? I... I don't know *how* to dance!"

Faith stood up again rapidly and looked at her with a stunned expression. "You're *kidding*! *Everyone* knows how to *dance*!"

Dropping onto her own side of their bed, Erica shook her head. "Not *me*. I never learned *how*. I was *going* to learn this summer because I knew there were school dances once I got into Middle School, but there weren't any in Elementary school, so I hadn't *learned* yet."

Half-forgotten memories of her mother Erica promising to teach her how to dance before she got sick flitted into and out of the child's mind. Unable to reconcile them with her life *as* Erica, she dismissed them quickly. One

thing struck her as odd though. In her memories, her mother was telling that to her *daughter*, not her *son*.

"Oh... OK. Well, *I* can teach you! It's not *that* hard!" Getting up off the bed, Faith went around and practically dragged her cousin out into the middle of their room. "So you put your left hand on my shoulder and put your right hand out like this." Faith demonstrated the position and then waited for Erica to mimic it. Switching to lead, she took Erica's right hand in her left and gently placed the other on Erica's hip. "OK, now look down at our feet. We'll do a simple box step to start."

After a few minutes, and several instances of colliding feet, Erica smiled as Faith danced her in a square while singing '*Daddy's Little Girl*', the song she'd learned to dance the box step to.

"This is fun!" Erica almost squealed.

Faith stopped. "OK, so that's the *easiest* step. Let's try the waltz, 'cuz they do that a lot at the party. Same basic idea, but you hold each other different and you turn as you go." Moving into the closed position, Faith slipped her arm fully around Erica's waist, making the younger girl blush at being so close. After a few false starts, Erica was following her cousin in circles around the room to Faith humming '*The Blue Danube*'.

Sitting on her side of the bed, Erica was winded from the experience. "Dancing is *hard work!* I feel like I've just run the quarter *mile!*"

Her cousin dropped on the bed next to her. "Yeah, but you get used to it. We better get our *baths* going though, before Mamma comes up and sees we aren't ready for *bed!*"

After separating and taking her nightgown across the hall, Erica relaxed in the tub of the guest bathroom. Just as she started to scrub, she was imagining being at the party and someone asking her to dance. Suddenly

her eyes shot open and she sat forward. Quietly, she whispered to herself, "Oh my *God!* It'll probably be a *boy* that wants to dance with me!" Her excitement at looking forward to dancing at the party vanished in a heartbeat. *I just can't dance with a boy!* she thought. *It would be... gross!*

Finishing her bath quickly, she dried and dressed, sullenly making her way back to her bedroom. Now terrified at the looming party, she considered asking her aunt if she could stay home and give out candy to trick-or-treaters, but realized that her aunt had already spent the money for her costume and it would be rude to back out now. Sitting at the vanity to brush out her hair, she tried to think of what she should do. Before she could formulate an idea, Faith came out and joined her.

"Are you *OK*, Erica?" Faith asked, seeing the worried look on her face.

Sighing, Erica turned around in the seat. "I thought of something in my bath. If I go to the party, *boys* will ask me to dance!"

Faith tilted her head in her usual way. "Of *course!* That's the whole *idea!*"

She resumed brushing her hair, this time rapidly in frustration at Faith's lack of understanding. "You don't *get* it Faith! I don't *want* to dance with a *boy!*"

About to say something, Faith closed her mouth and puzzled over the situation. "Oh. So you only like *girls* then? Like Aunts Jenny and Brooke?"

Blowing a breath out discouragingly, Erica looked off at nothing. "I *think* so? *Maybe?* I don't *know* though, ya *know?*"

Her cousin began combing through her own hair. "Hmmm. I think we should ask Mamma. *She'll* know what to do about it."

Standing and heading to the bathroom to brush her teeth, Erica sighed once more. "I *guess* you're right, but it's kind of *embarrassing.*"

A short time later, just as the two started climbing into bed, the expected knock came from their door. Heather opened it slowly and drifted into the room, smiling at her girls. "All ready for bed?" she asked.

Faith looked to her mother. "Mamma? Erica has a problem, but she's embarrassed to talk about it."

"*Faith!?*" Erica growled through gritted teeth as she shot her cousin a glare.

Holding up her hand to forestall an argument, her aunt interrupted. "Now Erica, I'm *glad* Faith told me... and *you* should be, too. I can't *help* you with things if I don't know anything's *wrong*, now *can* I?" She then asked delicately, "Would you prefer to talk to me about it in *private*?"

Erica shrugged. "No, I guess it's fine. Faith already *knows*. It's just... well... Ugh!" Overcome with embarrassment, she dropped back onto her pillow and covered her face with her blanket and sheet.

Having none of that, Heather walked around the bed and pulled the blanket down, exposing her young niece's face once more. "Now *Erica*, you have *nothing* to be embarrassed about! You can talk to me about *anything*, sweetie! You know I *love* you and only want to *help* you, however I *can*. So *tell* me... what's *bothering* you?"

Pinching her eyes closed tightly, she took a deep breath and gathered her courage, venting out her problem in one rapid sentence. "Faith told me that there would be *dancing* at the party and I told her that I didn't know *how* to dance so she *taught* me how and it was a whole *lot* of fun so I was starting to really look *forward* to it but then when I was *thinking* about it I realized that it would be *boys* asking me to dance but I don't *like* boys that way and so now I don't even *want* to go but I know you already bought my costume and everything so I know I *have* to go and now I just don't know *what* to do!"

Her aunt mulled over the issue, taking a moment to parse out the whole of Erica's longwinded explanation. "I see. Well then, that *is* a problem, *isn't* it?" Looking at her niece, she then asked point blank, "So... you *don't* like boys. Do you like *girls*?"

Erica wanted to crawl under the floor to hide. Instead, she grabbed her pillow, turned on her stomach, pulled the pillow down tightly over the back of her head, and nodded vigorously enough that Heather could see her nodding, even through the pillow.

Smiling knowingly, Heather looked at her buried niece. "Oh! I see! Well *that's* nothing to be embarrassed about, sweetie! Come here." she ordered.

Slowly, Erica crawled out from under her pillow and turned to face her aunt. As Heather pulled her into a loving hug, she rocked her niece gently in her arms and stroked her hair. Seeing an opportunity to help the child through some of her trauma, she formulated an idea.

"You remember Aunt Brooke? Well, she was your father Jack and my husband Richard's *best* friend! Now, you know *she* doesn't like boys, right?" Feeling Erica nod, she continued. "Well, did you know she went to dances with them and would dance with them *both*? She *especially* liked dancing with your daddy, Jack. She danced with him after your daddy and mommy's wedding."

Unbelieving, Erica leaned back and regarded her aunt. "She *did*?"

"Yes!" her aunt smiled. "Just because you *dance* with someone, doesn't mean you have to *like* them a lot. *Lots* of people go dancing and end up dancing with total *strangers*, and they *still* have a good time!" Heather could almost see the girl's thoughts rolling around her head, the child not even aware that she had managed to sneak in the fact that Jack was her father, Erica was her mother, and the consequence of both; that she wasn't Erica Hargrave.

Something about what her aunt was telling her refused to compute. She understood the words, but the idea refused to gel. Shaking her head to clear out the confusion, she changed back to the original subject. "So... even if a boy asks me to dance, it's still *OK*, even if I don't *like* boys?"

Heather nodded. "Yes, sweetie. Dancing isn't an invitation to *date*, it's a harmless *social* activity. You're still *very* young. I'll keep an eye on you. Does that *help*?" She hoped that the thought of dancing with a boy and bringing up dating would start to force the child's natural masculinity to finally reject the notion of being a girl, thus starting to break down the fantasy of being her own mother.

Her niece started to shake her head, like she'd just eaten something she found revolting. "Alright, Aunt Heather. I guess, if you *say so*."

"*See?*" Faith beamed. "*I told* you Mamma would help!"

Her mother released Erica and stood. "Alright, prayers and bed, ladies." Seeing both of them close their eyes and pray silently, she watched her niece most closely. Seeing that she still had a worried look on her face, she felt she could almost guess what the young girl was praying for. *God, please don't let any boys ask to dance with me!* She smiled knowingly as she waited from them to finish.

Seeing them both open their eyes and say "Amen.", Heather waited while they lay down and covered up. Kissing her niece on the forehead, then going around the bed to kiss her daughter the same way, she finally moved to the doorway and clicked off the lights.

"Goodnight, girls. Sweet dreams." she said softly.

"Goodnight, Mamma." Faith said through a yawn.

"Goodnight, Aunt Heather." grumbled Erica.

As the door closed, Erica closed her eyes and started to imagine what she would do at the party if a boy *did* ask her to dance. Her first thoughts were to punch his lights out, but she made herself imagine dancing with him. All it did was leave a sick feeling in her stomach as though she'd just devoured a rancid lemon. No matter how she tried to see it, she just couldn't see herself enjoying a dance with a boy the way she had with Faith.

After a moment, her thoughts drifted and the boy was replaced with April. A smile crept across her lips as she imagined April dancing the whole night with her... sweeping her across the floor over and over with Erica following her lead.

Chapter 12 - Halloween

Sitting at the vanity in her room, Erica watched the mirror while her aunt finished braiding her hair into two pigtails that came down the side of her head. The costume had been dropped off the day before and fit perfectly. With the shoes, dress, red braided pigtails, and a picnic basket with a small stuffed Cairn Terrier sticking up out of one side, she was the perfect image of Dorothy Gale. Watching her aunt tying off the blue ribbons at the end of her pigtails, she smiled at the reflection, still happy to see her young mother reflected back at her, even through her costume.

"There!" Heather exclaimed. "All perfect! Now don't pull on the ribbons or they'll come undone and your braids will come out, alright dear? I need to go change into my costume, so I'll be downstairs in a while."

"Yes, Aunt Heather!" Erica chirped. Picking up her basket, she practically skipped out into the hallway. As soon as she reached the marble hallway, she heard her footsteps louder than ever as each step was accompanied with a sharp double 'Click!' from her sparkly red shoes. The sound made her almost giddy, it made her feel so girly and feminine.

Walking toward the stairs, she met Franchesca coming the other way.

"Don't scrape your feet on the floor in those things, girl!" she barked. "If you scrape up the floor, it'll take me a *week* to buff it out!"

Lightening her step, she nodded her head at the maid. "Yes, Miss Franchesca." Erica watched as the grumbling woman sped her way past her to her aunt's bedroom, no doubt to assist with dressing her. Making her way down the stairs, she had to step carefully as she noticed that the shoes lacked any sort of tread and were a little slippery on the marble flooring.

Faith was adjusting her nurse's cap for the tenth time in the entryway mirror when she saw her cousin stepping carefully down the stairs. "Oh,

Erica!" she cried. "You look *beautiful*! I'm so glad you're Mamma's Dorothy! You look *way* better in it than *I* did!"

Blushing as she reached the bottom step, Erica looked down. "Thanks Faith! I really do *love* the dress! And the *shoes*! They're just *perfect*!"

Looking at the basket, Faith giggled. "Miss Fuller did a *great* job with your Toto! It really looks like the dog from the movie!"

"Yeah, I think it really sells the whole costume!" Twirling around, Erica watched the skirt of her dress flare out before falling back to her legs. Looking at her cousin she remarked, "Your costume looks really neat! But should you have a stethoscope? I thought only *doctors* used those?"

"No, nurses use them, too." Faith answered with a shake of her head. "They use them *before* the doctor to take a patient's heart beat and blood pressure."

"I guess so." Erica shrugged. "Is that a *real* one or just a toy?"

"It's a *real* one! Mamma took it out of the first aid kit!" Faith put the ends in her ears and stepped up to her cousin. "OK, let me hear your heartbeat, Dorothy!" Placing the stethoscope on her cousin's upper left chest, she giggled. "I can *hear* it! Your heart beat's *fast*, Erica... I mean... *Dorothy*!"

Looking down shyly, she skipped her foot across the marble floor and marveled at the sound it made. "I guess I'm a little *nervous*. I'll be meeting *lots* of new people tonight."

The sun getting low in the sky, the two girls bantered back and forth for half an hour before they heard someone coming. Erica's eyes widened and her jaw dropped as she saw her aunt descending like Glinda in her bubble, as smooth as the silk in the woman's dress, which was an exact copy of the one worn by the Good Witch of the North in the classic movie.

"Wow!" Erica breathed out slowly. "Aunt Heather, you look *beautiful*!"

Heather blushed at the compliment as she reached the bottom of the stairs. "Thank you, Dorothy Gale!" she joked, waving her wand over her niece. "You are most *definitely*, a *good* witch!"

The comment made Faith giggle. "You *do* look *very* pretty, Mamma!"

"Thank you, dear." she hummed.

A moment later, Fredrick appeared from the kitchen, dressed in a fine chauffeur's jacket and cap. "Are you ready to depart, Madame? Miss Faith? Miss Dorothy?"

The girl in pigtails giggled and curtsied lightly. "Thank you, Fredrick! Is it time to follow the yellow brick road?"

He allowed himself a slight smile. "Indeed, Miss. However I believe that we shall *not* be going to Oz this evening. *May I?*" he asked, extending his hand to the young girl.

Taking the offered hand and blushing, she let him escort her out the door and to the waiting limousine, followed by her aunt and cousin. Just as Cook was about to close the door, Franchesca yelled from the staircase.

"Don't you three *dare* move a muscle!" she bellowed, racing down the stairs. "I *swear*, you people don't know *nothin'* about *anythin'*! Just wait there!" she ordered as she readied her camera. "Alright, now you girls stand in front of Mrs. Hargrave. *Fredrick!* You get yourself out of the picture! This is for *them*, not *you*!" she barked.

Moving to the side, he stood patiently while Franchesca snapped pictures in rapid succession. Then, having Faith move to the side, took several of Erica and her aunt by themselves. Once she seemed satisfied, Erica spoke up.

"Miss Franchesca? Could you take a picture with me and Fredrick?"

His eyebrows shot up in his faint note of surprise. "Me, Miss Erica?"

She proudly stepped over toward him. "Yes *you*, Fredrick! And it's Miss *Dorothy*, if you please! After all, you *are* our carriage driver for the evening, even if it *isn't* pulled by the Horse of a Different Color!" she smiled as she gestured toward the car.

A lump formed in Fredrick's throat. "I'd be *honored*, Miss Dorothy." he intoned formally as he stood ramrod straight.

With Erica standing in front of the huge man, he placed his hands protectively on her shoulders while Franchesca took a few pictures. Once done, the girl took Fredrick by the hand and pulled him toward the maid. "Now Fredrick, would you take one of me and Franchesca?"

Franchesca balked. "What, *me*? Looking like *this*? Are you out of your cotton picking *mind*, missy?"

Looking up at the maid with pleading eyes, Erica melted the maid's heart with one word. "*Please?*"

"Oh, *alright!*" she gave in. "But be *quick* about it, Fredrick! They don't have all *night* and it's getting *cold* out!"

Taking the camera while Erica turned and stood in front of the woman, Fredrick took a few pictures of Erica standing in front of a very stern looking Franchesca with the house in the background. When they finished, Erica turned to her and said, "Thank you, *Aunt Em!*"

Franchesca blinked rapidly in surprise; her mouth hanging open. "Aunt *Em*!? Why..." Her fury was lost in the sweetness of the sentiment. Huffing as she tried to be mad, eventually she just stormed back to the house,

refusing to take the camera from Fredrick. "Keep it! You *might* think about taking some *pictures* with it tonight, if you can be bothered to *remember!*"

Theresa waited by the front door, smiling as Franchesca stomped her way up the steps. "Why, *Francine!* Are you tearing up?"

The middle-aged woman shook her head. "Of *course* not! It's just *cold* out! And don't *call* me that! My name's *Franchesca*, if you please!"

The two watched as Erica, Faith, and Heather climbed into the car, followed by Fredrick getting in the front seat. Cook waved at the three of them as they drove off. "I hope they have a good time." she wished.

While the trio rode to the party, Erica began to fidget with her braids.

"Careful sweetie, you don't want to pull them out." her aunt warned again.

Dropping her hands into her lap, she let out a deep breath, hoping it would take the nervousness out of her with it. "Yes, Aunt Heather. I guess I'm still a little nervous."

Her aunt smiled at her. "I'm sure you'll have a *lovely* time." Noticing her distracted daughter she asked, "Faith? Are you alright?"

Snapping her head around away from the window, Faith looked at her. "Huh?" she asked distractedly. "Oh, I'm *fine*, Mamma. Just thinking."

"About *what*, dear?"

Faith adjusted her nurse's cap once again. "Just wondering if anyone will think it's weird that you two are dressed for *The Wizard of Oz* and I'm just a plain old nurse." She adjusted the dark half-cape she wore that was now bunched up behind her back.

Her mother looked at her lovingly. "You look *lovely*, dear. Stop worrying! Your costume is *perfect* for you."

"Yes, Mamma." she replied uncertainly, turning to the window once more.

Erica tried to cheer her up. "Faith? I think you look prettier than I do. I almost wish we could *trade*!"

"Oh *no*, Erica!" she exclaimed as she turned back to face her cousin. "You look *much* better as Dorothy than I did! You don't even need a *wig*!"

Tugging at her braids, Erica sighed. "I wish my hair was a little longer, though. I guess I just need to be patient."

"You can be *my* patient!" Faith giggled.

The two others in the car groaned at the pun as they sped toward the party.

The car pulled off the highway, lurching down the dirt road toward the Dempsey's house. Erica could see lights around the outside of the barn, glowing in a thousand brilliant orange twinkling points. The huge doors were closed, but she could see light spilling out from every window, making the building shine on the scattered spots of snow surrounding it.

The sun had only gone down a few minutes before and several children were still roaming around the corral with the ponies. A small wagon could be seen pulling to a stop next to the barn, several teenagers clambering down from the back that was loaded with hay for them to sit on, while more waited beside it for their turn... each holding hands with another. A shriek penetrated the exterior of the car as they pulled to a stop, the shrill happy cry of one of the children running through the frosty pumpkin patch.

Once Fredrick opened the car door, Heather emerged first, followed by Faith. Erica suddenly found herself terrified to leave the security of the

limousine and only started to exit after her aunt told her to come along. The cold air assaulted her nose, along with the scent of horses, hay, and wood smoke coming from the chimney of the main house. She could almost taste the pumpkin pie that lingered on the air as they approached the barn. She was vaguely aware of her aunt exchanging greetings with several people as they made their way, feeling the crunch of frozen dirt underneath her shoes.

She was also aware that their approach was garnering a lot of attention from those outside. She watched blankly as several groups of people turned to each other, obviously talking about the trio as they would huddle together and talk amongst themselves with occasional glances their way. Blushing and looking away, she moved closer to her aunt and took her free hand. She heard Faith greet several other children, making comments on their costumes and thanking them for their compliments on hers.

Following her aunt into the barn, Erica's eyes had to adjust to the bright atmosphere. Lights decorated every part of the building, lighting every corner and crevice in a cheery way. A long table covered in food sat along the wall to her right while a dance floor and speakers took up the area to her left, pumping out the lively recorded tune of an Irish fiddle. Ahead were tables and chairs, most empty, where guests could sit and enjoy the hospitality, while simple log benches lined the far wall.

Heather smiled brightly as one of their hosts approached. "Michael! It's so good of you to invite us again!"

Michael Dempsey approached the three, eating up the distance in a few broad steps. "*Heather!* Sure'n it's glad Ah am ye' could come!" Having emigrated from Ireland only twelve years earlier, his brogue was still thick, Erica straining to understand him. "So what's *this*, now? Two *iníon*? Ah could o' sworn ye' had only *one* las' time Ah checked!"

Laughing, Heather explained their third guest. "Michael, I'd like you to meet my niece, Erica. She's come to live with us." Pulling the girl out in

front of herself, she watched as Mr. Dempsey lowered himself down to Erica's eye level.

"Erica, eh? Sure'n yer name won't be *Katherine* or *Sinead*? What part o' *Eire* do ye' come from? With hair like that, she's *dote* and *must* be Gaelic! You wouldn't be chancin' me arm, now would ye'?"

Furrowing her brow, Erica stammered, "I... um... *huh*?"

Michael laughed merrily and slapped his knee. "*S'alright*, darlin'. Me name's Michael and Ah'll be happy ta' know ye', Erica." He extended his hand to the girl and shook it gently as she took his. Straightening up with a groan, he looked around at the guests. "Well, me *Mot* air back in th' Gaff fixin' up more ta' eat. That gal be up ta' ninety every year fir this!"

Having gotten used to his brogue, Heather understood and looked back toward the main house where his wife was preparing more food for their guests. "Will Emma be joining us later?" she asked, having to shout a little over the music that seemed to be getting louder by the minute.

"Ah should think so." Michael grinned before he looked at Faith. "*Faith*, me darlin'! Now don't ye' look *deadly*! You gun take care o' me in me old age, *cailín óg*? Sure I could use nursin' from a *dote* like you!" Lowering his voice so only she could hear him, he added, "Jus' dun be tellin' me *Mot*! She's *fiery* jealous o' pretty *girseach* makin' time wi' her *fella*!"

"Sure, Mr. Dempsey!" Faith blushed. "Do you *really* like my costume?"

The man patted her on the shoulder, not able to pat her head due to her cap. "Aye, *girseach*! *Savage* ta' be sure!" Looking back up at Heather, he nodded as his smile faded. "Well, if'n you be excusin' me, I need th' Jacks!"

As he made his way out of the barn, Erica turned to her aunt. "Aunt Heather? Did you understand *anything* he just said?"

"Yes, sweetie." she answered. "But I've known Michael for *many* years. His wife Emma and I are *very* good friends, so I've managed to learn a little Irish Gaelic over time. He asked you what part of Ireland you come from, said you were cute, and that your red hair means you must be *from* Ireland. Then he asked if you were trying to fool him."

Erica gulped. "*Fool* him?"

"Into thinking you weren't Irish, sweetie." she explained. "As for the *rest*... well... let's just say he's been enjoying the party a bit much!"

Leading the two girls to an empty bench alongside the far side of the barn, they were stopped and greeted several more times by other guests who all seemed enchanted by the shy new addition to Heather's family. Erica didn't say much, other than the occasional "Thank you." accompanied by blushing at their compliments in regards to her costume.

Sitting down on the log bench, its surface sanded and polished until it shone, less than a minute went by before Heather was approached once more. Erica saw the man walking up wearing a black tuxedo, complete with a cane, top hat, and a small black domino mask. He was tall and thin with dark wavy hair that was matched with a small but neat mustache.

"Heather?" he greeted her. "Would you care to join me?" indicating the dance floor.

She smiled politely and nodded, letting him help her back to her feet.
"John? First I would like you to meet my niece, Erica. Erica? This is John William. He's an acquaintance of mine."

Erica only nodded to him shyly.

John bowed to her with perfection. "Charmed, I'm sure. Shall we, Heather?"

While he escorted her to the dance floor, Faith leaned in and whispered to Erica. "He's always wanting to take Mamma out on dates, but she won't go with him. She says he's too *slick*."

Looking over at the two of them dancing, Erica glowered. "So why is she *dancing* with him then?" she asked.

"Mamma says dancing is just for fun and he *is* a good dancer." Faith shrugged. "Besides, it's considered *rude* to refuse a request to dance." Just then, a preteen boy dressed as a vampire walked up in front of the girls.

"Hi, Greg." Faith greeted him nonchalantly before turning her attention back to Erica.

"H-Hi!" he nervously stammered out. "*Faith*? You wouldn't care to *dance*, would you?"

She turned back and smiled genuinely at him. "I'd be *happy* to, Greg!" she replied, extending her hand for him to help her up. Making her way to the dance floor, she looked back at her cousin and smiled.

Now sitting alone and watching her cousin and aunt dance, Erica's thoughts drifted to two days earlier when her cousin first taught her how to dance. She smiled at the memory of her dream about dancing with April, but it melted when she remembered the following day.

Erica almost ran up the stairs after eating breakfast and saying goodbye to her aunt. She knew Franchesca would want a lot of help, and she was determined to be as helpful as possible. Approaching her aunt's open bedroom door, she saw the maid inside making the bed.

"Good morning, Miss Franchesca." she greeted her cheerily. "Would you like help with anything?"

Franchesca looked at the girl standing in the doorway. Her brow furrowed in suspicion. "Just what are you up to, young lady?" she interrogated. "The only time anyone offers to help me around here is when they want something. So what is it?"

Clasping her hands in front of her skirt, Erica looked down at her feet. "Well, I was hoping, if you wouldn't mind later, after I help you, if you would let me use your computer to go online and check email and things?"

The maid nodded. "Ah ha! So that's it! I knew there had to be something!" She was finishing straightening the bed covers when she looked over at the hopeful girl waiting expectantly. "Well, don't just stand there, girl! Go into the bath, gather up the laundry, take it downstairs, and add it to the laundry pile! Sort it into light colors, darks, delicates, and bleachable whites. Got it? Oh, and make sure you set aside any hand wash items separate from the others."

Erica smiled and lightly bobbed. "Yes, Miss Francesca!" Rushing into the bathroom, she did as instructed and was soon on her way down the stairs with her arms loaded with her aunt's laundry. Faith was sitting in the living room reading when she saw her cousin.

"Erica?" she inquired. "What are you doing?"

She paused and looked around the laundry bundle in her arms at her cousin. "Helping Francesca. What does it look like I'm doing? Painting?"

Faith tilted her head. "But why?"

Pausing again after only taking one more step down the stairs, Erica sighed. "Because she needs help!"

Shaking her head slightly in confusion, Faith pointed out, "But you're doing her job."

Sighing frustratedly after one more step down, Erica turned to her again. "That's the point Faith! I'm helping her now so she can help me later."

"Help you with what?" Faith asked, still confused.

She didn't answer for a moment so she could get more than one step down per question, otherwise at the rate she was going it would be noon before she even reached the bottom step. Once at the bottom, Erica turned her body to the side to look at Faith around the clothes piled in her arms.

"With getting online. I want to check email and stuff and Franchesca is the only one with a computer."

"Freddie has one, too." Faith advised.

Her cousin started toward the laundry room. "But Fredrick isn't here," she retorted, shaking her head as Faith finally shrugged and went back to her book. Carrying the bundle through the kitchen and into the laundry room, Erica began sorting it as instructed. Within half an hour she had all the loads sorted and felt very accomplished when Franchesca came in.

The maid inspected the piles and nodded in satisfaction. "That'll do. Now get into that library and start clearing out the desk in the northeast corner."

Erica started to leave, then stopped and turned back to the maid. "Which way is northeast?" she asked innocently.

Rolling her eyes, she pointed in the four cardinal directions. "South! West! North! East! Northeast is the corner that's around the corner and to the right when you go in the library door! Don't you know anything?"

Theresa barged in following her harsh instructions. "Now Francine, don't bark at the girl! She's only trying to be helpful! How in blue blazes should she know which way is north here? She's only lived here three days!"

"She knows which way the sun comes up doesn't she?" Franchesca barked at Cook. "She should since it comes in her bedroom window every morning! That's East the world around... and don't call me Francine!"

The cook waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, quiet! Go on, Erica. Tend to your task and I'll see to it Faith and Franchesca are in to help you shortly."

The maid put her hands on her hips defiantly as Erica left the laundry room and ran out the kitchen door to the dining room. "Oh? And who put you in charge of the household? You can just be in charge of that kitchen! Leave the rest of the house to me!"

Lifting her nose in the air, Theresa looked down her nose at the harsh maid. "In that case girlie, you can cook your own meals and find a way to do it that doesn't come into that kitchen!" Turning, she sashayed out of the laundry room haughtily.

Fuming as she pursued Cook, Franchesca wagged a finger at her. "Now listen here, you! Just because..." She was interrupted as she stepped through the open archway into the kitchen.

"Stop!" Theresa shouted. "Not one step further until you've helped that girl fix up the library! Don't think I was kidding when I said you could scrounge up your own food until you do! Now, out!" she yelled, wielded her wooden stirring spoon like a battle-axe, and chased the maid back into the laundry. "Out, out, out!"

"Well!" breathed Francesca in frustration. "Of all the... you can't... Ooooo!" She stomped her foot in frustration and charged back into the laundry to quickly start the first load.

Turning to the right as she entered the library, Erica found the desk and saw it was covered in books, papers, pens, boxes, and assorted office supplies. Sighing, she dived into the mess. Before anyone had made it into

the room to assist, she'd emptied the entire desktop and returned every book to its proper place on the shelves. The boxes of office supplies sorted, she found places for them in the desk drawers and cleared the loose papers into a single pile. Erica had just sat down when Franchesca came in with Faith in tow.

"What are you doing missy! Loafing on the job?"

"Oh no, Miss Franchesca!" Erica stood quickly. "I just finished the desk! All that's left is this pile of papers I collected off of it. A grownup will have to decide what gets done with those."

She looked at the desk and started going through the drawers while Faith looked at her cousin in amazement.

"You did all that by yourself?" the older girl asked.

"Uh-huh!" Erica nodded. "I'm really good at organizing!" she joked, making reference to Faith's comments two days earlier.

The maid finished by wiping her finger across the desk. "Well, it's still dirty, but I'll take care of that. You two, clear out! I still have a lot of work to catch up on!"

Standing and waiting as Faith left the library, Erica looked at the woman. "Miss Franchesca?" she asked hopefully.

Looking up, she scowled. "What are you still doing here?" Realizing after a moment that the girl was waiting for an answer to her earlier request, she nodded knowingly. "Oh. Well, I'll come get you when I have time, girl."

She twisted back and forth in place slightly, twirling the hem of her skirt. "Is there anything else I can help you with, then?"

Losing patience, she leaned on the desk. "Yes! You can help me by skedaddling! Shoo!" She waved her hands at Erica dismissively.

Several hours passed while Erica sat and read 'Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm'. She was deep into the story when she heard from the top of the stairs, "Well? I thought you wanted to use my computer?" asked Franchesca. "Change your mind?"

Erica closed the book and stood quickly. "No, Miss Franchesca! Coming!" She walked quickly up the stairs and joined the maid as she walked past her and Faith's room.

"Now I want to make this clear. You can use my computer for twenty minutes! Got that? No more! I get a twenty minute break and I won't have you in my room when I'm not there!" As Franchesca spoke, the two made their way to the end of the hall near her aunt's bedroom door and turned left down a smaller hallway with four doors, two on each side. Franchesca opened the first one on the right and Erica followed her in.

The room was decently sized, about the size of most bedrooms Erica had lived in, but much smaller than her and Faith's shared room. The double bed took up most of the room, with cedar nightstands on either side of it. The room was immaculate with not a speck of dust anywhere and no clutter. The wall opposite the bed had a matching dresser, wardrobe, and a desk instead of a vanity. The only piece that looked out of place was the chair for the desk, which was more like an office chair than fine furniture.

"Alright!" Franchesca barked. "You can sit there and do what you need to do. I'll be watching from my bed while I relax... so no funny business! I don't want to see anything inappropriate on that screen, you hear?"

Erica nodded and smiled. "Yes, Miss Franchesca! I promise!" Quickly sitting and grabbing the mouse, she opened up a browser and entered in her email homepage. While April's parents could stop her from calling,

texting, and emailing using her cell phone, they couldn't stop April from using her school email account. Checking her messages, she was worried that she hadn't gotten anything from April. Hoping that she would have found a way to reach out to her, she started drafting an email to go to April's school address.

"Dear April,

I am OK. I arrived in New Hampshire Tuesday afternoon and there was a long cab ride to my aunt's house, so I didn't get in until it was getting dark. Right after I got here, the power went out and stayed out until last night. There's no cell service here, so Internet and an old phone are the only ways I have to reach you. (and Internet doesn't work if the power's out) I tried calling you on Wednesday, but your parents wouldn't let me talk to you. They said you were sad and told me never to call you again because it would just make you sadder. They changed your cell number and email, but I know you can still get email from me at school. I miss you very much!

Things are OK here. I got to see snow yesterday! Real snow! My cousin Faith and I made snow angels and built a snowman! My aunt is nice and so are Fredrick, (he's the butler and chauffeur) Cook, (who does all the cooking) and Franchesca, too. (she does the cleaning and works really hard... she's strict, but I know she's nice)

I don't know how often I can write. I want to tell you SO much! Things are REALLY different here. We're going to a Halloween party on Sunday and everyone wears a costume. Even grown-ups! I'm going to be Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz! The house is really old and even when the power went out we still had lights because the house uses a light called a gaslight that works without electricity. They're all built into the walls like normal lights, but they get turned on and off like a camping lantern! It's kind of cool!

I hope you aren't sad when you get my message. I don't want you to be sad, but I know how you feel. I was so sad when I had to go and still hurt inside

a lot from missing you. You're the best friend I ever had and always will be!

I don't have a lot of time. Francesca was nice enough to let me use her computer on her break, but I don't want to take too much of her time. So I'll try to write you again soon.

*Love,
Erica"*

She smiled as she sent the email and glanced at the time. Erica saw she still had several minutes left, so she brought up Facebook and looked at her contact list, but April wasn't on it and there was a notification that she'd unfriended her. Crestfallen that April's parents had gotten to this too, she noticed a few odd things. Perplexed, she looked at the pictures of her old life on her homepage and felt a twinge of discomfort when she saw the death notice written by Eric and all the condolences for her loss from her grown up friends. Shaking her head dismissively, she took comfort in knowing that her email would get to April through the school.

Just as she was closing Facebook, she saw a notice in her email inbox. Excited, she switched to it and read the subject line. Her smile vanished when she saw it was a notice telling her that her email couldn't be delivered.

Francesca had been watching the entire time, holding back tears at the girl's inability to reach out to her friend and take small comfort in that last connection to her life as it had been. Shaking herself, she got up off her bed and decided she would help in the only way she knew how, by eliminating the reminder of her sadness.

"Alright, missy! That's enough." she growled. "Close it down and get on with your own things. My break's almost over and I have a schedule to keep!"

Dejected, Erica stood up and started shuffling toward the door. "Yes, Miss Franchesca." she mumbled.

Exiting the room, Franchesca stopped the young girl and turned her around to face her. "Erica, I want you to know, I... well..." Unable to formulate the right words, she wrapped her arms around Erica and held her tightly while the child silently cried on the woman's shoulder. She soothed away her sadness with comforting pets on the girl's head. "It's alright, dear. I know. It's all confusing and it hurts, but it'll all be alright."

After a short time, Erica stopped crying and nodded at the older woman. "Th-thank you, Miss F-Franchesca. I... I'll be alright."

Chapter 13 - Friends and Enemies

Lost in the sorrow of her memories, Erica didn't even notice the boy who stood in front of her.

"*Helloo?*" he said for the third time, waving his hand in front of her sad and distant eyes.

Snapping out of her reverie, Erica finally looked up at the young man in front of her. He was heavyset, but not obese, and his short flame-red hair topped his round face, fitting with the outlandish hat he wore. His costume was The Mad Hatter from the live action film that had just been released earlier that year; a mad assortment of colors and patterns of cloth. "Um... hi." she responded shyly.

"Ah'm Mike *Junior*." he said, holding out his hand after wiping some cake crumbs off of it. "*Mamaí* and *Daid* air th' ones giving this party. Ah don't thin' Ah've seen ye' here a'fore. Are ye' *new*?"

His accent was an odd mixture of Irish brogue she'd heard from the boy's father earlier and the typical northeastern accent she'd started getting used to from the people she'd met since arriving. Taking his hand and giving it a soft shake, she replied, "My... my name's Erica... *Hargrave*." She pointed at her aunt, still dancing with John William. "*That's* my aunt Heather."

Mike sat next to her. "So ye' must be'n Faith's *cousin*, then. Ah heard *Daid* talkin' ta' *Mamaí* about ye'. *He* says ye' must be from *Eire*."

She shook her head, her short braids and ribbons tickling her shoulders. "Do you mean *Ireland*? No, I'm from Southern *California*."

His eyes widened. "Ya' mean like *Hollywood*? Did ye' ever see any famous TV or *movie* stars?"

Shaking her head once more, Erica giggled. "No! I'm from Newport Beach... that's *fifty miles* from Hollywood!"

The boy's face dropped. "Oh. S-sorry. Ah din' mean ta'..." His voice trailed off and he hung his head embarrassedly. "Ach! I kin be such a awful *eejit!* Ye' must be thinkin' Ah'm some kind o' *thick!*"

"Not at *all!*" Erica comforted him. "It's just a *question!*"

Anxiously, he looked over at the girl. "Say, would ye care ta' *dance?* Ah'm nay very *good*, but Ah won't be steppin' on yer *feet!*"

Stiffening, Erica remembered what Faith had told her about refusing a dance. Not wanting to hurt his feelings, she took a breath and nodded. "Alright, but I'm not very good, *either.* I just know the box step and waltz."

He stood and held out his hand to her. "Well then, we're *matched!*"

Taking his hand, Erica let him escort her to the dance floor. She assumed the position Faith had taught her, only to see Mike start to assume the lead position backwards.

"Ach! S'cuse me!" he mumbled as he reversed positions.

She smiled at his nervousness, comforted that he was as uncomfortable as she was, and waited for him to start. She watched him listening for the beat and counting to himself. At the start of the next measure, he began with a simple box step that fit the three-four beat of the song. Moving in a slow square, she could see he was focused on nothing but counting, his eyes looking down to the left and his lips counting silently. Trying to make him more comfortable, she tried distracting him.

"Hey, Mike! I bet we look *weird!* Dorothy dancing with the *Mad Hatter?*" she joked. "I bet some people might think I'm *Alice!*"

His concentration broken, he looked at his partner for the first time since they'd begun. "Huh? Ach! Ah suppose so!" Looking around at the other dancers, he nodded toward her cousin. "Get a load o' *them*, though... a vampire an' a *nurse*! Wot? She th' one what gets his *meals* fir 'im?"

Erica laughed and nodded toward another pair. "Look at them! A cowgirl and a zombie! Too *weird*!"

The two spent a minute pointing out odd pairings before Erica turned to look at him directly. "Hey, Mike? Did you notice something *else*?"

"Wot?" he looked back.

"You stopped *counting*, but we never stopped *dancing*!" she grinned.

Blushing, Mike looked down. "Aye, Ah *told ya'* Ah wasn't very good!"

"But you never stepped on my *feet*!" she giggled.

Eventually the music ended and most of the dancers made their way off the floor. The two were headed back to their bench talking about the Dempsey's ponies when they ran into a group of three older boys blocking their way.

"Well, if it isn't the little *Mick-ey*!" the tallest of them said in a snide tone. Turning to Erica he flashed a charming grin at her. "Is this *oaf* bothering you, Miss?"

Looking him over, Erica could tell he was handsome, athletic, and thought it made him irresistible. Furrowing her brow, she took Mike's hand, making her dance partner's eyes bug out. "No, he's *not*! Who are *you* to ask?"

The boy straightened up and looked at his buddies incredulously. "Who am *I*? I guess you *must* be new! I'm *Chet*... Chet *Mansfield*!" he stated as though that should mean something to the girl. His face turning cruel, he

then glared down at Mike and lowered his tone. "And *you* were just leaving! Right, pipsqueak?"

Her grip on Mike's hand tightened and she put her other hand on his shoulder, just as she started to feel Mike start to move away. "If *he* is, then we *both* are, *dork!* Come on, *Mike!*" Erica pulled on his arm and almost dragged him toward the bench they'd been sitting at as the three boys stood stunned. Her blood boiling mad, she could feel the adrenaline pumping and the overwhelming desire to knock Chet's block off.

"*Erica!*" Mike hollered. "Ah thin' yer pullin' mah *arm* oot th' socket!"

She stopped and looked back at the three boys who started talking and then looking over their shoulders at the two. "Sorry, *Mike.*" Erica said as she tried to calm herself. "I just can't *stand* smart aleck guys that think they're God's *gift!* *Oooo!* It burns me *up!* I wish *April* were here! *She'd* tear those wise guys up one side and down the *other!*"

Confused but curious, Mike asked, "*April?*"

She sighed as she turned her back to the boys and interposed herself between them and Mike. "She's my best friend back in Newport Beach. I *really* miss her and wish she was here right *now!* I'm not *usually* that brave! In fact, I've never stood up to a bully in my *life!*"

"Well, Ah thin' yer *awesome!*" Mike smiled at her. "No one tells off *Chet* like that! All th' *girseach* think he's *dotey!*"

She tilted her head the way she'd adopted from Faith as she resumed slowly leading him back to their bench where Faith and her aunt were sitting once again. "What's a *girseach*? And what's *dotey*?"

He trailed along, glad that she was no longer pulling on his arm, but very aware that she still held his hand. "Wot? Ach! *Girseach* is a girl and *dotey*

means cute." Mike swallowed hard and gathered his nerve. "L-like you! A *dote* girseach ta' be *sure*!"

Erica paused a moment as she slowly realized that she had managed to get this poor boy all wound up over her. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "You think *I'm* cute? No! I'm just *ordinary*. *Faith* is the *cute* one!"

"Nay, Erica!" he shook his head. "Ah thin' yer *class*! I know *Chet'd* sure like ya' ta' be *his cailín*!" Realizing she was about to ask, he explained. "If somthin' is class, it's really good, like awesome... and um... someone's *cailín*... is... um... their *girlfriend*." Mike blushed as he added, "Ah know Ah wish ye' ware *mine*." His eyes looked down as he finished, certain that this pretty new girl was about to laugh in his face.

What it *did* do was make Erica stop and cause her jaw to drop. No one, boy or girl, had *ever* shown her any interest that she knew of. While Erica *knew* she liked girls, it gave her pause as she tried to imagine dating this cute and interesting boy and had to repress a shudder. Closing her mouth, she tried to let him down gently. "Um, that's really *sweet* of you Mike. If I *liked* boys, I'd probably want to be your... um... *cailín*? Is that it?"

Mike nodded. "Aye, that it is." Sure that she was just trying to get rid of him, he asked point blank. "Do ye' not *date* boys, yet?"

"I don't date at *all*, yet." she shook her head. "But when I *start* dating, it won't be *boys*." she tried hinting a little more bluntly.

After a moment's contemplation, his eyes opened wide. "Oi! Yer *aerach*?" Seeing her confused look, he explained once more. "Um... ye' like *girls*?"

"Nothing personal." Erica nodded unashamedly.

Noticing she was still holding his hand, Mike looked down at them in confusion. "Then why did ye'..."

She laughed as they resumed their slow walk back. "Because I still *like* you! Better than that snob *Chet*, anyway! I just don't *like* like you! You're interesting and nice... for a *guy*." Finally reaching her aunt, she released his hand. "Aunt Heather? Faith? Do you know Mike?"

"Nice ta' be see'n ye again, Mrs. Hargrave. Faith." He bowed slightly to her aunt. Turning to Erica, he smiled. "Thank ye' fir th' dance, Erica. Kin Ah be gettin' ye' a drink? Or cake?"

Smiling as she sat by Heather, Faith on her aunt's other side, Erica answered, "Thank you, Mike. Punch would be... um... *class*!" Seeing the boy smile at her use of Irish slang, she watched him speed off to the refreshment table.

Watching the exchange with interest and more than a little concern, Heather turned to her niece. "So, did you *enjoy* dancing with Mike?"

"It was *OK*, I guess." Erica shrugged. "I more liked *talking* with him, though. He's a nice guy. He started teaching me a few Irish words, and he also likes some of the same things I do... *horses* in particular."

Her aunt leaned down and whispered a gentle warning into her ear. "He seems to be quite *taken* with you, Erica. How does that make you *feel*?"

"It's fine." she shrugged. "I know he does. He told me. I told him I don't like boys though, and he was fine with it. He didn't *seem* to care, anyway."

Still worried, Heather watched the Dempsey boy rushing back with Erica's punch. "I *don't* think he cares, sweetie. In fact, I think he doesn't care *so* much, he's *still* taken with you in *spite* of it! You need to be *careful*, dear. You could *easily* hurt his feelings."

Mike handed Erica a plastic cup with an orange punch in it. "Yer drink, m'lady!" he said while bowing to her with a toothy grin.

She took the drink with a shy, "Thank you." and sipped it, the flavor similar to orange soda and tickling her nose. When another song began, she saw Chet making his way up to the foursome. "Oh, no!" Erica mumbled.

The popular boy stopped in front of Faith and bowed to her, extending his hand. "May I have the *pleasure*?" he asked smoothly, glancing sideways to Erica who was trying to bore a hole in his head with her glare.

Smiling, completely unaware of Chet's earlier cruel remarks, Faith took his hand. "I'd be *delighted*, Chet!" she said as she stood.

Watching him with her head lowered, Erica's eyes were thin as slits as he escorted Faith to the dance floor. "Oily *snake*!" she muttered.

Heather looked from her daughter to her niece. "Who? Chet Mansfield? He's a *fine* boy, Erica!"

She glared at them starting to dance. "He's a two-faced, oily *snake* that thinks he's all *that*! He *probably* only asked *Faith* to dance to get under *my* skin... the *jerk*!"

"I'm *sure* you're mistaken." Heather scoffed. "Did something *happen* between you two?"

"*Chet* the *Chump* threatened *Mike*." Erica snarled as she crossed her arms angrily, her eyes never leaving the bully across the room. "Oh, not in a blatantly *obvious* way, but he made it clear that he wanted *Mike* to leave me *alone* with him! As *if*!" *Mike* only just taking a seat next to her, she turned to him. "Mike? Would you like to dance again?"

The boy turned white as a sheet as he stumbled back to his feet. "Um, *sure* Erica! Ah'd be happy ta'!" Extending a hand to her, his fingers were nearly crushed as Erica gripped them tightly and stood back up.

"Excuse me, Aunt Heather." she fumed as she took the lead in dragging the boy back to the dance floor. Assuming her position, she waited for Mike to take his, but was surprised when he stood there silently. "What's the *matter*, Mike?"

Shuffling, he looked at her. "Ah git th' fealin' tha' ye' don't sah much as want ta' dance wi' *me* as much as ye wan' ta' show up *Chet*."

Realizing he was right and how that must have made him feel, understanding how right her aunt was, Erica calmed down and looked at the floor. "You're *right* Mike, and I'm *sorry*. I actually *would* like to dance with you again... if you like... but I understand if you would rather just find someone *else*."

Mike smiled as he shook his head. "Nay, Erica. Ah *wouldn't*." He stepped up close and took her hand, letting his other slip around her back, starting to waltz with the others.

She seriously tried to keep her focus on Mike, but every time Faith and Chet moved into view she couldn't help but look over his shoulder at them. Realizing she was still being unfair to Mike, Erica made herself listen to what he was saying, mostly talking about his parent's ranch and their horses. After a while, she found it easier to listen and comment and wasn't even noticing her cousin any longer. When the dance ended, they started back to her aunt, but were stopped when Chet cut in front of them.

"Oh, sorry *Mick-ey*." Chet snidely faux-apologized. "You're so short and round, I thought you were one of the *tables*!"

Finally overcome with anger and loathing, Erica had reached her boiling point. Rearing back, she poured out all her pent-up emotions into one act, letting fly with an amazingly fast and strong right jab into Chet's lower abdomen that doubled him over. "Serves you *right, jerk!*" she screamed at him with all the fury in her heart pouring out freely.

Quickly, they were surrounded with adults trying to find out what had happened. Faith turned and watched her cousin descend into complete panic. She tried to make her way over to Erica, but couldn't reach her before the terrified girl ran for the barn door.

Just reaching the forming crowd to find out what was going on, Heather spotted her daughter. Grabbing Faith's arm, she pulled her aside. "What *happened?*"

"Erica punched Chet in the stomach! Laid him out, too!"

Closing her eyes, Heather tried to compose herself. Taking a deep breath, she looked around just in time to see Erica run out the barn door. "Wait here." her mother ordered as she hurried off after her niece.

Faith stood by numbly as her mother and Mike both ran after Erica.

His small size allowing him to move more easily through the crowd, Mike reached the door and was out and hot on Erica's heels before Heather had even made it halfway. "*Erica!*" he called out after her. "Slow up, *girseach!*"

Tears streamed down her cheeks as Erica ran through the cold evening air, not even caring if she drew attention. When she heard Mike's voice call out to her, she collapsed to the ground and began to cry in earnest. She wasn't hurt *physically*, no one had even laid a finger on her, but her stomach was balled up like a rock, as though *she* had been the one punched in the gut.

Running up to her, Mike quickly removed his multicolored coat and dropped it over her shoulders while she sat kneeling on her hands and knees in the frozen dirt. "*Erica?*" he asked concerned. "Air ye' *a'right?*"

She shook her head slowly. "No, Mike! I'm *not!* He just... he made me so *mad* when he insulted you! I don't even know *why* I did it! I just..." Tears began to flow once again just as her aunt approached.

Mike looked over at Heather as she crouched down next to her niece. "Sweetheart? Are you alright?" she woman asked concernedly.

Looking up at her, Erica shook her head. "Why does everyone keep asking *me* that? *Chet* was the one that got punched! By *me!* I punched someone!" she cried in stunned disbelief at her own actions.

Slowly, she helped Erica back to her feet. "Yes sweetie, but obviously *something* is wrong or it wouldn't have *happened*." Heather knew exactly what the problem was. Her niece had begun to see Chet, a boy that rubbed her the wrong way, as an object of all her pent up rage and frustration with the world. Just as she'd tried to transfer to herself the target of *Eric's* anger, Chet must have done something to cause *Erica* to pour it onto him instead. "Did he *do* something to you? Or to *Mike*? Did he *say* something?"

Beginning to shiver as she nodded, despite Mike's coat, Erica tried three times to answer, but it just wouldn't come out of her mouth, as though the ability to speak had somehow been robbed from her.

Shivering without his coat, Mike tapped Heather on the shoulder. "Ah thin' Ah kin explain, Mrs. Hargrave." he offered. "We ware makin' oor way off th' dance floor when Chet cut in front o' us an' made a rude remark... towards meself." He lowered his head ashamedly, thinking he was the cause of Erica's grief.

Heather gathered the two in her arms and started toward the main house. "I *see*. Why don't we go in and get warm. *Then* we'll talk. Alright, sweetie?" Erica nodded as she fought back another torrent of tears.

Entering his home, Mike ran to the kitchen. "*Mamaí?* I need some hot cider!"

Emma Dempsey stood up from crouching in front of the oven. "Where 'air yer' coat, boy!" she barked at him. "You'll catch yer *death* runnin' around out there *half-naked!*"

The twelve-year-old rolled his eyes at his mother's protectiveness. "Mamaí! First, Ah ain't *half-naked!* Second, Ah *needed* ta' give mah coat ta' Erica. Third, that's why Ah need th' hot *cider*. Where'd ye' *put it?*"

His mother put her fists on her hips. "Erica *who?* An' dun be givin' me none o' yer' lip, *boyo!*"

Seeing the cider bowl on the counter behind her, he grabbed three cups and tried to make his way around his mother while he explained. The more he talked, the more his mother's face melted from angry to concerned. "Mamaí! Kin Ah git by ye'? They'll be *waitin'!*"

Moving to the side, she was flustered. "So am Ah te' understand tha' the boyo insulted *ye'* and *she's* th' one tha' put him doon?" Mike nodded as he was about to scoop up a cup of cider when his mother's hand whacked him in the back of the head. "*Eejit!* Ware were *ye'?* Hidin' behind her *skirt?*" Taking the cups from him, she shook her head. "Git back in there an' see ta' oor guests. *Ah'll* be takin' these ta' Heather an' her niece!"

Running for the living room where the two went after coming in after him, he nodded towards his mother. "Ye' dun need ta' tell *me* twice!"

As Mike rejoined the two in front of the fire, he stood back and waited while Erica sobbed into her aunt's shoulder. It looked odd due to their costumes, but heartbreaking. For the life of him, he couldn't figure how such a small thing could cause so much anguish for her.

Emma entered and pushed past her son. "Heather? Here, take these." She offered the cups of hot cider. "Is th' *girseach* ta' be a'right?"

"She'll be *fine*." Heather nodded. "Just a stressful situation that released a *lot* of pent up anger and hurt." Seeing the confusion on Emma's face, she explained. "Erica's mother just *died* a month ago, and her father was *killed* with my Richard while serving. That's why she's come to *live* here with us."

The Irish immigrant's heart ached for Erica. "Th' poor *girseach!*" she exclaimed in a near whisper.

Just then, Michael came in from the cold along with an irate looking man. He nodded at his wife before approaching the two ladies huddling by the fire. "Mr. Mansfield is wantin' ta' talk wi' ya', Mrs. Hargrave." Pausing a moment he added, "If ye' can spare a tick."

Releasing the broken child, Heather rose graciously and turned to Chet's father. "I want to sincerely *apologize* for Erica's behavior, Mr. Mansfield."

Roger Mansfield stepped in front of Michael to confront her. "That *heathen* of yours made a *laughing stock* of my boy!"

Crossing arms, Emma scoffed. "*Ha!* 'Bout time *someone* did, ye' old *fahrt!*"

Flummoxed, he tried to respond, but Emma tore into him. "Tha' boyo air a *brat*, Mr. Mansfield! Ye' *shoulda* taken' him o'r yer knee a few times ta' beat th' *cocky* oot o' him! But what kin ye' *expect*... th' *apple* ne'r falls far from th' *tree!*"

Her husband's eyes widened. "*Emma!* Now look here..."

Emma glared at him, stopping him mid sentence.

"You have *no right* to tell me how to raise *my son!*" Roger stiffened.

Storming in front of him, Emma glared up at his frightened face. "Ah have *every right* ta' call em' like Ah see em' in mah own *gaff!* Yer' *brat* ware tormentin' mah *boy!* Erica stood up ta' him an' I say, 'good on her'! An' last Ah say, '*Git!*' Ye *nay* be welcome in me *gaff* nay *more!* *Oot!*" She pointed past his shoulder toward the door making Roger flinch, sure that she was about to slap him out of her house.

Roger left in a huff before Michael turned to his wife. "Tha' ware nay *hospitable*, Emma!"

She grumped in return. "Some kinds o' loud-mouths ought not *deserve* hospitality, *Mister Dempsey!*" Turning to Heather, her voice softened to a hush. "How air she?"

"Upset, but really she'll be *fine*." Heather sighed. "I think it would be best if we were on our way, though. We don't want to disturb your other guests any further than we already have and you can't stay *here* all night. You have a party to see to."

"Now none o' *that*!" Emma shook her finger. "Ah'll grab th' roast, *Michael* kin take th' cider, an' we'll all go back ta' th' party *ta'gether!*"

Sitting in front of the fire, only dimly aware of her surroundings, Erica's thoughts were a cloud of jumbled memories, all conflicting with her assumed identity. Even as she kept telling herself, *I'm Erica Hargrave! I am!* memories of her mother's funeral and half remembered nights waking up crying at the death of her father clashed together with her new life, threatening to send her spiraling off into madness.

Slowly coming back into herself, Erica heard the last of the conversation. Finally, she calmed down and stood up. Turning to Mike, who never left her side, she slowly handed him his coat.

"Thank you, Mike. I hope I didn't embarrass you."

Taking his coat back, Mike shook his head. "Ach! Nay, Erica! 'Tis fine. If *anythin'*, Ah'm *grateful* to ye' fir standin' up fir me."

"An' next time ye' kin stand up fir *yerself!*" Emma shot her son a glare. "Ah'll nay have a wee scared *rabbit* fir a *Mack!*"

Squaring her shoulders, Erica defended the boy. "It's not *like* that, Mrs. Dempsey!" Looking over at Mike, she smiled. "Mike was trying to avoid being rude to one of your guests. Chet really didn't *do* anything. It was just *words*. I shouldn't have overreacted. It's *my* fault."

She approached Erica and took her in her arms. "Thank ye' jus' th' same, *girseach!* Mike could be usin' more friends like you!"

While the four made their way back to the party, they talked about the ranch and how they'd gotten by during the power outage. Entering, a noticeable hush fell over the guests until Michael broke the tension.

"Air this a party air not!" he bellowed happily. Waiting for Emma to put down the roast, he took her by the hand and escorted her to the dance floor. In doing so, the mood shifted back to being light and entertaining.

Faith almost ran over to her mother. "*Mamma!* You should have seen *Chet!* His daddy took him out of here crying and holding his stomach!"

Lowering her gaze, Erica blushed. "I... um... I didn't punch him in the *stomach*, though."

Turning to her cousin, Faith's eyes widened. "You did *so!* I *saw* you!"

The embarrassed girl shook her head. "I hit *lower* than that." Looking up at the shocked faces around her, Erica held up her hands defensively. "I didn't *mean* to! It's just... well he's a *lot* taller than I am and... well..."

Heather had to restrain herself with every fiber of her being to keep from laughing out loud. Faith cocked her head, not understanding the subtle difference for a boy between a gut punch and one in the groin. Mike shrank back and crossed his legs, trying not to think about what had happened to poor Chet.

As the evening wore on, Erica noticed that while her aunt and Faith were asked to dance several times, all the boys avoided her like the plague and looked at her with a mild amount of fear in their eyes. She noticed too that the girls avoided her, casting dirty looks her way as though she'd committed some unpardonable sin by hitting the cutest boy around, making him leave early. Mike in contrast, doted on her all evening, getting her drinks, snacks, and even asking her to dance several more times.

When it came time for the games, Erica teamed with her aunt for most of them, their matching costumes making a cute pair. Other times she paired with Mike or sat them out while Mike would regale her with stories about his parents' lives in Ireland. She loved listening to him. His accent wasn't *too* thick, so she could follow his elaborate stories; sure that at most only half could be true.

Later, as people started telling ghost stories, the lights were turned down and Erica noticed that most of the younger guests started pairing up boy-girl. Unsure what to do, and seeing Mike alone and not wanting him to feel left out, she sat with him and held his hand. Innocently, she really started thinking of him as a good friend and only wanted him to be happy, and her presence seemed to make him quite happy. She never noticed the lovelorn looks he gave her as they sat in the dark close together, fingers intertwined.

At long last the evening came to an end and people started saying their good-byes and departing. When it was their turn, Heather smiled and hugged Emma warmly. "Thank you for a *wonderful* evening! I *do* want to apologize again for Erica's behavior. Just know that it's *not* typical for her."

Dismissing her apology with a wave of her hand, Emma snorted. "*Ach!* Go on then! It's *fine!* Perhaps it'll make th' brat think twice aboot bein' such a snot ta' others! I jes' wish it had been me own *Mack* who'd done th' deed!"

Erica hugged the elder Michael and thanked him for the food and games. Then turning to little Mike, she saw him shyly blushing and extending out

his hand to shake hers. Steeling herself, she pushed past his hand and hugged him, making the boy unsure what to do about it. When she planted a kiss on his cheek, he turned three shades of red and stopped breathing, which made Erica giggle. Finally his father whacked him on his back, forcing the boy to resume breathing.

"Yer lettin' this *girseach* git ta' ya boy! Better be *watchin'* that!"

She smiled at Mike. "Thank you for showing me a good time, Mike." Dropping into a posture similar to Emma's when she was bawling out Mr. Mansfield and an Irish brogue she'd started picking up through the night, she added, "An din' be worrien' aboot gettin' ah *cailín*! Ye'll be havin' plenty o' time fir *that*, yet!" She was happy to see it made him laugh, along with his mother and father.

Starting toward the car, Heather took both girls in her arms as they walked. No words were exchanged, but Erica could tell that her aunt was pensive, which made Erica wonder what she might do to punish her for fighting, especially since she'd started it.

Fredrick held the car door for them as they climbed in and sat. Once they were underway, Erica looked across at her aunt and cleared her throat.

Heather stopped her musings and looked over at her niece. "Yes, sweetie?"

Gulping, Erica took a breath. "I know I'll need to be punished for hitting Chet, Aunt Heather. I'm ready."

"But I'm not, sweetheart." she shook her head. "I honestly don't know *what* to do about it." she added, looking out the window at the dark of the night.

Faith, who'd been uncharacteristically silent, finally spoke up. "So where *did* you punch him, then?"

Breaking the tension like an explosive, Heather couldn't stop herself from laughing out loud this time. Her laughter triggered the other two to start laughing and soon Heather found herself trying to explain to her daughter what it meant for a boy to be hit where Chet had been struck. By the time the three had reached their home, Erica was in much better spirits and her aunt was more sure than ever what she needed to do about her niece's unresolved anger and pain.

Franchesca was at the door and took Heather's coat while Fredrick parked in the garage. "Did you have a good time, ma'am?" she asked roately.

Cocking her head, she nodded slightly. "Yes... we certainly had an *interesting* time. Thank you."

Helping Erica off with her coat, Cook saw the girl blush and turn away at her aunt's description of the night. "What *happened*?"

"Erica punched Chet Mansfield in the *groin*!" Faith blurted it out while Fredrick came in and took her coat. After a few minutes of explanation, mostly from Heather, the two girls ran upstairs to wash and change for bed, it being well after their normal bedtime.

Holding her hand out toward Fredrick, Francesca inquired in a growl, "Well? Where's my *camera*?"

Handing her the device, he silently nodded at the maid.

"Did you get *any* good pictures?" she asked as she started to look at them.

"One of *monumental* importance and impact." he replied as he hung his own jacket and started putting on his butler's coat. "When you find it, you might consider just erasing it as it *could* be used in evidence against Miss Erica, should the Mansfields decide to sue."

Franchesca furrowed her brow and quickly started scanning through the photos, finally coming to a stop on a picture that made her draw in a breath. There in front of her, recorded for all time, was sweet little Erica with her fist buried in Chet's upper groin.

Looking over Francesca's shoulder, Theresa nodded. "Good for her!" she shouted.

Chapter 14 - Lost Faith

Sitting in the library, Erica stared out the window as the snow fell all around the house. She knew she needed to get back to her studies, but her mind just wouldn't settle. Her thoughts drifted as freely as the snowflakes that fell past the large window, taking her from one memory of the last few months to the next. Finally shaking her head to make herself focus, she re-read her essay on early New Hampshire history. Reviewing her notes, she finished the closing and set the papers aside, glad that her work was done before Christmas break.

Rising from her seat, she stretched like a cat and placed her work in the folder to give her aunt. Turning out the desk light, she was mildly jealous of Faith's ease with completing writing assignments. Over the last month, Faith had continually beaten Erica at finishing them, giving Faith more free time. She knew it was petty, so she dismissed the thought out of hand.

She'd also noticed how Faith had started changing as of late. Her moods were unpredictable and chaotic. Her aunt Heather had explained that it was just hormones, but Erica couldn't understand why her own moods were not as volatile and were instead more subdued. Slowly ascending the stairs to their shared room, she pondered the problem. *Other than the one time I punched Chet, I haven't noticed me being like Faith gets!*

Erica had tried her best to make up for her one serious lapse in judgement, doing chores, helping both Cook and Franchesca with as many things as she was able to between studies. Her aunt had never brought up the incident again, seeming to have completely dismissed it. *Maybe she thinks I've done enough to make up for it.*

Entering their room, she saw Faith sitting near the foot of their bed on Erica's side. "Hi." she greeted her cousin quietly.

Faith shot her cousin a look that could freeze air. "Hi." she barked back.

Sick of dancing around whatever it was that had gotten her cousin mad at her, Erica sat on Faith's side of the bed and faced her. "Can we talk?" she asked delicately.

Dropping onto her back, Faith looked up at the ceiling. "There's nothing to talk *about*." Silence sat between them like a drift of snow.

Mimicking her cousin, Erica sighed and lay back on the bed, her head next to Faith's. Unsure what else to say, she lay there silently.

Finally, her moody cousin broke the silence. "Maybe it's time you move to your room." she stated bluntly.

Too heartbroken at the idea to even put up a fight, Erica only noticed the tear after it fell from her eye. "If that's what you want." she said quietly.

"It *is*." Faith snipped as she rolled off the bed. "I'll tell Mamma." Without another word, Faith stormed out of the room, nearly slamming their door.

Able to do nothing but lay there, tears ran down into her ears as she slowly sank into apathy once more. Everything hurt too much and, no matter what, it seemed she couldn't escape the pain of her existence. Over the last six weeks Heather had worked with her several days a week, helping her cope with her sadness and anger, eventually discarding the notion that she was Erica Hargrave. Telling her aunt that she still wasn't ready to go back to being Eric, instead she became Erica Bella Dunning, her own person.

Slowly, she stood up and walked over to the vanity, taking a seat and looking at her reflection. She could still see her mother looking back at her, but somehow it looked hollow; vacant, like a shadow rather than a ghost or reflection. She watched the redness of her eyes deepen as more tears formed. Taking a tissue, she wiped them and started going through the drawers to take out the few things that were hers.

A gentle knock interrupted her busywork, making her look up to see her aunt entering. "Mind some company?" she asked delicately.

Shaking her head, Erica let out a ragged breath, trying to contain the sadness that consumed her. "It's fine, Aunt Heather." She stopped her task and watched her aunt move over to the bed and sit, patting the mattress. Moving over to the bed, Erica sat down next to her slowly and sadly, leaning in to rest her head against her aunt's shoulder.

Heather ran her fingers through Erica's pretty hair, it having grown out so much that Brooke had colored it once more. "Faith told me she wants a room to herself again. I wanted to talk with you about that."

"It's fine, I guess." she retorted with a shrug. "It's what *Faith* wants, so I guess it'll make her *happy* again."

Her aunt nodded. "Alright. Do you understand *why*?"

Shaking her head slowly, Erica dropped backwards onto the bed to stare at the ceiling as she'd done earlier. "Not *really*, Aunt Heather. It just seems like *everything* I do makes her mad. I don't *understand* it. She doesn't ever want to play with me anymore. I know it's snowy and has been for two weeks, but she seems like she doesn't want to do *anything* with me, even inside. I just wish I knew what I did *wrong*."

Heather pulled her niece up and hugged her gently. "You didn't do *anything* wrong, sweetie. Faith is just going through a hard time right now. Her body is changing and her mind is, too. She's starting to grow up."

She took comfort in holding her aunt. "So it'll happen to me *too*, someday?"

Dancing around the subject delicately, Heather gave only a half answer. "Not *exactly* the same way, dear. Everybody is *different*, so we all go through this part of life in a different way."

They sat there in silence while Heather petted her head to comfort her. Ever since the Halloween party, Heather had been steadily chipping away at Erica's vault of pain she'd locked behind her fantasy. Before Faith's recent moodiness, Heather even had hope that Erica might be nearing a time when she could finally fully face her grief and return to her life as Eric. Now with yet another trauma pounding on her delicate psyche, she seemed to be retreating further and further back into what Heather believed to be the child's fantasy of being a girl.

Out of nowhere, Faith stormed into the room. "So? Do I get my *own* room again or *what*?" she barked at her mother.

Looking sternly at her daughter, understanding her issues didn't excuse her rudeness. "Faith! You have to understand this is very *hard* for Erica. She's gotten *used* to having you around. Separating you will be *difficult*."

She rolled her eyes at her mother. "So... is that a *yes*?" she sniped.

"*Faith!*" Heather exclaimed. "Don't you *dare* take that tone with me!"

Seeing her mother angry wasn't something she was used to. It shocked Faith so much she jumped. Stubbornly pushing back, she sneered at her mother. "Just tell me when *his* stuff is out of my room so I can sleep in *peace* for once!" At that she stormed out.

Heather was stunned at Faith's callous outburst, but not nearly as much so as Erica. Heather looked down at the stricken girl, who looked to be in shock to the point she wasn't even breathing. Erica stared at the doorway as though it were a gaping maw about to consume her soul. Her aunt was torn between wanting to console Erica and chasing down Faith to make her apologize. Finally, she turned to Erica and looked her in the eyes.

"Erica? I *love* you, just the way you are. I don't *care* what Faith said, you are my *niece* and I *love* you. Do you understand me?"

Shaken from her state of shock, she nodded at her aunt as tears silently ran down her cheeks and she began breathing again. Moving forward, she hugged her aunt as though clinging to a life ring, the woman's loving embrace the only thing keeping her from drowning in a sea of pain.

Pulling back, she looked once more in the girl's eyes. "I need to go talk to Faith. What she said was *inexcusable*. Will you be OK for a minute without me?" Seeing a slight nod from the girl, she stood up and backed toward the door. "I'll be back soon." she added before turning to pursue her child.

Sitting in the lonely confines of what had been her room for the last two months, Erica looked at the things around her that gave her comfort. Their shared vanity, the neatly arranged row of stuffed animals along the toy box at the foot of their bed. As her eyes turned toward the box of dolls she started hearing yelling from downstairs. Her aunt's muffled and unintelligible voice, mixed with that of Faith's, rang through the building like echoes of the storm that had greeted her arrival at her new home.

After a short time, the yelling stopped and silence sat over the house once more, thick as fog. Erica knew she should get up to start collecting her things, but she couldn't make her body obey. Instead she just sat, unable to even rise. Sinking rapidly into a near catatonic state, she floated through memories that were some of the best of her life since coming to live with her aunt.

Turning as they tried to keep up, Faith shouted, "Come on slow-pokes!"

Erica held out her hand to Mike as they climbed over the log. Their hike through the woods to the north of her aunt Heather's house had taken them up a hill through thickly wooded forest. Faith knew the path well, having walked it many times, but Erica and Mike were lagging behind.

"Wait up!" Erica yelled. Turning toward Mike, she laughed as he flopped onto the ground into a pile of leaves that had been gathered together by the wind. The frost of the week before had melted into a warm Indian Summer.

The three children had known that soon their outdoor activities would be confined to snowball fights and other winter activities for many months, so they took advantage of the temporary warm weather as much as possible, spending every weekend day out exploring nature.

Mike lay on the fallen leaves and panted for breath. "Tha' cousin... air yours... mus' be... part mountain goat!" he exclaimed.

Falling into the leaf pile beside him, Erica giggled. Finally she looked up at her cousin who had back-tracked and stood over them with her hands on her hips looking like Cook when Franchesca invaded her kitchen.

"Aren't you two coming?" she asked.

Erica laughed as she stood back up and gave her hand to Mike. "Yeah, we air comin' col ceathrar!" she said, imitating Mike's brogue.

Taking his best friend's hand, Mike pulled himself up. "Ye' sure'n ye aren't from Eire, girseach? Ye' sound like me mamaí!"

"Well, if you two are quite through, can we get moving?" Faith scowled at the two. "I'd like to get to the pond before it gets too late!"

"Yes, Faith." Erica sighed. "Lead the way!"

The three continued to hike up the hill while Erica and Mike lagged behind a bit. "So, you're going back to Eire for Christmas?" she asked, turning to him.

Mike nodded. "Aye. Mamaí misses her siúrs an' she wants ta' spend it back in 'er home town this year."

Erica nodded in understanding. "Well, I'll miss you while you're gone. Will you write me? I've never gotten a letter from another country before!"

"I will ya!" he laughed. Seeing her scowl at him for implying that he wouldn't, he swallowed hard and nodded, "Aye, I'll do that."

Cresting the slight rise, Faith stopped and finally smiled. "Here it is!" she yelled. "Come on, you two!"

The two friends jogged up the hill to stand next to Faith, breathing heavily from their run. Erica looked down at the pond that had formed in the slight depression from the melting snow. A few birds that had not flown south for the coming winter flew over the water, giving it a serene feeling that this place was untouched and pure.

The trio ran down the short hill to the edge of the water and took in the beauty of the view. Splitting up, Erica and Faith started walking around the pond to the left while Mike went to the right. It was small enough that they could yell across it to each other without difficulty, if needed.

While Faith walked along slowly with her cousin, she looked over at her. "Erica? Why did you invite Mike along? I wanted to show this to you."

She shrugged as she picked up a small rock and tossed it in the pond. "I don't know. I just thought he might like it, too."

"But I wanted to spend time with just us!" Faith whined. "You're always spending time with Mike! It's like he's your boyfriend!"

Stopping, Erica looked at her cousin. "He is not!" Lowering her voice she added, "You know I don't like boys that way! Yeah, I know he's got a crush on me, but so what? He's nice, sweet, and interesting to talk to, but he's not my boyfriend! I mean... eww!"

Faith turned and looked at her. "You're making him think he's got a chance, Erica."

"A chance at what?"

"Ugh!" Faith rolled her eyes. "A chance at you, nitwit! And that's another thing. You used to always talk about April being your best friend. Now it's Mike all the time!"

Lowering her head, Erica's voice turned melancholy. "I... I don't like to think about April. It hurts." She fiddled with her fingers as she tried not to think about the pain in her heart from missing the girl she'd grown up with.

Her cousin saw she was struggling and became impatient. "It's OK, Erica. You can just say it."

She looked back up. "Say what?"

"That you're in love with April." Faith said sadly as she turned back to their walk around the pond.

Erica felt her face flush at hearing the words. Starting to move again, she easily caught back up with her cousin. "How did you know?" she whispered after a moment.

Rolling her eyes again, Faith looked away. "It's so obvious, Erica! Every time you talk about her I can see little broken hearts around your head!"

"Oh." was her only reply. After a moment, she looked over at Faith. "I didn't know you knew."

Faith sighed. "It's just that I hate to see you so heartbroken over it, is all. I mean, I know that before you left you were just friends, and now that you're so far away from her you wanted it to be more. It's just all so sad."

Erica nodded silently. As the two reached the side of the pond, they both looked over at Mike who was shouting to them.

"Oi! Ah found a bone!" he cried.

Faith giggled as they waved at him. "I'll bet he did!" she murmured.

"Huh?" Erica looked at her confusedly.

Shaking her head, Faith dismissed the question. "Never mind. I guess it's only funny to me!"

Reaching the far side and meeting back up with Mike, he was very animated about his discovery. "Ah thin' it ware a deer! Look here!" He held out a piece of hoof.

Faith stepped back. "Eww! Put that away, Mike! God, boys are so gross!"

Disappointed, Erica had wanted to humor her friend and look at it. Trying to salvage a good time out of their walk, she made a suggestion. "Why don't we walk back around the way Mike came. That way he can show us where he found it and we can see the rest of the pond!"

Rolling her eyes once more Faith spat, "Fine!" and started walking ahead, but Erica quickly caught up to her.

Lowering her voice to a whisper she asked, "Is something bothering you?"

Faith stopped and turned to Mike. "Could you give us a moment?" she asked. "I promise we won't take long."

Mike smiled. "Sure! Ah'll jes walk oot th' other way a wee bit. Come ta' think o' it, Ah thin' Ah'd like ta see th' oo'r side. Ah'll meet ya back where'n we started, a'right?" He turned and headed back the way they had come.

When Faith was sure he was out of easy hearing range, she sighed and looked at Erica. "I guess I'm just jealous is all. I mean, when you got here,

April was your best friend. Then Mike became your best friend. I guess I thought..." Her voice broke as it trailed off into silence.

Taking hold of Faith's hand, they started walking again and Erica turned to her. "Faith, you're the best friend I've ever had! You're always there for me, helping me, giving good advice. You know how much you mean to me."

She sighed and leaned her shoulder against Erica's. "I know, but you never want to spend time with just me. You did at first when you got here, but now it's like you're afraid to or something."

Her cousin shrugged as she tried to hedge her answer. "It's not that. It's just that... well... you and I are different about some things. Don't get me wrong, I think you're great! In fact I think you're just about perfect!" she said dreamily. Swallowing hard, Erica was worried that too much of her true feelings had shown through. "If I considered anyone my best friend, it would be you." she tried to recover.

Faith stopped and looked at her. "Do you mean that Erica? For real?"

"For real." Erica nodded shyly, glad that Faith had obviously not picked up on the real meaning of her expression of admiration for her cousin, that she'd grown to care for Faith far more than she should for them being cousins.

The two didn't say anything more as they made their way around the pond, just walking in companionable silence and holding hands. When they met up with Mike on the other side, Faith seemed much more at ease with having him around and even included him in their conversations. Erica was truly happy. Her two best friends were happily together with her; a true trio.

It was one of the best days of Erica's life.

Faith looked up at her mother. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Trying to explain, Heather sighed. While Faith was no longer shouting at her, she still wasn't listening. "Faith, you may well have undermined *all* of the last two months of therapy I've been doing with your cousin! Don't you see? You've broken her world... *again*, and just when she was getting ready to leave her fantasies of her own accord! *Damn* you, Faith!"

It shocked her to hear her mother swear. In fact she was sure it was the first time her mother had ever sworn in front of her. "*Mamma!*"

Heather was beyond frustrated. She had spent weeks getting Erica to admit she wasn't her own mother and felt certain she was close to giving up her feminine persona and return to being the boy he'd always been. Now her daughter, on an emotional whim with terrible timing, had undone almost all of her progress. Turning away from Faith, she struggled to figure out a way to undo the damage. At last she turned to her daughter and sat next to her.

"Dear, you *know* I understand how you feel lately, but don't you think you could set that aside for just a *short* while and try to help me? Otherwise I just don't know what may happen! Your cousin could end up *hurting* herself if she doesn't give up these fantasies of being a girl! It's already gone on *far* too long!"

Faith crossed her arms and looked away. "Seems like you care more about getting *Eric* back than you do your own *daughter!*" she quipped angrily.

Reaching out, Heather made Faith look at her. "Now you *know* that's not true, Faith! I love you *both*. You have to remember though just how *hurt* she is. How would you feel if you lost *me* the way she lost *her* mother?"

Her anger began to wane as she listened, but not her resolve. "Mamma, I *do* understand, but Erica is just... ugh!" She stood and walked away from her mother and crossed her arms again. "She's *not* a little *girl* anymore,

Mamma. She's starting to grow *up*... and *not* into a *woman!* You're going to have to *do* something about that!" she hinted.

Standing, she crossed the room, walking up delicately behind her daughter. "Faith..." Heather made her turn around and face her. "Dear, has... has Erica done anything... *inappropriate?*"

Faith stiffened and stormed away from her mother. "Of *course* she hasn't!" she yelled. "How could you even *think*...!" Her voice trailed off as she lacked the words to express just how upset even the accusation made her.

Looking at Faith, Heather put her hands on her hips. "Well you made it *sound* as if..."

"Oh, *Mamma*, I did *not*!" Faith interrupted. "You just try to read into *everything* I say, even when I'm just saying something *simple*!"

Her mother shook her head. "You haven't said anything *simple* in *weeks*, dear... and don't *interrupt*!"

Closing her eyes, Faith mentally counted to ten, trying to keep from losing her temper again. "Mamma, that's just *so* unfair! You don't *understand*!"

"Mothers never *do*, dear." she shot back calmly. "That is, until you grow up and realize they understood *everything*, all too *well*."

Faith sat down, exhausted from fighting with her. "Mamma! Just give me a straight answer! Can I have my own room back, or are you going to *do* something about Erica?"

Slowly, Heather stepped in front of her daughter and went down to her knees to face her directly. "Faith darling, you know I want to give you everything you want or need. Why is this so *important* to you all of a sudden? Two months ago you were *begging* me to let her share your room!"

What's *changed*? What's *happened* that suddenly makes you want your cousin to be *away* from you?"

She couldn't look her mother in the eye. She looked down and then to the side. "I guess *I've* changed." Gathering her courage, she sighed and tried to force the issue. "I can't share a room with someone that's going to be a teenage *boy* soon, Mamma. *Something* has to be done." she hinted again.

After a few moments, Heather finally let out an exasperated sigh. "Alright, Faith." she relented. "I'll see to it Erica's things are moved to her room, but you *know* this is going to hurt her. *Badly*. What are you going to *tell* her?"

Faith looked at her mother's eyes, reflections of her own, with a stunned expression as she'd not been expecting this turn of events, nor for her mother to put the responsibility on her. "Me? You want *me* to tell her?"

She stood and started to leave. "Yes, Faith. *You*. If this is what you *need*, you need to *make* your cousin understand it." With nothing more to say, she left the room to find Franchesca and make preparations for the change.

Slowly, Faith opened the door to their room, knocking lightly as she did so. Seeing Erica sitting motionless on the bed, she cleared her throat and softly said, "Hi." When she'd pushed for separate rooms, the *last* thing she'd expected was to get what she said she wanted. To then have to hurt Erica on top of it was pouring salt in the wound. When Erica didn't even look her way, she quietly came in and stepped in front of her cousin, looking into Erica's green eyes that were glazed over as though she were blind. She didn't even seem to see Faith standing right in front of her.

After a moment, she moved around and sat on the bed next to her. Not seeing any sign that Erica was even aware of her presence, she truly understood how badly she'd hurt her cousin. *It's like she's not even here... like she's lost inside herself.* She tried to take Erica's hand, but even after doing so it sat limp in hers, the same as if she were asleep. Finally, she rested her head on

Erica's shoulder and hooked her arm under the slightly younger girl's limp limb. Sitting like that for several minutes, she tried to come up with the words that would explain things. Finally giving up, she just started to talk about whatever came to her mind.

"I really *liked* the short story you wrote last week." she started. "It was really *good*. You don't write as *fast* as me, but you write a lot *better*." Not seeing any change, she just continued. "I think you have a real *talent* for writing." More silence filled the room until Faith couldn't stand it anymore. "Erica! I need to *talk* to you! Won't you please *listen*?"

Somewhere in her mind, Erica was vaguely aware of Faith's presence, but she just couldn't figure out how to reply. *Faith?* she thought, unable to make her thoughts reach her lips. *Faith? I don't know what I did wrong, but can you forgive me? Please?* Still unable to make her body respond, Erica started screaming the words in her mind, but to no avail. Nothing she did seemed to connect her mind with her body. Finally, she turned inward and began to pray... pray that she might find her way back... that she might be happy once more in her new home... that Faith wouldn't hate her for whatever it was she'd done wrong.

Starting to see tears forming in her cousin's eyes, but nothing else, no sign that she was there, Faith became frantic. "Erica! You're scaring me! Please! Just say something! Yell at me! I deserve it! Please! I'm sorry, OK? I didn't mean it! Please, just... just don't leave me!" she began to cry.

Erica's hand slowly responded, moving to take her cousin's, griping it lightly.

Faith's eyes widened at the first sign of life from her tormented cousin. "Erica?" Faith asked hopefully as her tears abated.

Two green eyes slowly tracked around to face Faith, her head gradually following them. Erica tried to speak, but words would still not come out. Her lips moved, but no sound came forth.

Practically tackling Erica in a hug, tears rolled down Faith's face. "Erica! I'm so sorry! I didn't *mean* what I said before! I *swear!* Please forgive me! I know you're not a boy, and I *don't* want you to go!"

Feeling her cousin's tears on her neck, Erica could only manage to hug her, words still not making it from her mind to her lips.

Babbling now, Faith tried to explain why she'd done what she'd done. "You've been such a *Godsend* to me, Erica! I never thought I'd *ever* need someone near me so much in all my life! It... it *sacred* me how much I need you to never go away! You're the best friend I could ever *have!*" Not ready to admit the full truth yet, she thought up an excuse. "I... I tried to *push* you away before you *left* me! I'm *so* sorry, Erica!"

Finally, words came loose of her tongue, words she'd been trying desperately to say since Faith entered the room. "I... I... I..."

"Yes? What *is* it, Erica?" Faith wiped her eyes. "Just say what you need to... it's OK. Even if you *hate* me, just *please* be OK!"

Erica took a breath and tried again. "I... understand... if... you... *hate* me, Faith, but..."

The smaller girl interrupted her. "I *don't* hate you Erica! I *love* you! So *much!* I... just..." She paused and made herself say part of what she felt. "I don't want you to *ever* leave me! I don't want you to *ever* go back to Southern California, or back to being Eric! I know that's *terrible* of me, but it's the *truth!* Please, Erica! Never go back? I know you want to because April is there and you *love* her, but *please*? Say you'll *never* go? That you'll *never* leave me?"

Erica smiled weakly and shook her head. "N.... *never!*"

Chapter 15 - Goodbye

Christmas came with all the happiness, love, and family it's supposed to have. Faith had called off the move, but that was to be short lived. As the long winter wore on, Heather decided that, for Erica's own good, she needed to move into the guest room and make it her own. She offered to let the girl chose her own decor, but Erica sadly accepted the room as it was.

Her first night alone in Hargrave House came in April, just as the snow was giving way to rain. Erica hadn't even gotten to sleep when she felt that someone was in the room with her. Nervously, she looked up and saw Faith standing next to her bed.

"Faith? Are you OK?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

The girl hugged herself and shook her head. "I... I can't *sleep!* Can I lay with you a while?"

Nodding, Erica was unable to say no to the girl. Lifting the covers, Faith quickly slid into her bed and snuggled her back up against Erica, almost shivering as though it were that first freezing cold night all over again.

After the two settled in, Faith rolled over to face her cousin. Whispering like they used to before they would fall asleep together, she needed to talk to her. "Erica? I... want you to know. I think I understand why you need to have your own room now. I turn thirteen next week and you turn thirteen in a few months. I think Mamma doesn't like the idea of two teenagers sharing the same room... and I think I understand *why* now."

Erica was tired, but listening to Faith was more important. "OK, so *why*?"

Biting her lip, Faith tried to figure out a way to say it without upsetting her cousin. "OK, do you remember that second morning after you got here, when we were getting dressed and you got all embarrassed when I kissed

your cheek?" Seeing Erica nod shyly in remembrance, she continued. "Well, remember how you *felt*?" Erica's cheeks flushed and she nodded again. Seeing that she was going to have to spell it out, Faith took Erica's hand to steady herself. "I... I think, um... I think you were, um... getting..." She looked away and made herself say it out loud. "...turned *on*... by *me*." Looking back, she gazed into Erica's lovely eyes and her heart fluttered.

Eyes growing wide, Erica furrowed her brow and began yelling in a whisper, "*Faith! No! I wouldn't!* I... I *couldn't!* You're my *cousin!* That's just so... so... *wrong!* What do you think, I'm some sort of *perv?*"

Hearing Erica call herself a perv for being attracted to her cousin stung, but Faith shook her head. "*No, Erica! Not at all!* I know you weren't *perving* on me, but I think Mamma is afraid that we might... well... I mean now that we're getting *older* and I'm starting to get... *developed*... that we might... uh... *you know!*"

She recoiled from her cousin, the idea of giving in to her physical attraction toward her tying her stomach in a knot. "*Faith!* Is that what Aunt Heather thinks? That because I like *girls* that we might... um... *you know... fool around?* With each *other?*"

"*I think so.*" she nodded. Faith paused a moment before asking the real question on her mind. "*Would you want to?*"

Erica shook her head in denial. "*Are you kidding?* I mean, *I like girls, but you don't!* Besides, we're *cousins!* This is *New Hampshire, not Kentucky!*"

The comment made Faith giggle. "*You know, I think Mike would like to see if you go both ways!*"

The girl's terrified look dissolved into one of mirth. "*Don't I know it! God, he's so crushing on me!* I feel *bad* for him though, because it's *never* gonna happen!"

Faith stopped giggling. "You mean, you aren't even curious to *try*? Just to see what it's *like*? I mean, with a *boy*?"

"*Eww!*" Erica stuck out her tongue. "No way! Boys are *gross*! Besides, I haven't even tried it with a *girl* yet, and I *know* I like *girls*!"

Gripping Erica's hand a little tighter, Faith admitted one of her truths. "*I am. Curious*, that is. About girls. About what it might be like."

Her cousin's smile disappeared as her heart hammered in her ears. "Faith, I *love* you... more than I could ever *say*... but..."

She let Erica's hand go and drew it up to herself. "I *know*. I knew before I came *in* here." After a moment's silence, she continued. "Did you know that day when we went up to the pond, I was planning on *kissing* you?"

Erica felt her heart beat rise quickly. "Um... *no*."

Her cousin nodded shyly. "Uh-huh. That's *really* why I was upset that you brought your *boyfriend* along!"

"He's *not* my boyfriend!" Erica almost laughed. "God, you're worse than Aunt Jenny is with Aunt Brooke!"

Giggling, Faith tried to quiet herself. Suddenly becoming serious, she looked Erica directly in the eyes. "I wanted you to know, I think I've had a crush on you since the first time I saw you. I know it's *wrong*, and nothing will ever *happen*, but I wanted you to know. I think, somehow, I *needed* you to know. That's all. I... I also wanted you to know that it's *you* that I'm crushing on. *Erica*."

Faith sighed as she admitted her worst failing. "That's why before Christmas when I could tell that Mamma was about to make it so you wouldn't *have* to be Erica anymore, I said those *awful* things to you. I... I wanted to *force*

Mamma into either start giving you hormones so you could never go back to being Eric or else let you get hurt. I *never* thought she'd actually *do* it. Now, here you are in your own room *anyway*. I'm sorry."

Reaching out her hand to Faith, Erica took hers and smiled. "I think I understand." Her own worry now heavy on her mind, she needed to share just as openly as Faith had done. "Um... I've been thinking. I know I've kinda started puberty. I know that it's going to start changing me so I won't look like my mom so much anymore."

Taking a deep breath, she made herself say the words. "I'm going to start becoming a guy soon, and I *hate* it, but it seems there's nothing I can *do* about it. I *never* want to stop being Erica, but I think at some point I'm going to *have* to. Aunt Heather won't *let* me take hormones. I *know* because... I um... I *asked* her... a few weeks ago. It just seems... so *unfair*!"

Faith felt a tear roll down her cheek. "Life's not fair." she said simply, recalling the advice Erica had given her shortly after arriving.

The two sat in silence until finally sleep took them both. They lay like that, facing one another, holding hands, all through the night.

July came and they celebrated Erica's thirteenth birthday. Her aunt had surprised her with a computer of her own, plus one of the new tablets. While they still lacked cell service, it gave Erica a way to express her interest in writing by creating her own blog, submitting poetry to various places, and eventually getting a small following on social media with the website, 'newhampshire-vs-california.com'. She would write about the differences between Southern California and Northern New England, as well as their similarities.

On the first anniversary of her arrival at Hargrave House, Heather took Erica aside and spoke to her about her future.

"We need to talk." Heather started, sitting at Erica's vanity while the terrified girl sat on her bed. "I think you know what about, sweetie."

She nodded. Puberty was taking its toll on her and soon she wouldn't be able to pass as a young girl anymore. "I know, Aunt Heather."

Heather sighed and leaned forward to brush the girl's bangs out from in front of her eyes. "I... I've given this a lot of thought. I *hate* it, but it seems the only solution." Taking a breath, she said what she'd decided. "I know it's breaking my promise to you, but I think you should go away to school. Away somewhere where no one has ever *heard* of Erica. Somewhere you can be Eric Dunning again and it won't be socially awkward for you."

Feeling the tears coming, Erica knew that once again she was about to be ripped from the home and life she had known, this time to be completely alone. Trying to avoid it, she choked back the tears. "There's *another* way."

She knew what the young girl was implying and shook her head. "I'm *sorry*, sweetie! I *know* that right now you want *so bad* to be a girl and grow into a lovely young woman, and I *know* you would! You'd make me so *proud*! But I just... I *can't*! You don't understand what it *means*! You'd never be able to have *children*!" Now her aunt's turn to cry, tears traced down her face.

"I know it's hypocritical of me to deny you this when I was the *first* person to stand up for your aunt Brooke. *Believe* me, if there was *any* way to give you what you want without denying you your ability to have children someday, I *would*, but you're just too *young* to understand how this will change the rest of your life. I *cannot* in good conscience let you *do* that to yourself... any more than I could stand idly by while you used drugs or alcohol! You're just too... too damn young to know!"

Erica found herself in the strange position of comforting her aunt. After all the times over the past year that she'd been the one *being* comforted, her aunt now sobbed into her shoulder the same as Erica had sobbed into hers.

So it was a week later that Erica Dunning died a second time. She'd gotten to see Mike one last time at the annual Halloween party. Mike knew that she was going away to school, but not where or why. He'd wanted to see her off when the cab came for her, but Erica insisted he just let Halloween night be their last time together. When she left the party, she kissed him on the cheek just as she'd done the year before, this time as a parting gift for the boy who liked her far more than she could ever return.

Refusing to see off the person that would take Erica's place, Faith said her good-byes the night before in the privacy of Erica's bedroom.

While Erica brushed out her beautiful hair one last time, knowing it would all be gone the next day, she watched the last vestiges of her young mother in the mirror echoing her actions once more. Near to tears, she heard the knock on her door. "Come in." she said barely restraining her emotions.

Tiptoeing into Erica's room, Faith silently closed the door behind her. Her mother had already bid them both goodnight, so she knew they wouldn't be disturbed until the next terrible sunrise. "Mind some company?" Faith asked hopefully.

"You shouldn't be here, Faith." Erica warned as she resumed brushing. "Aunt Heather would be *furious* to know you're here instead of in bed."

"I don't *care!*" Faith grumbled quietly. "She can ground me for the rest of *time* and I'd *still* stay." Moving up close to Erica, she watched entranced as her cousin brushed out her hair, almost forgetting why she came in.

When Erica finished and put down the ornate wooden hairbrush, she watched her young mother staring back at her a moment. At last turning away from her personal ghost, Erica looked down at the floor and then up at Faith. "You *really* shouldn't be here." she said softly. "It... it's not a good idea, us being alone together like this."

Stepping closer, Faith took a breath and gathered her courage. "Erica? Would you do me a favor?"

Smiling sweetly, Erica nodded. "Of course, Faith! I'd do *anything* for you!"

Her heart skipping a beat, she pushed forward. Pulling her hands out from behind her back, she held out the same nightgown that she'd nearly forced Erica to wear her first night. "Would... um... would you wear *this* tonight?"

Noticing at last that Faith was wearing the same blue nightgown from that first night, Erica smiled wistfully. "For you? Anything!" she sighed. Looking at it, she cocked an eyebrow at Faith. "If I can get it *on*, that is! I've grown like four *inches* since last year!"

Giggling together a moment, Faith nodded. "I know. Will you *try*?" Getting up Erica started heading for her bathroom when Faith reached out and gently grabbed her elbow to stop her. "No. Change here. *Please*?"

Her mouth opening to say that she shouldn't, Erica knew exactly why Faith would ask and that saying no would take away part of the whole reason she'd asked. Biting her lip, she simply nodded as she wordlessly put the borrowed nightgown on her vanity. Slowly pulling her larger satin gown up her body, she at last pulled it over her head and stood nearly naked in front of her cousin with only a pair of white panties coving her. Pausing a moment, she let Faith look.

Flushed, and with her heart racing, Faith watched her slowly strip in front of her eyes. Her breath caught as Erica stood in front of her baring most of her lithe body. When at last Erica picked up the borrowed nightgown and pulled it over her head, she started to breath again as it covered her cousin's body one more time.

Pulling it tightly down over her skin, Erica finally exhaled as well. "There." she sighed. "It... it's a little tight."

Stepping even closer, Faith smiled. "You still look *beautiful* in it." she said breathily. "If anything, even *more* so than the first time!"

"Faith?" Erica said softly. "Why?"

"Don't you *know*?" she answered with another step closer, now less than a foot away. "I think you *do*, Erica."

"It's *w-wrong*." Erica stammered. "We're *cousins*, Faith."

"I don't *care*." Faith said with another half step closer. "I... I *love* you, Erica... and I think you love *me*."

Turning away, Erica felt a tear fall down her cheek. "I... I *can't*!" she sobbed. "I'm going *away* tomorrow, Faith!" she justified. "I... I'm going to... b... become... a... a *man*!" Tears streaming down her face, Erica tried to hold them back, but they came anyway. "How can you even *look* at me!"

Stepping up until she could wrap her arms around Erica, Faith pressed her growing body against her cousin's back and held her from behind.

"Because right now, *tonight*, you're still my Erica." Turning her to face one another, she wiped Erica's tears away while one hand still held her. "Don't cry." she begged.

"I... I can't *help* it, Faith!" she quietly blubbered. Finally giving in, she reached out and wrapped her arms around Faith. "Oh, *Faith!* Hold me?" As they held each other desperately, both cried onto each other's shoulders. After several minutes, their emotions spent, they backed away from each other as Erica grabbed some tissues off her vanity and handed one to Faith. "Here." she said simply.

"Thanks." Faith sniffed. Drying their eyes, they smiled weakly at one another. Gathering her courage once more, she asked, "Erica? Can... may I sleep with you tonight? Like we used to?"

Looking at her lovesick cousin, Erica shook her head. "We... we *shouldn't*, Faith." she sighed. "What if we... um... *do*... something we shouldn't?"

Stepping close, Faith looked hopeful at the suggestion. "We *could*... if you *want* to. I *love* you, Erica! Don't you love *me*?"

Restraining herself, Erica swallowed and nodded. "Yes. You *know* I do..."

Sighing, Faith stepped back away. "... but we're cousins." she admitted.

"Plus, we're still only thirteen!" Erica added.

"I could promise that we *won't*." she offered in compromise. "Just... *one* more night with you? Just to lay *near* you one more time before..." She couldn't bring herself to say what was about to happen to her the next day.

Desperate for the closeness she craved before being sent away, Erica nodded. "OK, but you promise? Just *sleeping* together? *Nothing* else?"

"If I *can* sleep." Faith sighed. "I don't *want* to. It'll make morning come that much sooner. But, yeah... I... I *promise*."

Sighing, she looked one last time at the vanity's mirror, but her mother's ghost was gone. In its place was her own reflection. After a year of living with her young mother looking back at her from every mirror, she was finally able to see only her true self.

Moving into bed, Erica settled onto her back while Faith joined her there. While the two settled in, Faith turned to face Erica.

"I *meant* what I said, Erica." she whispered. "I *love* you."

"I know." she replied. "More than you *should*." Hesitating, she turned and faced Faith. "I... I love you, *too*... *much* more than as just my cousin."

"I'll never love *anyone* else, Erica." Faith cried quietly. "Like Mamma will never love anyone but Daddy!" She moved closer and took Erica in her arms and held her. "I'll love you and *only* you forever! I promise!"

Erica held Faith in return, listening and nodding in response. She knew it wasn't true, Faith would move on and love someone who would be allowed to return her love, but it felt good just to hear it. "I love you, Faith!"

The night passed slowly as neither slept much. They simply held each other until dawn threatened to break. Just before the sun rose, Faith woke Erica from the restless sleep she'd slipped into.

"Erica?" she whispered. "It... it's time."

"No!" Erica cried. "I won't let you go!"

"You *have* to..." Faith admonished. The younger girl slowly pulled away before Faith leaned in closely. "...so I can do this." She tilted her head slightly and let her lips brush against Erica's. With a rush of fervor, and seeing Erica not pulling away, Faith poured all the love and affection that she'd built up over the past twelve months into that simple kiss.

Erica felt Faith's lips touch hers and, for that moment, all of her pain and anguish vanished and she felt whole again. Letting Faith continue, not wanting it to ever end, she reveled in the closeness and hated that it had come so late in their time together. When at last Faith slowly pulled away and the pain and loneliness in her heart returned, Erica began to weep for the life she longed for with all her heart, but knew she would never be allowed to have.

"Goodbye, my sweet Erica." Faith cried softly as she pulled away. Climbing out of Erica's bed, she made herself return to her own, there to cry alone until exhaustion claimed her.

Soon enough, the sun rose and Erica got up to go downstairs where her aunt waited with Brooke, there to cut away her beautiful hair. The girl hadn't packed anything as Erica wouldn't be taking any of her clothes. Her new ones had been ordered and sent on ahead to the school, sight unseen.

Erica didn't even want to see what they looked like. They wouldn't be her pretty dresses and outfits, so she didn't care. In that moment, she hated her aunt for sending her away, for destroying the beautiful home they'd had together and making her go back to being a boy for the sake of a future she didn't even want.

When she saw the anguish in Heather's eyes though, and even in Brooke's who, with unspoken words, had made clear that she disapproved of Erica's girlish nature, she couldn't stay angry though. She was just sad. Brooke cried silent tears together with the ones that fell from Erica's eyes as she sheared off the girl's beautiful hair down to a close-cropped boy's cut. She kept one perfect curl, as did her aunt, so they could have something to look at and remember the girl Erica was and the woman she might have been.

Cook and Franchesca couldn't watch, so they busied themselves with tasks and made themselves scarce. Franchesca angrily went about her work, while Theresa chose to imagine Erica leaving for a glamorous girl's school in one of her prettiest dresses. The reality was much more somber, witnessed only by the stoic Fredrick, Heather, and the cab driver there to take her away.

Standing and waiting as Fredrick put her essentials bag in the cab for her, the man never uttered a word as he placed a single hand on her shoulder, paused a moment without even looking down, and then walked back to the house. When the cab driver got in to wait for his passenger, the only ones left outside were Erica and Heather.

She walked up to the child she'd grown to love more than life itself, just as fiercely and completely as her own daughter. She looked utterly alien to Heather's eyes now, dressed in a fine tailored dark suit and boy's haircut.

She could still see the girl standing there, tears held back by sheer willpower, but with a dead, vacant look in her eyes. Heather embraced her one more time, allowing the tears to flow from her eyes for the both of them.

Softly, Heather whispered as she held Erica so tight she threatened to squeeze the life out of her. "You will *always* be my daughter, Erica! No matter *what!* I *love* you, sweetheart!" Finally, releasing her to enter the cab, she could stand no more and ran into the house; tears falling like the threatening rain soon would.

Watching out the rear window of the cab as it started to pull away, she saw the drapes in the upstairs window part. She knew it was Faith's window, the same one from which she'd seen her first morning snow. She watched as Faith appeared, still wearing the same nightgown she'd worn the night before, her lovely face marred with tears. Faith hadn't seen her get in the cab. She didn't want to. She'd waited until she could only see the car pulling silently away into the gloomy afternoon light. Watching it depart, she could only utter a single word.

"Erica..."

The cab took her to the airport where she was escorted to the First Class section of the plane that would take her away from the life she'd loved. Met at her destination by a limousine, it swiftly carried her to the exclusive boarding school where no one would ever hear of Erica Dunning.

The next years were a blur. School and study filled her life and nothing else. No one came on holidays and she never went anywhere other than school functions. The school staff found it sad that this fine upstanding and studious 'boy' with a gift for the written word had no one to love and be loved by. However, they were paid the extra fees for year-round boarding, so did their best to at very least make the child comfortable. It was a hollow and empty existence.

Heather had seen to it that her charge would want for nothing. The finest tailored clothes, the best car for a sixteenth birthday present, gifts every Christmas and birthday, but things didn't matter to Erica. Her writing was all that mattered anymore. Heart and soul poured into every page, pages that could make her teachers cry at the heartbreak and depth of feeling they contained.

A therapist, a former colleague of Heather's, was available, and they spoke weekly. She made numerous notes and kept in contact with Heather so she would know that the child she so loved was at least getting by. Heather asked several times to come to the school to visit, but each time the offer was returned with a cold, "It's probably for the best that you didn't, Mrs. Hargrave." from the child she'd sent away.

Letters were delivered, read, and responded to... each with no name. She never signed her name to anything, just the valediction "Love,". For the lost and lonely child, names were just reminders of how much she'd lost.

School finally ended and graduation came, but none of her family attended. She'd coldly disinvited them. With a heart like an empty shell, a diploma was given and taken with the simple words, "Congratulations, Dunning." Over the years, the staff had learned not to ever use her legal first name. It was only ever "Good morning, Dunning" or "Good afternoon, Dunning." First names only led to silence. So the well-paid staff adapted and made do.

Five years passed after Erica left their lives. Heather went about her daily routine, as did Fredrick, Theresa, and Franchesca. Faith however, was another matter. She had totally closed herself off from everyone in her life. Gone was the happy girl, the sad girl, and the frustratingly unreasonable girl. All that was left was a shell; a body that did what she was told and showed no interest in anything.

Heather tried sending her back to school, but it only made her worse. She was given to crying for what seemed to be no reason at all. After patient

questioning it would end up that something had been said or discussed that Erica had once said, talked about, or written. After less than a semester, Heather returned Faith to home-school where at least she would be close and she could be there for her when the tears fell, as they so very often did.

While life went on, Hargrave House was no longer the warm home it once had been. Theresa could barely speak to her employer. She knew Heather was doing what she felt was right, but couldn't stomach her employer's disregard for Erica's broken heart in sending her away. She took no joy in her job; joy that she knew was denied to the poor child who had made a year of their lives brighter than it had been since Richard's death.

Franchesca sat in her room and read Erica's letters to her from school over and over whenever she was not working. She'd made a point of keeping up Erica's 'New Hampshire vs. California' website, taking a pseudonym and writing new articles after long hours searching for new things to compare and contrast about the two states.

Fredrick seemed the most unchanged in his behavior, but the life was gone from his eyes. He continued to treat Heather with the respect of her position, but no more than absolutely necessary. His feelings were closed off and surrounded by a brick wall.

Faith stopped attending church once she turned sixteen and she was given the choice. Heather prayed every night for her daughter, as well as for guidance; some sign that what she'd done had been for the best and was in accordance with His will. Nothing ever came of it, but she knew that didn't mean anything. God had stopped burning bushes long ago.

Heather also stopped trying to make her daughter keep a schedule. She resigned herself to just let the girl be and hope that she would get past her pain. She asked the ex-colleague of hers who'd taken over her local practice to be Faith's therapist when it became clear that Heather was the *last* person Faith would talk to about her problems.

Each morning Faith would wake and lie in her bed, trying to get up the will to get dressed and go eat, resolving that this day would be better than the last, but would inevitably make her way down in ratty pajamas no sooner than ten or eleven. Long gone were her pretty dresses, replaced instead with off the shelf yoga pants and baggy sweatshirts.

She made herself stay fit, walking the woods often and visiting places she'd gone with Erica, but nothing she did brought joy to her. She tried dating to make a serious effort to get over her heartbreak, she even thought she might be in love with a girl she'd known from elementary school who'd come out earlier that last year, but everyone she dated, boy or girl, just made her feel worse. It was always as though she were cheating on Erica. She knew it wasn't logical, but she couldn't get over the feelings.

Heather's friends and acquaintances, especially those at their church, often asked about 'that adorable little precocious Erica' and wondered why she never came home from boarding school, even for holidays. Heather would always make excuses that Erica was far too busy and had declined all her invitations home; that her education had become her life, and Heather had no intention of letting anything, even a family holiday, stand in the way of her future. Eventually people stopped asking as rumors began to spread that Heather had never really cared for the orphaned niece who'd been thrust upon her, sending her away as soon as she could.

They stopped going to the annual Dempsey Halloween party after the first year without Erica. Faith refused to wear a costume that year, and turned down every request to dance. A lovesick Mike would barely speak to the Hargraves, leaving a cloud to hang over the celebration that year. While everyone knew why the mood was so somber, no one would talk about it openly. Heather made her apologies the following year, and advised the Dempseys that they would no longer attend the annual celebration as she had no desire to let Erica's absence darken what was supposed to be a happy and joyous occasion.

Mike grew into his own after they stopped coming and finally started dating, ending up in a serious relationship with Faith's old friend Jennifer Wilks. Everyone 'knew' they would get married as soon as they finished high school, but Jennifer left New Hampshire shortly after graduation to pursue a life in Boston, leaving a broken and rejected Mike alone to work his parents' ranch with no feeling left in him.

Brooke took it harder than any of them. She blamed herself that Erica was forced away; that her insistence at extracting the promise from Heather that 'Erica' would only ever be a coping tool and nothing more had driven Heather into taking the only other option; sending her away. Heather tried to convince her that the decision was only partly to do with the promise she'd made to Brooke, but she wouldn't hear it. She *knew* that Erica had been aware of her disapproval, and it drove her mad with guilt and regret.

The economic downturn didn't help matters. Brooke was forced to close her shop except for select appointments with regulars, and even *they* started drying up after a while. She started drinking to dull the emotional pain, and her relationship with Jenny became strained to the breaking point.

One morning after a severe bender, Jenny gave Brooke an ultimatum, quit drinking and join AA or she was leaving and filing for divorce. Brooke did as she asked, but their relationship was uneasy. They still loved each other, but the same cloud hung over their home as over Hargrave House.

Time sped past; their sleepy end of the country growing more and more sparse as an increasing number of Coös County residents either left to seek their fortunes elsewhere, or died where they'd lived. By the time Faith graduated, over a thousand people had left the area... one way or the other.

Life, while it *had* gone on, seemed to be slowly leaving them all behind.

Chapter 16 - Time Changes Everything

Waiting for her name to be called, Erica was nervous. Even though it was a simple outpatient procedure, she knew there was no going back. The money her aunt Heather had sent her every month had been squirreled away, invested, and turned into a tidy sum that was paying for her new life.

None of her teachers ever understood how she could write so eloquently on subjects that seemed so far beyond her years. She won writing contests that added to her growing sum and used that money to start her own business at sixteen; a publishing house with herself as sole author. Her main target audience were others like herself; boys and girls trapped in a body not their own. She wrote stories about it, about coming to terms with it, dealing with family, friends, loved ones, employers, doctors, lawyers...

She wrote tragedies about girls who tried to become men, not because they felt they were, but because 'men had it easy', until they got their first taste of male competitiveness and ruthlessness in the real world. Where being a man meant no one cared if you lived or starved, or were even openly discriminated against because they were now a man who had 'all the advantages'.

She wrote comedies about boys who had to spend their vacation pretending to be a girl because their older sister's clothes were the only ones packed.

She wrote love stories; romance novels centered around people like herself and the thrilling highs and terrible lows that came of trying to find true love when the obstacles seemed so impossibly insurmountable.

She wrote about it from every angle; the good, the bad, and the truly ugly. Rape, molestation, sex slavery, botched operations, regrets after transition and wanting to go back, ruined marriages, suicide, transitioning teens and pre-teens and the havoc their rash and youthful choice smote on the ruin of their later lives, murder, and lonely death by neglect. She wrote it all.

She also wrote of God's love for all people, *including* those like herself. How *no one* was too lost to be saved, and how *everyone* was precious in His sight. She wrote about her own loss of faith over the death of her parents, how through that loss she became part of a beautiful family that loved her, and how they guided her back to His love. She wrote how she reconciled the evil of the world... including the hate spread by false teachings of His word... with God's love for us, using a simple lesson passed on by Heather from her father. It was her only non-fiction book and became a best seller the month she graduated.

Through it all, she waited for her eighteenth birthday. The day it came, she started hormone therapy, having already taken care of the legal needs beforehand. She paid to bank her reproductive material against future need, then threw herself into transition with abandon. Now she sat waiting for her breast surgery, the one to feminize her facial structure like she'd had before testosterone had mangled it having been done months earlier.

That, along with a voice feminization surgery to return her voice to the soft strains of her past, and laser hair removal, had all served to bring a little peace to her tortured soul. Within only a few months she had made herself completely as she saw herself in her mind's eye; free to be the woman she'd ached to become since age twelve. Her name had also changed on her birthday. Legally and forever, she would be Erica Bella Dunning.

As she waited in the doctor's office, she received a text. Glancing at it, expecting it to be some message from her secretary June, her heart began to race when she saw it wasn't and who it *was* from. All the message said were three simple words.

"*We found her.*"

Following the hyperlink, she read in horror the report from the private detective that she'd hired to find her long lost first love.

April Stone was diagnosed with clinical depression by her family doctor at age 13. She was prescribed anti-depressants, which led to a sleep disorder, for which she obtained tablets of Estazolam (a sleep aid that can worsen depression) from a street dealer.

She overdosed at age 15 and was committed to a psychiatric ward for observation. She was released under her parents' care 12 hours later when it was determined the overdose was accidental, not a suicide attempt. She continued psychiatric treatment until she reached the age of majority in January. At that point, she left home, moved to Flagstaff after getting her juvenile record sealed, and took a job as a waitress at a restaurant called Ed's Diner while she completed high school.

Miss Stone graduated on June 8th and is still living in Flagstaff in an apartment near her place of employment. She is unmarried and does not appear to be dating or seeing anyone socially. She has no apparent contact with her family, and maintains only a few social media accounts. She appears to intend to enroll in college at some point as she seems to have sent away for multiple pamphlets for many different institutions around the country. Her area of interest appears to be psychology.

She sees a volunteer therapist, Dr. Heart, one afternoon each week. We've determined by our own methods that she still suffers nightmares, depression, anxiety, and a fear of dying alone. Your previous name is mentioned repeatedly. A recent photo, taken July fourth, is attached in appendix A. Contact information, address, and location of employment are fully detailed in appendix B.

This concludes our investigation and we thank you for your business. Good luck!

Erica briefly considered rescheduling her procedure with this new information, but dismissed the idea and thought that if she were to go to April now it wouldn't be right. Knowing that April was working on fixing

her issues, Erica knew she needed to do the same before seeing her. Making one concession to her need to connect as soon as possible, she texted a message to the cell number the detectives provided.

"I've missed you. I never really held it against you that you're a girl. -E"

Within seconds she got a reply.

"Eric?"

Blushing, she only sent a smiley followed by a heart.

"OMG! is it REALLY you?"

She tapped out a quick reply.

"It took me this long and a few private detectives to find you. I never stopped missing you."

Seconds passed before the reply came.

"how do I know it's really you?"

"'Me: You smell funny. You: It's just soap. Me: I use soap and that isn't it.' The day I moved in and my Mom went to the hospital. Convinced?"

"ERIC!!! where are you? your number is not one I know! 603? still New Hampshire?"

"Yes, but I don't live with my aunt anymore. I live on my own now. Long story. Maybe with a happy ending."

"I HAVE to see you! Tell me where you are and I'll find a way to book a flight!"

"I'd love to, but need time to get things sorted. I know all about what happened. Keep going to Dr. Heart. He sounds like he really wants to help you." Sending that, she quickly finished it. *"Tied up the next few weeks. Can't get away! Sry! Next month I'll send a plane ticket. Round trip. I need to see you and for you to see me. You'll understand."*

An interminable wait followed. Finally, she got her reply. *"guess you got a good pvt eye! so embarrassed! made a mess of my life! month's a long wait, but so's 6 yrs. what's tying you up? working in a BDSM shop? ha ha"*

Erica giggled as she replied, hoping now that they wouldn't call her name anytime soon. *"Very funny! Tied up on business. Started it at 16 and it took off. Easy to do when you're heartbroken, no distractions like love to get in the way."*

Hearing her name called, she quickly typed a goodbye. *"They're calling me! Gotta run! Just got the P.I. report before I texted you, but had to tell you right away! Love you! -E"*

Turning off her phone, she strode into the cosmetic surgeon's office.

Her mind drifted freely in a haze after the drugs put her to sleep. She saw memories of her life floating past her, both happy and terrible. It seemed to stretch off into eternity before she felt the sensation that she was no longer floating, but falling... falling helplessly into an abyss of darkness.

Erica stood in a dark place that felt like a dream, but at the same time didn't.

"It's no dream." he said.

Looking around for the person who spoke, she wondered who it was.

"Funny, I knew who it was... I just couldn't believe who it was." the man said, knowing her thoughts. "Let's save time. Yes, I can read your mind. If

you want, just look for me and you can see me. Wish my old man had told me that! See Dad? No need to be all cryptic!"

Erica slowly found herself standing at the edge of a column of light surrounded by darkness with a vaguely familiar man opposite her.

"You look *beautiful*, Erica!" he said proudly.

She tilted her head like Faith used to. "*Dad*?"

"Yep!" Jack replied, looking down at the polo and khakis he seemed to be wearing. "Though I remember wearing BDUs the last time I had clothes."

"But you're..."

"Dead." Jack sighed and looked up at the darkness. "Damn, was I *this* thick-headed, Dad?" He looked back to her and smiled. "To answer the question that's just forming in your Grape, I'm here because you *asked* me to be here to answer the question that's been itching in the back of your brain-housing for six years. I don't want to ruin the moment for you, so I'll let you go ahead and ask."

She swallowed hard. "Um... well, I guess what I want to know is... will you still love me as your *daughter* instead of as your *son*?"

"Erica, I love *you*... daughter or son makes *no* difference." Jack half-smiled at her. "Though it was funny as *hell* watching you pretend to be *Buttons*!"

"*Stop* it, Jack!" his wife admonished. Beside him as though she'd been there all along, Erica's mother looked at their child. "Hi, sweetie! You look *lovely*! But then, I thought you did when I was your shadow that year, too."

"*Mom*?" Erica almost cried before she looked down at herself, seeing that she appeared exactly how she imagined her ideal self to be.

"Yes, sweetie. I'm sorry I had to *leave* you, but you'll understand why someday." she explained without explaining.

"I *have* to know!" Erica said stepping further into the light. "Am I making the right decision? Choosing to be a woman?"

Jack looked at his wife. "She thinks it was *her* choice!" he laughed and looked down. "Sorry, sweetie! You were *submarined*, same as *everyone*!"

"*Jack*," she growled. "She asked a serious *question*!" She looked back at their child. "To answer your question, as long as you're following your heart... yes. He loves us and wants us to be happy. Your book was right. You should listen to your own advice, sweetie."

The shaft of light began to slowly fade, Jack sighing and putting an arm around his wife. "Damn, that was fast! Wish you'd got the thousand-year treatment *I* got, just not how *I* got it. I'd love to spend a few lifetimes with you. Just remember that we love *you*... *always*."

"*Forever*, sweetie." her mother added. "Just the way you *are*, Erica..."

"Erica..."

"Erica?"

Her eyes fluttered opened to the sound of someone saying her name. Two hours had passed and her secretary June was standing over her calling out to her, there to pick her up and take her to her office where she could be watched for several more hours before finally going home.

Thinking as she sat in the back of her limousine, Erica pondered the odd dream. *Was it a dream?* she wondered before answering herself. *Of course it was! Just my mind needing to feel like Mom and Dad would approve.* Taking a pad, she jotted down some details for later use in a book.

Three weeks of on and off texting with April later, Erica felt up to meeting her face-to-face, but first she felt she had to tell April everything.

"*You there A?*" Erica texted her.

"*for you, anytime E!*"

"*Can you talk on the phone right now? You're off work today, right?*"

"*sure, if you want to i'd love to hear your voice! probably sexy!*"

"*Some people think so. I'll call from this number so you know it's me.*"

"*Did your voice change much?*"

"*In a way, yes. Calling.*"

Feeling the sweat on her hands as the phone rang, Erica felt like she was twelve all over again and going shopping in Berlin. After only one ring, it was answered.

"Eric?" April's voice sounded a little deeper to her ears, but Erica knew at once it was her.

"Yeah." she said in simple reply.

"You sound funny. Are you stuffed up?"

"No. April, I've been *dying* to tell you something... something big, but I've been afraid to." Erica closed her eyes and imagined April on the other end.

Shaking her head, April laughed. "*Whatever* it is, it *can't* be as bad as what I did! We must have a weird connection." Erica heard her giggle. "You almost sound like a *woman!*"

With her eyes still closed, Erica took a deep breath. "I *am*." she confessed. Dead air followed. A sinking feeling in her stomach threatened to consume her while she squeezed her eyes tighter shut.

April was confused. Sure that she'd misheard, or that something had been lost in the phone connection, she asked, "Sorry, you're *what*?"

Opening her eyes, Erica spoke plainly. "I'm a *woman*, April. It's a *long* story, but I'd like you to know *all* of it... if you'll let me *share* it with you."

"Eric? Is this some sort of *joke*? I mean, you were *always* doing things to make me smile or laugh, so... Eric don't *BS* me!"

Tears started to form in her eyes as she could see it all crumbling down. April would hate her. She'd despise her for destroying the boy she loved, replacing him with a freak. "It's no *joke*, April. I'm... I'm a *woman*. It's *really* me! Ask me *anything*! I can tell you what we had for lunch the first day of first grade! You had PB and J with a banana and a box of milk, and I had mustard tuna with pickle, chocolate milk, and three Oreos! I remember because that jerk Steve Reynolds tried to take my sandwich, but got grossed out by it! It's *me*, April! My... my name's *Erica* now... Erica *Bella*."

April almost dropped her phone. She had no doubt. No one but her best friend could know that level of detail. "Whoa! Did you say *Erica*? You took your *mom's* name?"

Tears started to roll down her cheek. Composing herself, she nodded her head. "Before I was born, Mom and Dad were going to call me that 'cause the doctor thought I was going to be a girl!" She sobbed into the phone before she pulled her emotions back enough to continue. "I guess the doctor was right after all! I... I just took the name I was *supposed* to have."

She was moving beyond stunned and directly into livid. "You son of a *bitch*! You *jerked* my heart strings for *three weeks* and you... you..."

Wiping her tears away, only to have them immediately replaced, Erica stammered her reply. "I... I *tried* not to! I... I just couldn't *help* myself! I fell in love with you when you tried to kiss me goodbye in LAX! I... I could see it in your *eyes*! You... you *loved* me!"

Pacing her living room like a caged tiger, April was fuming. "Of course I loved you! I nearly *killed* myself, I missed you so badly! You never *called*, you never *wrote*! What the actual *hell*... *Eric*!"

"I... I t-tried to call you, the day after I got there... b-but your p-parents..." she stammered, the pain from that day coming back as though it were yesterday.

Stopping, April remembered the afternoon the day after her best friend left. Shortly after she got home from school the phone had rung and she thought it might be 'Eric' based on her father's tone, but they had insisted that it wasn't. "Those *bastards*!" she fumed. "You know they made me *unfriend* you? They changed my cell number, made me delete my email... they even told the school I had to have a new email there, too! Claimed you were *harassing* me!"

"I... I know." Erica nodded through the tears. "I tried *everything*... but... Oh *God*, April! I'm *so* sorry!" She tried to stem the tide once more, but her tears kept falling. "You... you don't know what I *went* through! I lost *everything*! I lost *Mom*! You! I even lost what little *luggage* I had! When I got there I had *nothing* and because your parents sent me a week early, they weren't *ready* for me! Then the *power* went out for *days*... they had *no* cell service... no *Internet*... the *roads* were closed... I... I..."

Trying to explain, the more Erica did, the more upset she got. "I ended up having to wear my cousin Faith's clothes, and... oh *God*, April! That first time I looked in the mirror looking like a *girl*? I saw *Mom* looking back! It was like she was *there*! *Alive* again! I couldn't *reach* you, I was *alone*, and there was *Mom*!" Calming herself, she finished. "At first it was *necessity*, then it was an *escape*, then it was who I *am*... who I always *was*, really."

Her fury spent itself as April listened to the story of how Erica ended up so different. "Alright... *Erica*... so you've lived as a *girl* for the last six years?"

"No." Erica shook her head. "Just the *first* year, and again since I turned eighteen." She spent the next half hour detailing how she'd become known as Erica, how as she got older it was impossible to continue passing as a girl, and then how her aunt had sent her away to pretend to be Eric once more.

"When they sent me away, I was... dead, completely *dead* inside, April. I did what I *had* to, but *nothing* mattered anymore. I was forced to be 'Eric the orphan boy' and had *no* one who loved *me*. I... I *hate* them! My aunt... Faith... *all* of them." she continued, her voice hardening. "They didn't want *me*. I *never* went home after they sent me away and I *refused* visits from them. I wrote back out of respect for the letters *they* wrote to *Eric*, but since I wasn't *him*, I never signed them. As far as anyone was concerned then, Eric was a non-person... and Erica *died* when they sent her away. I was *nobody*."

April sat at her kitchen table to listen. "So... *then* what happened?"

"I started *writing* again." Erica sniffed. "It brought me back to myself. I was *good*, so I won some awards. I started my own publishing company using my prize money and my aunt's 'guilt money'." Erica laughed at the memory. "When I turned sixteen, she bought me a freaking *Mercedes S-Class*! Like I *ever* wanted her *crap*! *That's* what put me over the top, though. I sold it right back to the dealership, *undriven*, and used the money to publish my first book." Sighing, she looked around her office. "It was a hit, so now I'm a big-time independent publisher. *Big deal*."

Conflicted as she heard the boy she knew in the young woman that she was listening to, April shook her head in disbelief. "It *is* a big deal, Eric...a! I mean, aren't you a *success* now? You probably have like a *million* friends!"

"*None*." she shook her head solemnly. "Maybe *one*, if you count my secretary, June. She *likes* me, but like a good *boss*, not really like a *friend*."

Success only brought me *two* things I ever wanted. The first was being able to become the woman I *needed* to be."

April paused a moment before asking, "And the *second*?"

"Your *phone* number." Erica practically sighed the last part out, unable to hide the sound a lovesick woman.

Smiling a little, she asked, "So you did all *that*, to... to find *me*?" April heard her old friend giggle over the phone.

"A *little*! I mean, you were like my *goal*. I needed to make enough money to hire enough detectives to *find* you, but I wanted to help people while *doing* it. I guess I *have*." Erica paused before finishing her thought, her voice dropping low and sad. "But none of that *matters*. I guess it was all for *nothing*."

"So I'm *nothing* then?" April barked. "What, because I'm just a *waitress* and you're some big-time *publisher*?"

"*No!*" Erica snapped back at her. "Because now that I *found* you, you don't *want* me!"

Slowly realizing how harsh she'd been, without even giving Erica a chance to explain, April took it down a notch. "Um... OK. *Yeah*, I was a bit of a bitch... but you can't just *drop* something like this on someone like that!"

"So how was I *supposed* to break it gently then?" Erica harrumphed.

"Well for *starters* you could..." Pausing, April tried to think of a gentle way to tell a long lost friend they changed sex. "Um... well... why were you *hitting* on me!?" she shouted.

"Because I *love* you!" Erica shouted back. "I think I've *always* loved you! Because I *dream* about you! Because I've never been with another woman

because they *aren't* you!" She was angry, but glad to finally get those things out in the open.

April was dumbstruck. "Uh... *really*?"

Still fuming, Erica barked in reply. "Yes!" Making herself count to ten, she tried to be calm again. "Yes, April. I meant *every* word, and every word I texted you was right from my very fragile heart."

She tried to imagine what her twelve year old sweetheart would look like as an eighteen year old woman, but couldn't match the two. "So... what do you look like *now*?" she asked curiously.

Erica tried to be serious, but her friend had just left too much open to let the opportunity pass. "Like Bo Derek... only *hotter*!"

Laughing genuinely for the first time in a long while, April smiled. "Oh... *very* funny! If I wasn't sure *before*, I'd know *now*... it's still *you*! But come on... *seriously*. Did your private eye get you a picture of *me*? They do that in the movies."

She laughed with April and looked at the photo of her once more. "July fourth. You were on your way home from work. Cute uniform!"

"Oh, *God!* I *remember* that day! It was hot, windy, and I was dog-tired from working a *double*! I musta looked like a *junky*!"

"Not at *all*. Sure, you look *tired*, but I can still see the beautiful girl I once knew in the woman I see."

Feeling herself getting the same feelings she used to get when she would imagine being with Eric, she shook it off quickly. "Oh! You're *smooth*!"

Shaking her head, Erica leaned back in her chair. "Just being *honest*."

April felt a mild tingle run down her spine at the idea that she could still make her childhood sweetheart look past the physical and see *her*. "So, since you know what *I* look like, it's only fair that you tell me what *you* look like... for *real*, I mean!"

Unsure how she'd take it, Erica told her anyway. "I look a *lot* like my mom, but with dirty-blonde hair. I guess I always *did*."

She tried to remember Mrs. Dunning, but the memory was too clouded and vague. "I... I'm *sorry*, Eric. *Erica!* Damn it! Sorry! I... I can't *remember* her. Most of my memories from back then feel like another lifetime. The meds they had me on kinda messed with my head."

Grabbing the photo she'd had taken the previous week for book covers, she messaged it to April. "Sent you a pic." she said simply.

Hearing her phone chime, she swiped a finger and her memories of Erica's mother suddenly jelled into place. "My *God*, Erica! You *do* look just like her... except the hair!"

"I *know*." Erica murmured.

"Oh. *Right*. You just *said* that." April kept looking at the photo and then finally saw the boy she used to know so well in her eyes. "Oh, *wow*!"

"What's *wrong*?" Erica asked concernedly.

"No! *Nothing*!" she answered. "I just... I see *you*... I mean... I see the *you* that I *remember*. It's your *eyes*. They have that same look in them that I saw that day at the airport. You look so *sad*! Oh, Erica! I'm *so* confused!"

"If you *like*, I could come *see* you... or I could fly you out *here* if you still want your vacation. My *treat*!"

Biting her lip, she weighed her options, unsure if she really wanted to see in person the woman who'd taken the place of her first love. "Well, I... I already asked for the time off, and I *could* use a break from this weather! Are you *sure* you still *want* to see me? After what I *said*?"

"I could *never* stay mad at you, April. *Remember?*"

Recalling the number of times she'd shaken 'Eric' out of being mad with just a smile, she laughed lightly and smiled once more. "Yeah, I *do*."

Taking a deep breath, Erica closed her eyes and saw April smiling at her, her bitterness toward April melting like those first snowflakes in her hand. "Alright then, your round trip ticket should be delivered tomorrow morning and your return flight will be for next Sunday, but you can trade it in for a *later* flight if you want to stay the whole two weeks... or... an *earlier* flight if you.. um... want to cut it *short*. Sound *good*?"

She smiled wistfully. "Yeah, it really *does*." Catching herself having strong feelings for a woman she effectively barely knew, she re-focused herself. "Um, I mean it sounds *OK*. So then... *Saturday*?"

A feeling of hope spread through Erica like a wave. "Saturday... at the airport... almost where we left off!"

The day came and Erica sat waiting impatiently at Manchester-Boston. The only flight she could get for April was connected through Salt Lake, so she felt bad that April had been stuck on a plane for over five hours, but felt every second with trepidation. She busied herself with work, using her tablet, until June texted to tell her that April's flight was disembarking. Standing quickly, she checked her makeup and hair for the fifth time and straightened out her business suit, pulling the skirt down and blousing her top a little. Satisfied that the outfit would do, she waited as she started to see departing passengers.

Suddenly, through the crowd, she spotted April. Putting on her best smile, looking to be in her twenties instead of eighteen due to her smart suit, Erica waited until her childhood friend's eyes connected with hers. April looked older than her eighteen years in a completely different sort of way; tired, care-worn, and beaten down by life. A simple top and jeans showed her figure to be fit, but her face was thin, pale, drawn, and anemic-looking.

Approaching, feeling more than a little intimidated by the powerful businesswoman waiting for her, at first she thought that Erica had sent someone to pick her up; her secretary or someone similar. As soon as she could see Erica's eyes though, she knew it was her one-time best friend. The two stood in front of one another for an eternity lasting only a few breaths, not saying anything. Finally, Erica broke the silence.

"Do... do you have any *bags* to claim?" Seeing only a nod from her long lost love, she watched as April searched her, as though she were looking for the zipper in the woman-suit, waiting for her old friend to open it and climb out. "OK. Well, do you want me to go *with* you to get them, or..."

Still unable believe that the woman standing in front of her was the same 'boy' she'd lived with for six months and had known her entire young life, April was stunned. This was the same person she'd dreamt about, *fantasized* about, and loved. "Um... whatever is *fine*. If you want..." she said absently.

Erica closed her eyes and waited for the blow. *Now that she's here and can see me with her own eyes...* Erica was certain April just wanted to go home and move on.

Noticing the look, April knew it all too well. It was the same look she'd seen on Erica's face preparing to hear bad news as a child. "No!" she cried. "No, Erica! I didn't.... oh, *shit!*" She looked down at her feet absently.

Opening her eyes suddenly, Erica saw the same little girl who'd just flunked her math test and was afraid to tell her parents. "No, April! It's *OK!*

It's... um... oh, to *hell* with this!" She stepped forward and hugged her oldest friend tightly. "I missed you *so* much!" she almost cried.

April was stunned, but quickly returned the hug, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. "You have *no idea* how much I missed you!" As the two separated, she wiped her eyes. "Well, *maybe* you do!"

Shaking her head to clear it, Erica tried to smile. "Well then, lets go get your bags and I'll drive you to your hotel. I got you a suite at a place not far from here. I hope you like it!"

They walked in silence for a time, still very unsure of each other. April led the way, grabbing her suitcases and dropping them on the luggage cart that Erica had brought to her. April found herself looking around at everything else but her oldest friend; the rental car booth, the ticket counter, the people coming and going, anything to distract her from the reality that was so different from her fantasy reunion with her one true love. There were no bells, no music in her heart, no electric thrill of the first touch. It was just... *awkward*. Heading to exit the airport, she started toward the parking garage escalator, but was stopped when Erica called to her.

"April? My car's right *outside*."

Following her out, the visitor from Arizona looked for a car, but couldn't see anything past a white limousine. "Where?" She watched as Erica stood next to the limo while the driver got out and waited patiently. Slowly approaching, she laughed a little. "You rented a *limo*?"

Furrowing her brow, Erica shook her head. "Of course not! Eddie? Would you get Miss Stone's bags please? April? This is my *driver*, Eddie."

She saw the large black man in the gray suit tip his hat at her with a smile. "Ma'am!" he said as he took her suitcases and dropped them in the trunk.

April stood next to the back of the car stunned. "You have your own *limo*? Jesus, Erica! I mean, you said you were doing *well*, but..."

Slowly approaching her only friend in the world, she sighed sadly. "You might say I got used to it." She lowered her head in sorrowful memory of the happy life she all-too-briefly knew. "My aunt Heather had a butler and chauffeur named Fredrick. He was such a *wonderful* man. I miss *him*."

Seeing Erica's sorrow made the powerful businesswoman look small and helpless. April made her way over to her as Eddie opened the door for them both. Climbing in, the newcomer settled on the far side of the car while Erica sat on the passenger side. There was enough room on her bench that she could have laid down and taken a nap. "I'm *impressed!*" she smiled. Sitting across from her, April seemed to be looking at everything but Erica.

"Th-thanks!" her long-lost love muttered. After the driver got in, the car slowly pulled away from the curb. Soon they were moving and a thick silence hung in the air. Erica closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Come on, E! Just spit it out." April said, recognizing the signs that Erica was trying to get up the nerve to say something.

Her breath fell out of her like someone had just popped a balloon. Smiling, she nodded. "You know me *too* well, April. I guess this was all just a big mistake. I know you're... *disturbed*... seeing me this way." Seeing her about to object, she held up a hand like her aunt Heather used to do to forestall an objection. "I *know*... it doesn't matter so long as I'm *happy*, right? You're *fine* with it, right? You and I *both* know that's not true."

Feeling insulted, April lashed out. "Where do *you* get off..."

Erica was hurting. Here she was, finally with the one girl she never stopped loving, and April couldn't even look at her. "Just *stop!*" she shouted. "Alright? *Spare* me the *bullshit!* I *know* it *bothers* you, April! You know

me so well you can tell when I want to say something difficult? Well, *I know you* just as *well!* You're acting like that day that creepy guy followed us home from school! Like I'm some sort of *perv* out looking to score with little *girls*, or something! Just *say it!*"

"*Alright!*" she screamed back. "I *admit* it! It creeps me the hell out! *Jesus, E!* I can *see* you in there! I can *hear* you in the *words* you use. In the way you *talk...* in your *eyes...* hell, even the way you *dress!* You always *were* a conservative dresser, and here you *still* are!" She paused a moment before smiling a little mischievously. "You are *hot*, though!"

Her blood up to boiling, Erica couldn't help herself when April smirked. Before she realized it, Erica had started laughing. Soon, both of them were. After a moment, the laughter died and silence hung in the air again. Not wanting to let it linger, Erica looked at her oldest friend.

"I'm sorry." was all she could say.

April looked away, ashamed of herself. "What do *you* have to be sorry for? *I'm* the one with the *problem!* I should be *happy* for you..." Her voice trailed off, unable to give words to her feelings.

"...but?" Erica asked. Seeing April close her eyes and repress her tears, she knew the rest. "...but you wanted *Eric*, and I'm not *him*. I never *was*. *See?* *That's* why I'm sorry, April. I... I *failed* you. I... I can't be the way you can *want* me to be... and now... now..." She took another deep breath and said what they were both thinking. "I'm not the person you *thought* you loved."

April felt the tear escape her eye. "God *damn* it!" she yelled at herself for letting her feelings show. She learned before she turned fourteen that she needed to repress her feelings, to bury them so far down they didn't show. Now Erica was trying to dig them up again. Old scars of pain, loss, yearning, and guilt bubbled to the surface and she railed against it. "Yes! You *killed* my Eric! He's *dead!* *Gone!* You're just an *imitation!* God, my

parents were *right!* I should have just moved on and *forgotten* about you! This was all just a huge *mistake!*"

Erica's heart shattered. With her family gone, her one hope for happiness left in the world was gone. In its place sat a void that couldn't be filled. Her heart ached for April's love, but she now understood it could never be. Too much time had passed and they were each so changed by the absence of the other that their former selves were simply gone. Any hope for reclaiming their lost love was futile. Erica had *known* it could happen; likely *would* happen. She'd written about this exact same situation time and again. She'd only hoped that somehow *their* love could overcome it.

The hurt welled up inside so powerfully that she wanted to cry it all away. She tried to stem the tide of sorrow as April obviously had done, to spare the woman she loved the pain of seeing her reduced to tears at the hateful words. Unfortunately, while April had been hardened by life to hide her feelings in order to get by, Erica had learned to cope by expressing them and letting them flow freely. She had no way of stopping the flood of tears; no cofferdam of anger to fall back on. She could never truly hate someone she cared about, even if they hated her. The once again lost orphan girl managed to hold her tears back just long enough to turn away before they began pouring down her face.

April couldn't watch as the wounds she'd inflicted tore her one-time best friend and first true love apart. Part of her despised Erica for being weak, for letting her feelings show and not burying them as she had done. She hated that Erica wasn't strong enough to spare her the knowledge that she had just destroyed her best friend's dreams. The rest of her was at war with the anger. *You're a cruel, hard, and bitter woman that doesn't deserve someone like Erica!* She tried to hold on to her anger, but the tide had turned. Her anger washed inward in a sea of guilt and remorse until all that was left was the pain of watching her dearest friend cry.

Chapter 17 - The Road Not Taken

It was a bright Wednesday morning, five days from Halloween. Heather sat in her loveseat reading Keats, while Faith was upstairs alone in her room, as usual. While Cook puttered in the kitchen and Franchesca updated Erica's website before starting the laundry, Fredrick busied himself with preventative maintenance on the limousine. It seemed like just another day.

It was. Just as was the day before, and the day before that. Just like the thousands of days that ran together in a seemingly indistinguishable string of sameness over the last five years. When at last the sun began to set, right as Heather was heading up the stairs to go and try and coax Faith down to dinner, she heard a car pull up their driveway.

Not expecting anyone, Heather's heart raced for a moment, hoping it might be who she longed to see driving up to her house, but the hope died in her quickly, knowing it never would be. *He's never coming back.* she accepted. *I abandoned him and he hates me. I deserve no less.* Still wondering who would be coming to see her though, she slowly started back down the steps just as Fredrick opened the front door in response to the gentle knocking.

As the door opened, she could see two ladies standing outside. From her perspective, she could only see them from the waist down. Stepping down the staircase, her view of the two slowly moved up their bodies until she saw their faces and her heart skipped a beat.

"*Erica!?*" she gasped as she began to run down the rest of the stairs and around the corner toward the door.

Standing just outside, her shoulder-length red hair curled to perfection, Erica had grown up, but not so much as to prevent her aunt from knowing it was her. She was taller, over five-foot ten, two of those inches aided by the heels she wore, and her outfit accentuated her very feminine curves, but she could still see the girl she once knew in the woman at her door.

Heather stood mutely as Cook, Franchesca, and Faith all started heading toward the door at hearing the name that hadn't been spoken openly in the house for almost five years. Not waiting for the others, her aunt finally gathered her composure. "Won't you come in, sweetheart?" She tried to say it with nothing but love and joy in her heart, but fear crowded its way into her voice. "*Please?*"

Looking at her aunt, Erica hardly recognized her. The once elegant lady who shone like a diamond had been turned into a middle-aged woman with gray hair slowly fading away her lovely blond coif and a pale complexion that was replacing her once healthy pink hue. Finally, she managed to squeak out, "*Mamma?*"

Overwhelmed with simultaneous grief and joy, Heather broke down. She fell to the floor, simply unable to keep her own feet.

Immediately, Erica and Fredrick moved to her just as all the others reached the entryway. Chaos ensued as five voices all vied for Heather's attention, trying to see if she was all right, needed a doctor, help to a chair, a glass of water, or to go lie down. The only one not speaking was Faith, who was mute with shock. She could only stand at the lower landing of the steps and stare at the girl she'd loved from the day they'd met... then at the young woman who'd so obviously taken her place at Erica's side.

Faith didn't need Erica to explain. She knew from the day Erica was forced to leave that she would find love. It was too easy to love her. She'd likely had a dozen girlfriends over the years. She'd never written home about any, but Faith knew in her bones with each letter what Erica must have left out. The girl next to her gave the proof that her feelings had been right all along. Erica didn't *need* her, had *never* needed her, the way she needed *Erica*. It hurt, but she wouldn't blame her. She *couldn't*. She loved her too much.

The chaos only died when a shrill whistle silenced them all. Everyone looked back at Faith as she took her fingers out of her mouth.

"*Freddie*? Get Mamma off the floor and take her to the loveseat. *Cook*? Get her a glass of water. In fact, bring a pitcher and glasses. *Franchesca*? Run and grab the first aid kit and bring it to me. *Erica*? Close the door and see your guest to the living room." When she saw the stunned faces looking back at her, shocked that Faith had said more in one minute than she'd said the entire previous week, she shouted to break the spell. "*Move!*"

At that, each went to their assigned tasks. Soon Heather was seated and recovering her composure as Cook poured her a glass of lemon water and handed it to her shakily. While Faith took a seat next to her mother and across from Erica and her guest, the woman of the house finally spoke up.

"*Erica*? W-What *happened* to you? We stopped getting letters from you *months* ago! My *God*! You called me *Mamma*! You don't *hate* me? Say something, sweetheart! *Please!*"

Holding up a hand for silence, Faith took out the same stethoscope she'd worn all those years ago as a prop, bidding everyone be quiet, including her mother, while she checked her mother's heart. In her efforts to get over the pain of losing her love, Faith had tried embracing nursing and had been studying it for years on her own. While she was not an RN, and couldn't be until she went to college and got her degree, she knew enough to identify a potential heart attack. Sighing with relief, she turned to everyone. "She's *fine*! Just an emotional *shock*." She leveled her gaze at her cousin.

"I... I'm sorry, *Mamma*." Erica blushed. "I didn't *mean* to... I mean... that is..." Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked around the room at all the people still in the world who she'd ever loved. Finally, she managed to almost whisper, "I'm home! *Home!*" Moving quickly, she crossed over to her aunt and hugged her as though she might vanish from in front of her eyes if she let go. "Oh *God*, *Mamma*! I missed you *so much!*"

Heather held her and rocked her just like she had when she was twelve. "Shhh! It's all *right*, sweetheart! I've *got* you!"

Wanting to touch Erica's arm, just like she had the night April's parents had broken her heart and severed the best friends' ties seemingly forever, Faith nervously glanced over at the woman sitting across from her and saw her smiling back. Taking that as a cue, she silently ran her hand along Erica's smooth arm, just to let her cousin know she was there.

Touching Erica frightened her, stirring feelings she'd long ago buried and tried to forget. Feelings that were now boiling to the surface with such strength it took all her will to keep from grabbing Erica and kissing her in front of God and everybody. She pushed them back down for her cousin's sake. She knew nothing good would come of it and quite a lot of bad likely would, most probably her and Erica never seeing each other again. Faith loved her too much to do that.

Finally, Erica released her aunt and settled back on her heels. Taking a silk hanky from her tiny black purse, she dabbed at her eyes and started to laugh. "God, I must look *terrible*! I wanted to look so *perfect* for you!"

Smiling, Heather touched Erica's lovely hair. "You look *fine*, sweetie! Better than I ever *imagined*!" Taking the tissue being offered by Fredrick, she smiled up at him with a simple "Thank you." and started drying her eyes. After a moment, she turned to Erica. "Please, sweetie! Sit down! You *must* be tired after that drive! Are either of you *hungry*? Cook was only throwing together some leftovers, but I'm *sure* she'd be happy to..."

Her niece held up a hand, stopping her aunt. "Leftovers... would be *fine*, Mamma." Erica's voice sounded light and happy. While Cook headed for the kitchen to prepare food for two more, Erica looked up. "Fredrick? I know I sort of disrupted tonight's schedule. I don't want to delay things further, so would you escort us to the dining room?"

He raised an eyebrow, briefly glanced at Heather, then bowed crisply. "Very well, *Miss Erica*." A smile crept over his lips, not even trying to hide it. Helping Erica and her guest up, he then did the same for Faith and Heather.

Escorting them into the next room while Franchesca ran to the kitchen ahead of them to help Cook bring out plates and silverware, Fredrick bowed to her. "Apologies, Miss Erica. We have not been accustomed to eating in the dining room for some time. Most meals are served in the *kitchen* now." he stated with a hint of disdain, holding out the chair at the head of the table.

Heather raised her chin proudly, her manor at odds with her casual attire. "Thank you, Fredrick." Taking her seat at the head of the table, Erica paused while he pulled out a chair across from her usual seat for her guest before taking her usual place next to Faith, waiting for Fredrick to seat them.

"Well," her aunt began, "I guess we have a *lot* to catch up on! Erica sweetheart, would you please introduce your *guest*?"

Her smile melted at the realization that she'd never even made any introductions before being seated. "Oh! In all the excitement, I forgot!" Smiling once more, she giggled, "Everyone? I'd like you to meet *April*!"

Heather drew in a sharp breath. "Your friend from California? Good *Lord*, sweetie... how...?"

Taking a moment, Erica tried to explain. "A private detective found her for me. We reconnected a few months ago." She looked across the table to April and smiled shyly.

Looking from one to the other, her aunt sighed as she lay her napkin across her lap. "Well, that *is* good news! *April*? Welcome to Hargrave House! I *do* hope you'll both be *staying* for the evening? There's just *so* much to talk about!"

Cook came in carrying a steaming pot of stew, smiling at Erica as she sat it in the middle of the table. Turning toward the kitchen, she stopped when Erica grabbed her arm gently.

"Cook? When you're done, won't you please *join* us?" she asked.

Flabbergasted, Theresa could barely form words to reply. "No, dearie! You need to catch up with your *family*!"

"You *all* are my family!" Erica smiled. "You *too*, Franchesca! Fredrick?"

The two looked at one another, maid and butler. Finally, Franchesca turned and scowled. "That just wouldn't be *proper*! You *know* that, girl!"

Rising from her seat, Erica walked up to the maid, hugged her, and then took her by the hand and held out a chair for her. Making herself look serious, she intoned gracefully, "I *insist*!"

Blustering, Franchesca wagged her finger at the girl. "Why *I*! Why *you*! Now *listen*!" Seeing that none of her growling was even phasing the young woman, she flattened her face and narrowed her eyes, trying to make a dent, but Erica stood firm. After a moment she finally said, "*Oooo!*" and took the far-left seat from Heather, two chairs down from April.

Standing, April held out the chair next to her. "*Please?*" was all she said.

Slowly making her way around the table, Theresa sat in the offered chair. "Thank you, dearie!" Looking up at Fredrick, she could see him stiffen his back in resolve. "*Fred? Sit!*" she barked, pointing at the chair at the end of the table, opposite their employer.

Walking up to him, Erica's eyes were soft and pleading. "*Please*, Fredrick? I *know* you don't think it's proper, but... there are some things I *need* to tell you." She turned and looked at those already seated. "*All* of you." Turning back to him she begged, "*Please?* For *me*? Just this *once*?"

Fredrick knew before her plea that he was going to cave, but let her finish. "Very well, Miss Erica." he said evenly, his voice betraying his feelings as

it quavered slightly when he spoke her name. Moving to Erica's chair, he held it for her until she was once more seated. He then moved to the end of the table and slowly sat himself. "How very *odd*." he noted.

Laughter broke around the table as the seven sat together for the first time. Erica watched Cook serve up stew into everyone's bowls, then retrieve a plate of rolls from the kitchen before she returned to her seat. Looking up towards her aunt, Erica cleared her throat as Heather nearly took a bite. "*Mamma?*" she asked confusedly.

Their tradition of saying grace having been abandoned years ago, Heather turned crimson. "*Oh!* You wouldn't *mind*? I just thought..." Heather then looked at her daughter pensively.

"It's *alright*, Mamma." Faith sighed. Bowing her head for the first time in years, she pretended to pray just as Erica had so long ago.

Looking around the table after saying grace, Heather sighed happily. "Well, everyone eat up!" Taking her own first bite, she watched as Erica and April began. *Dear Lord! Thank you for bringing my Erica back to me! I was a fool!* She fought back tears of joy as she joined the rest of the family.

While they ate, only light small talk interrupted the meal. Erica looked at Cook sitting next to April. "You have *no* idea how much I missed your cooking!" she complimented. "This is *so* good!"

"Why *thank* you, dearie!" Theresa blushed. "That's *very* thoughtful of you!"

Enjoying her first home-cooked meal in longer than she could remember, April's own mother not having made a full meal since before Erica had moved in with them, relying on frozen food and eating out, she listened to the family talk happily. It made her smile, but looking around the table, her eyes met Faith's stare. Their mutual gazes locked, April could see so much in the vibrant blue eyes across from her. Jealousy, pain, and longing, but also

elation and happiness for her cousin. The two seemed to know each other's thoughts; each one knowing and aware of how obvious their own feelings about Erica were to one another. Finally, Faith looked down at her bowl in shame just as April did the same.

Faith was confused. She had looked into April's eyes, but she didn't see the joy she'd expected to find, knowing what she and Erica must have shared with one another. Instead she saw embarrassment, guilt, and the pain that Faith knew all too well. The moment Erica had introduced her, Faith had seen their loving reunion in her mind's eye as though she'd been there. Their soft embrace, the first kiss of their true love, romantic dinners by candlelight, and their frantic first night of passion. It had been all so clear to her, but she saw none of that in April's gaze; just that same dreadful emptiness she saw in her own reflection.

When at last the seven finished their simple meal together, Erica looked at each of them in turn. "I wanted to talk to you all about some things... some things that have happened to me." She turned to her aunt Heather and looked at her sorrowful expression. "I *know* what you did, sending me away, was probably the hardest thing you've ever *done*, Mamma. I want you to know it was the *right* thing to do."

Her aunt shook her head in dismay. "No, Erica! It... it was a *mistake*! I... I should *never* have sent you away!" She fought back her tears as the guilt nearly tore her to pieces.

Moving quickly, Erica stood and moved to her aunt, dropping to one knee beside her chair. "No, Mamma! It *wasn't*! It *needed* to be done! I *needed* that time to *know* myself! To be *certain* that *this* is what I wanted!" She lowered her gaze to the floor. "You took on yourself all the responsibility, blame, and anger that came from doing the *right* thing instead of the *easy* thing... and you did it for *me*." Looking back into Heather's tearful eyes, she repeated three words spoken so long ago. "No greater love..."

Faith stood up furiously. "Bullshit!" Silence washed over the room as she glared at Erica. "How can you *say* that? She sent you *away!* *Abandoned* you! Made you live like a *boy!* God, Erica! You should *hate* her!" She looked her mother dead in the eyes. "I know *I do!* She destroyed our *home!*"

Standing, Erica stared her cousin down. "I *could* hate her! I *did* for a while, but... I... I *can't!* Don't you *understand* Faith? She *had* to do it!"

Turning away from them, Faith was livid with Erica for not hating her mother, crossing her arms in defiant resolve. "There was *another* option!"

Shaking her head, Erica sighed. "No, Faith. There really *wasn't*. Not for *me*."

Turning her head slightly, the older girl huffed. "She *could* have put you on *hormones!* Let you *become* the woman you wanted to be! *Then* you could have stayed *here!*" Turning to face her forbidden love, her eyes swelled with tears as her voice dropped to a near whisper. "Stayed with *me*."

Her words went through the room like a shockwave. Each one of them at some point had suspected Faith harbored more feelings for Erica than she should, but her words gave their suspicions truth. Cook drew in a breath.

"*Faith!*" Heather gasped as she looked at her daughter with eyes wide.

"What, *Mother?*" Faith snapped. "You *knew!* Before you *abandoned* her, you *knew!* You *all knew!*" Her eyes scanned the room at the shocked faces looking back at her. Finally, she stormed out, increasing to a run as the six heard her steps go up the stairs, followed by the slam of her bedroom door.

Erica recovered quickly. "She's *wrong.*" Looking at her stricken aunt, she continued. "I *needed* the time you sent me away, Mamma. I didn't know it then, and *hated* you for it, but I know *now.*" She looked around the room at the others. "I know *most* of you have probably hated her too, at one time or another, but you really *shouldn't*. If Mamma had let me *stay*, put me on

hormones or whatever, I never would have done the things I've done that helped so many... and helped me find *April*."

Her aunt blinked and looked up at her. "Whatever do you *mean*, dear?"

Returning to her seat, Erica explained the things she'd done with her time; her writing, her business, the books she'd published, and the hundreds of thousands of letters she'd received telling how her words had transformed lives, and in some cases, *saved* them. Finally, she looked back at her aunt. "*None* of that would have been *possible* if you hadn't done what you did... what I *needed* you to do because it was what was *right* for me."

April reached over and took Erica's hand, giving it a squeeze. Her aunt noticed and asked what everyone present was dying to know. "Sweetheart? Are you two..." Her voice trailed off, waiting for Erica to finish for her.

The two looked at each other shyly. April turned to Erica's aunt and smiled sweetly. "Not *exactly*, Mrs. Hargrave."

"What does 'not exactly' mean?" Franchesca scowled as usual. "You either *are*, or you *aren't*! Which *is* it?"

Erica held up a hand to forestall further confusion. "We're *not*, but we're *open* to the idea." she explained as she looked back at April.

Nodding in agreement, April looked at the others. "It was *hard*... I mean, coming to terms with Erica being a girl, but in the end she was still the same person I'd loved my whole life..." She looked back at Erica and squeezed her hand. "...and still *do*!"

Theresa shook her head. "So you *are* together, then?"

Shaking her head, Erica turned to her. "Only in the sense that we're spending *time* with one another and seeing where things go. No *expectations*, no

commitments, just getting to *know* one another, all over again. If we still love each other after *that*, well then... we'll deal with *that* when we come to it." She looked at April. "After *all*, I just don't know if I can *stand* living with someone who picks her *teeth* at the dining room *table*!"

April pulled her fingers from her mouth. "What? I had some *roast* stuck between my teeth!"

It made everyone laugh, but soon Erica turned to each of them in turn. "*Fredrick?* I... I *know* you have your own ideas about what's right and proper, and I *know* my father was a wonderful man, but... I needed to tell you that you're the closest thing to a father I ever knew."

Standing solemnly and bowing slightly, Fredrick choked up at the sentiment. "*Thank* you, Madame Erica. I... I'm *honored*."

Rising and walking up to him, Erica wrapped him in her arms, still unable to reach all the way around his bulk. "*I love* you, Fredrick!"

Returning the embrace, his countenance softened, but he never spoke.

Turning to Franchesca, Erica smiled. "And *you*! You may fool *most* people, but I know just how caring you *are*! I've watched the website! You've done *wonderfully* at keeping that silly thing going all these years!"

"*Silly!*" Franchesca balked. "I'll have you know the newsletter *alone* has a hundred thousand subscriptions! *Lots* of people *love* that site!" Adjusting her seat, she looked at the people staring back at her. "Couldn't just leave it to *rot*!"

Coming up behind her, Erica hugged the neck of the maid from behind, still in her seat. "*I love* you, Franchesca! You're *always* taking care of me!"

"I... You're *welcome*. I love you *too*, dear." she replied, patting Erica's hands.

Straightening up once more, she looked over at Theresa. "Cook? You were looking out for me from the *start*, weren't you? It took me a while, but I finally figured out it was *you* that made it so I could *stay* Erica. You helped me find a part of myself I never knew was there all along. I'll *always* love you, for that *alone*!" She waited while Theresa stood, taking each other into a loving hug.

"I just wanted you to be *happy*, dearie!" Theresa sighed. "You were so *lost*! I just *couldn't* let you suffer! Not when there was something I could *do* about it! I love you, girl!" After a minute of holding one another, the woman resumed her seat, wiping her eyes while Erica turned to her aunt.

"*Mamma*?" she said quietly. "Do you know *why* I call you that now?"

Heather barely kept the tears from her eyes. "I... I *think* so." Blowing her nose, she laughed lightly as she hadn't done for years. "Tell me *anyway*?"

Kneeling down next to her, Erica placed her hands together on her aunt's lap. "When you saw me off that day, you told me I would *always* be your *daughter*. It was what I'd wanted to hear you say for *so long*! It may have started off as pretending, but I *always* knew I wasn't like any boys I knew. I... I just didn't know *why*." Wiping her own tears away, she smiled. "And don't *worry*! I think Mom and Dad *still* love you, *almost* as much as *I do*!"

Tears rolled down Heather's face. "Oh, *baby*!" she cried, hugging Erica as she stood. They held each other a while, no one daring to interrupt.

Finally, they released one another and Erica looked up toward Faith's room. "I... think I need to talk to Faith *alone* for a while." She looked around the room at her loved ones. "If you'll all excuse me?"

Everyone rose to their feet as April nodded and said, "Go on, E. Talk to her."

Smiling back, she looked around one more time before walking to the stairs.

Chapter 18 - Truth and Consequences

Reaching the stairs and ascending, Erica recalled the first time she'd done so, scared and alone. Now as she went up them, she felt only the fear, this time that Faith was beyond reach. That of all the people she'd helped over the years, the one who needed it the most would be the one who she could help the least. Slowly walking down the all too familiar hallway, she reached the door to their once shared room. Knocking gently, she waited.

"*Go away!*" Faith shouted, not caring who was at the door.

Trying to open it, Erica found it locked. She sighed and turned her back to the door, leaning against it and sliding down until she was seated against it. "*Faith? Please? Let me in. I... I need to talk to you. Don't make me do it through a door.*"

Sitting on her bed, Faith's legs were drawn up to her chest, her arms wrapped around them. Tears soaked her face as she looked up toward the door. "*Go away, Erica! I don't want to talk to you!*"

Closing her eyes, Erica held back the hurt. Becoming more determined, she lowered her tone. "*Faith... I'm not leaving. I'm going to sit out here until you open the door so we can talk. And you know how stubborn I can be!*"

Rolling her eyes, Faith remembered how Erica used to stubbornly insist on doing her own schoolwork, even when it took her hours longer and she'd offered to let her copy from her papers. The memory made her laugh, not because it was funny, but because it seemed so innocent and stupid now. Rolling off her bed, she padded over to the door and turned the lock, returning to her bed without a word.

Rising, Erica opened the door and stepped inside. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, seeing that the room had changed so much it was unrecognizable. Gone were the toys, extra wardrobes, and their once-shared canopy bed. In

their place were all new modern furniture and a disorganized assortment of books, clothes, and junk. It was as though the Faith she had known growing up had vanished and a stranger had taken her place. She slowly walked around the bed, looking at her cousin with concern and affection that only they two could understand. Taking a seat on what used to be her side of the bed, Erica half turned toward her. "I... I still *love* you."

Faith couldn't stand it. She began to sob into her knees. "How... how can you say that to me! How can you even *look* at me! I'm a disgusting *perv* that should be *locked up*!"

Climbing all the way up on the bed, Erica walked on her knees over to Faith, touching her shoulders from behind.

"Don't *touch* me!" Faith shouted, throwing off her cousin's arms with a shrug.

Determined, Erica grabbed her from behind and wrapped her arms around Faith's waist. Feeling her try to pull away, Erica locked her arms and grabbed her own elbows. "I *won't*, Faith! I won't *let* you chase me away!"

Panicking, Faith started to thrash, twisting and turning, trying to get Erica to release her. "No! Let *go* of me! Damn it *Erica*! Let me *go*!" She pushed down on Erica's locked arms, trying to force them apart. When that failed she started beating them with her fists. "*Let! Me! Go!*"

"No!" she shouted back. Erica held on for dear life and rested her head against Faith's back. Enduring the pain Faith was inflicting on both her arms and her heart, she held fast. "I'm *not* letting you *go*, Faith! *Ever!* Now stop it, damn it! You're *hurting* me!"

"Then let *go*!" she growled. Trying once more to force Erica's arms off of her, she pushed down on her cousin's hands, making them slip off her elbows. When Erica tried to re-fasten the grip, Faith grabbed Erica's wrists and pulled them out from around her.

Seeing that she was about to lose her grip, Erica reversed and grabbed Faith's wrists instead. Having been taught wrestling in school, she used it to her advantage and pulled Faith off balance, making the both of them tumble backwards onto the bed. Rolling over, Erica leapt on Faith's prone form and pinned her hands to either side of her head. Her skirt strained as she straddled her cousin and put her entire weight down on Faith's stomach. "Are you *done* now, Faith?" she asked.

"Get *off* of me!" Faith yelled. "*Damn* you! Get *off* me, *Eric*!"

Her cousin refused to budge. "No! And I don't care *what* names you call me! You're going to *sit* there and you're going to *listen*!"

Faith stopped struggling, seeing determined authority in Erica's beautiful green eyes. She half smiled and changed tactics, moving sensuously under her cousin, wrapping her legs around Erica's calves. "Well, we could always just *not talk*!" she purred.

She shook her head resolutely and lowered her tone to a hush. "That won't work *either*, Faith."

Desperately caught between hating that Erica had her immobilized and loving the fact that their bodies were pressed so close together, Faith started to cry. "Please, Erica! Please don't *torture* me like this!"

Erica lightened her grip slightly. "Will you *talk* to me?" Seeing a nod from her she added, "*Promise*?" When Faith just nodded, she shook her head. "No, you have to actually *promise*! Like we *used* to!"

Rolling her eyes, she relented. "Fine! I swear I'll talk to you! Alright?" The moment Erica started to release her, she quickly turned the tables and flipped her cousin over on her back. Now pinning Erica in place, Faith glared down at her. "So let's *talk*." She slid her body up and down Erica's in a slow undulating release of her long held passion. "Are you *sleeping* with her?"

Trying to dislodge Faith, she knew it was futile. Faith may not have taken wrestling, but she was a fast learner and Erica had just shown her how to pin someone so they were incapable of escape; especially on the soft mattress that gave no good leverage to push off against. "What are you *talking* about?"

"I'm talking about your *girlfriend*." Faith spat back. "Your precious *April*!"

Sighing and laying her head back, Erica looked up at the ceiling. "No, we aren't *sleeping* together. We're not even really *dating*, just... seeing where it goes! Now will you let me *up*?"

"*No!*" Faith shook her head. "Do you *love* her?"

She looked up in Faith's eyes. Knowing that lying would be a waste of time, she nodded. "*Yes.* I've *always* loved her. You *know* that."

Her breath only now starting to slow, Faith lowered her voice to a whisper. "Do you still love *me*? The way you love *her*?"

Closing her eyes, Erica held her breath. Letting it all out at once she uttered one fateful word in a whisper. "*Yes.*"

"Then *be* with me! *Here!* *Now!* There's no *law* against it!" Faith pleaded. "*I love you!*" She started to lower her face toward Erica's, but stopped just short of kissing her. "*I... I can't!*" she cried. Rolling over and releasing her cousin, Faith covered her crying eyes with one hand while the other beat helplessly against the mattress. "*Oh God, Erica!* I want you so *bad*... but I... I just *can't!* I can't make you give up *everything*... the family, your *life*, *April*... just for *me*! Because I *know* you, and you *would, wouldn't* you?"

Erica quickly moved and pulled Faith up into her arms. Her cousin clung to her and poured her soul out on Erica's shoulder while she rocked Faith, held her, and just listened.

"I wish you'd never come *back*!" she cried. "I... I wish you'd just been *Eric* so I wouldn't *love* you! I wish... oh, God! I wish I didn't *feel* like this! I wish I could go back and *change* it! I wish Mamma hadn't sent you *away*!"

Faith cried on her shoulder while Erica just sat silently and waited. When at last her cousin's tears were spent, Erica pulled her away and looked Faith in her eyes. "I know. I know just how *bad* this hurts. You're *still* the only girl who's ever kissed me because I... I wouldn't *let* anyone else."

A shocked expression crossed Faith's countenance as she looked in Erica's eyes and saw how tortured she was, nearly sending her back to tears. "Oh, *Erica!* You... you *never*...?"

Slowly Erica shook her head, her colored curls bouncing lightly. "I had the *opportunity*, but..." She looked down at her lap. "...and then I just tried *hating* you. Hating you for *loving* me. For making me feel guilty for *wanting* love." She looked back up at Faith's horrified eyes. "But I *couldn't*. I could no more hate *you* for loving me than I could hate *Mamma* for sending me away. It's what *had* to be, Faith!"

Faith just backed away. "How can you not *hate* her for what she did? She *abandoned* you! She tore this family *apart*! It's been *hell* here without you!" She told her of all the hurt and anguish since her leaving; about Brooke and Jenny, Mike and Jennifer, and the hopeless atmosphere of Hargrave House. "So how can you *sit* there and tell me that what she did was for the *best*?"

Looking away, Erica tried to explain. "Faith, if Mamma had let me stay, she would have *had* to put me on hormones."

"What's so terrible about *that*?" Faith scoffed. "You're on them *now*, aren't you? What *difference* does it make?"

"Yes, but if she'd have done it *then* I never would have been able to have children. Now I *have* that option and I *still* get to be me! Don't you *see*?"

She took on all the responsibility of doing the *hard* thing, making the *hard* choice for the *right* reasons, and she did it for *me*... for *my* benefit. She let everyone *hate* her and think the *worst* of her so *I* could have a happier life! She sacrificed *everything* for me! Even her own *happiness*!"

Pausing she allowed the thought to sink in. "I *know* what people have been saying about her. That she got *rid* of me. That she saw me as a *burden* and *resented* having to take care of the 'poor orphan girl' who came to stay with her. Have you even *once* heard her deny it? She let *everyone* think the worst of *her* so they *wouldn't* think the worst of *me*!"

"So *maybe* she was right!" Faith shouted. "But was it *worth* it? Was it worth all the pain and suffering she caused just so you can *maybe* have kids?"

"It's *more* than that." Erica explained. She paced Faith's floor while telling her of the books she had written and the thousands of letters sent by people saying how their lives had been made better from them. Finally sitting on the bed once more, she turned to her cousin. "None of that would have been possible if I'd stayed here! So it's *not* just about me being able to have kids someday, Faith. It *had* to be this way! It's the way it was *meant* to be!"

Sniffing, Faith asked, "So... what... you went to a *sperm* bank or something?"

She tried to suppress it, but the giggle came out anyway. "Out of all *that*, *that's* your takeaway?"

The two stared at each other and both started to giggle like they were pre-teens all over again. Faith covered her face. "Oh, *God*! I can just *see* the look on the doctor's face when you went in to make a *deposit* instead of a *withdrawal*! Looking like *that*!"

Erica lost her balance and rolled onto her side laughing. Gathering her wits, she shook her head. "No! I didn't look like *this*, yet! I... *had* changed my *name* already though, which caused a *bit* of confusion!"

Suddenly Faith stopped laughing. "You mean, you looked like..." Erica simply nodded. "Oh, and you... so did you have *surgery* or something?"

"*Something* like that." she explained. "Cost me a lot, but I like the results! What do *you* think?" Erica spread her arms out as if to show herself off.

Looking up and down Erica's body, she could see nothing that would give away that the woman before her was anything but a natural born woman. Her hips and thighs were shapely, her legs smooth and sexy, a narrow waist tapering up to C-cup breasts, thin and delicate arms, a beautiful complexion, perfect teeth, nicely rounded jaw line, no Adam's Apple, and a voice like a songbird. "I think you're *breathtakingly* beautiful, just like you *always* were." she said eventually, her breath starting to grow ragged with desire.

Starting to move toward Erica, she stopped. Though her cousin showed no sign that she would stop her, Faith knew she had to stop *herself*. Looking away, she could only apologize. "I... Sorry, Erica. I didn't mean... I let myself get carried away. I'll *try* not to let it happen again." Clearing her throat, she made herself look back at Erica. "You do look *beautiful*, though." Laughing gently she added, "If Mike could only see you *now*! He'd *flip*!"

Erica rolled her eyes. "Oh, *God!* *Mike!* Ah *swear*, Ah thin' even if he'd a *known*, he'd *still* be wantin' me ta' be his Mot! I feel so *bad* for him though. Jennifer really did a *number* on him, huh?"

"I'm surprised he didn't leave for the city." Faith nodded. "A *lot* of the kids we knew back then did."

Their conversation stalling for a moment, the two just looked at each other. Eventually Erica broke the quiet. "You look good, by the way."

Smiling shyly, Faith shook her head. "In a baggy sweatshirt and yoga pants? I look like I'm pushing *thirty*!"

"No!" Erica denied. Waiting a moment she quipped, "Twenty-five tops!"

"Oh, yeah?" Faith shot back with a smile. She picked up a pillow and bopped Erica on the head with it.

"Oh... you've done it *now*, girl!" Erica grinned. Grabbing another pillow, she swung and missed.

Squaring off against Faith like they did her first day, each one looked for an opportunity to attack. Faith jumped off the back of the bed, shifting her weight back and forth between her feet. "Come on! Is *that* the best you got?"

Climbing down, Erica was careful never to break eye contact. "Oh, I've got *lots* more where *that* came from!" Moving sideways across the floor, the two circling each other, she waited until Faith was between herself and the bed. When Faith swung her pillow out to try and tag her, Erica ducked under it and moved in. Using her pillow like a battering ram, she pushed Faith back onto the foot of the bed, letting the pillow loose to free her hands. She was about to tickle her when she heard Faith stop laughing and gasp. "What's *wrong*?" she asked.

Faith had a wild look in her eyes. Her breath became ragged and her chest heaved with need. Looking up at Erica once more on top of her, she saw the concern in her eyes change to understanding, then desire, and finally guilt. Starting to push herself up, Faith grabbed Erica's arms and held her in place. "*Tell* me you don't want me *just* as badly!"

Held fast, Erica closed her eyes. Opening them with a sincere and desperate look in them, she answered honestly. "Of *course* I do, Faith. But *then* what?"

Not ready to give up, Faith released her and watched as Erica backed away from the bed as though it would swallow her. "I could tell *then*... and I can tell *now*... you want me *just* as badly as I want *you*!"

Erica turned away and crossed her arms, holding herself. "I know! I admit it! I do!" She was near to tears at the thought of hurting either Faith or April, but she knew whichever course she chose, *one* of them would suffer. Turning to face Faith, she was surprised when she was no longer on the bed and was now standing less than a foot in front of her.

"Are you going to make me *choose*, Faith? Between you and *April*? Between you and *Mamma*? You *know* she wouldn't *stand* for it! She'd throw us *both* out and never speak to *either* of us again! What *then*? You go back with me to Concord? We can't get *married* there! Even if we went somewhere where it's legal, New Hampshire won't *recognize* it! We can't have *children*! Is *that* what you want, Faith? *Half* a life? *Scandal*? My business *ruined*? I'd end up *resenting* you for..." Her argument was interrupted by Faith's lips.

She had simply stepped forward and kissed Erica. She didn't even need to grab her. Within a second, Faith's right hand was behind Erica's head caressing the nape of her neck as her left drifted down her love's back to gently caress her rear. Erica's hands moved to Faith's hips, pulling the two of them tightly together. Their kiss opened as Faith parted her lips and gently let her tongue slip along Erica's teeth.

They stood together like that for several minutes, touching groping, kissing, and loving. Finally, Faith pulled away and stepped back to sit on the foot of her bed, leaving Erica standing alone. Looking down at the floor, Faith stammered, "I... I'm *sorry*. I just... I guess I just needed to know that I took the *chance*... that I knew... that..."

Moving quickly, Erica swept Faith into her arms, kissing her as she lifted her up off the bed. Once more they made out with reckless abandon, Erica kissing Faith all over her face, then down her neck. She held Erica's head against her, deeply inhaling the scent of her.

"Oh God, Erica! Please!" Feeling Erica's kisses slowing and moving lower toward her collar and forward toward her breasts, Faith gathered every

shred of self-control she had and pushed Erica away. "No... I... I can't *let* you *do* this!"

The two teenagers looked into each other's fiery eyes, each seeing the passion for the other, but this time it was Faith who looked away.

Erica dropped to the floor on her knees. "So what *is* it then? You just wanted to *make* me admit I want you just as badly? And now that I *have*, you want to break *my* heart as much as *yours* has been broken? Is *that* it?"

Rolling over on her bed, Faith cried. "I'm *sorry!* I'm *sorry!* I'm *sorry!*" Sobbing for a time, she finally looked up to see Erica sitting on the floor with her legs tucked to the side of her. She had a vacant look on her face, like she had become catatonic once more. "*Erica?* You *alright?*"

Looking down at the floor she sat on, guilt washed over Erica like a tidal wave. "I... I think it would be best if we don't spend any time *alone* with each other. I... I can't *trust* myself."

Nodding, Faith agreed. "You're *right.*" Wiping her eyes, then her lips and neck, she stood and went into her bathroom, cleaning herself up of any evidence of their passionate embrace. When she came out, she saw Erica still sitting in the same spot, not moving. Going over to her, she grabbed Erica's hands and made her stand up. "*Come on,* Erica! Get up!" When her cousin finally got her legs under her, Faith started leading her to the bathroom, grabbing Erica's purse on the way. "*Come on,* sweetie! Pull yourself together."

While Erica stood in front of the mirror, her makeup smeared by their necking, she looked at Faith in the mirror. "I would have let you *have* me." she said, finally looking down into her purse for her compact and lipstick. "*I still* would. Even *now.*"

"I *know.*" Faith nodded. "That's why I made us *stop.*"

Taking a cleansing breath, Erica looked back at her reflection. "I... I understand. I *think*." She started to fix her makeup to leave no trace of their make-out session.

Faith looked down as Erica worked. "I just couldn't *let* you throw away your life... even if it meant I could finally... Oh, *God!* Life really *isn't* fair, *is* it?" Looking up to see a simple shake of the head from Erica, Faith walked up behind her and rested her head on Erica's right shoulder, her hands snaking around her cousin's waist in a not-so-platonic hug. It was intimate enough that Faith felt her cousin shiver with excitement, so she backed off again.

Once Erica was done to her own satisfaction, she turned and looked at Faith. Walking up to her, she took both of Faith's hands in hers, squeezed them, then kissed Faith on the cheek, slow and loving.

"Why'd you do *that*?" Faith asked, her hand moving to her cheek.

"Because you *needed* it." Erica replied sweetly. Taking Faith by the hand, she led her out of the bathroom to sit once more on Faith's bed. "Are we *OK* now?" she asked after a pensive moment.

"I *think* so." Faith sighed. "May I ask you some things? I mean, if anything makes you *uncomfortable*, you don't *have* to answer, but... I guess I just want to *know* some things before I'll be *OK* with everything. *Alright?*"

"I'm an open *book* to you, Faith." Erica agreed. "Ask away."

Getting a mischievous grin, Faith asked, "Are those *real*?" glancing down at Erica's chest.

Laughing, Erica quipped, "No! They're an *illusion*! I just use the right makeup and it only *looks* like I have a C cup!"

"Very funny!" Faith rolled her eyes in response. "I mean, did you have..."

"Uh-huh." Erica admitted. "I *probably* should have waited for some natural breast growth, but I just couldn't *wait!* Call it *vanity* if you like, but I'll get a reduction later as I grow in naturally."

"You *better*, or those puppies will be *killing* your back when you're forty!"

The two laughed earnestly before Faith moved to another question. "So anything *else*? Face? Lipo?" She glanced at Erica's skirt. "Down *there*?" Looking at Erica she grinned lustily and waggled her eyebrows.

Erica shook her head and laughed. "You're *terrible!* Face, yes... plus voice surgery... no lipo... and 'down there' has to wait a year. Most any reputable SRS surgeon won't do it until I've lived for at *least* a year as a woman."

"You lived a year as a girl *here*, didn't you?"

"Doesn't *count*." Erica noted. "It has to be a year under supervision as an *adult*. Oh, I could go to *Thailand* and get it done *now*, but I'm in no hurry." Looking over at her cousin, she tilted her head curiously. "Why?"

"Just fodder for fantasy, love." Faith admitted. "If I can't have you for *real*, I at *least* want to imagine you *right* when I'm..."

Blushing and turning away, Erica sighed. "Faith! I don't need to know *that*!"

"You *asked!*" Faith pointed out.

"Fair enough..." she admitted, "...but *please*, it's hard *enough* to control myself as it is without thinking of you..."

"...masturbating while thinking of you?" Faith finished her unspoken sentence seductively. "Honey, I've been doing *that* since I *could!*"

Erica took a deep breath again. "OK... so there's *that*. Anything else?"

Thinking for a moment she asked, "Have you ever... done the same thing? I mean, thought about *me*?"

Guiltily, Erica nodded. "A *lot*, actually. Probably more than I *should* have!"

"Is there a *healthy* amount of sexual fantasy to have about your cousin?"

"If there *is*, I bet *Mamma* would know!" Erica quipped. "But *I* sure won't be the one to ask her!"

"That's *another* thing." Faith noted. "Why are you calling her *Mamma* now instead of 'Aunt Heather'?"

Closing her eyes, Erica recounted the day she left. "From that moment on, she wasn't 'Aunt Heather' anymore. She was just 'Mamma'." Looking over at Faith she admitted, "I used to be *so* jealous of you! You were *beautiful, happy...*" Pausing a moment, she finally said the words. "...and a *real* girl with a *real* mother who was alive and not a figment of your imagination."

Standing up, Faith walked a distance away, her back to Erica and her hands in her back pockets. "I wasn't a very *good* daughter to her after she made you leave. I hated her *so* much for that! I don't know that I *can* fix the damage."

Rising and moving to Faith, Erica rested a hand lightly on Faith's shoulder. "You *can*! You *know* Mamma! She'll *always* forgive you!"

Shuddering at Erica's touch, she reached up and put her hand over Erica's, trapping it in place. She wanted to say something, and almost did, her mouth opening to speak, but knew no good would come of it, so she patted Erica's hand and slipped free of her touch. Walking over to her vanity chair, she sat and lowered her head.

Reaching a hand toward her, Erica smiled. "Come on. Let's go downstairs and talk it *out*."

Faith shook her head. "I... I *can't* face them. Not after admitting that I... I..."

"...that you *love* me?" Erica finished for her. "You said it *yourself*, it was *hardly* a secret." Moving closer, Erica still held her hand out. "Come on. You can't stay up here *forever* and there's no time like the *present*, right?"

Looking up at her smiling and devastatingly sexy cousin, Faith managed a false smile and took the offered hand. "I guess it's time to pay the piper." she said as she stood up.

Pulling Faith up into her arms, Erica held her warmly, affectionately, and longer than would be considered appropriate. Pulling back slightly, she looked into Faith's eyes. "One more for the road?" she offered, her smile genuine, warm, and inviting.

Leaning forward, desperate to feel Erica's lips on her own once more, Faith stopped herself. "I... I *want* to so much, but... if we *did*... I wouldn't be able to *stop* myself from wanting *more*, a *lot* more."

Sighing, Erica closed her eyes and looked down and away as she pulled back. "You're *right*. I guess I need to learn to *check* myself." Looking back to Faith, Erica asked, "Before we go down, can I ask what you think of April? I always *wanted* you to get to know her."

"She seems... *nice*." Faith lied. Really she hated the girl for being what she perceived as the biggest obstacle standing between her and Erica. She was certain that if April had never come back into Erica's life, she would have succumbed to their earlier passions and by now the two of them would have been basking in the afterglow of carnal bliss. She just couldn't ever tell Erica that.

Almost as though she could read Faith's mind, Erica laughed. "You know, if it wasn't for April coming into my life, I *never* would have come back."

Cocking her head in her typical way, Faith was surprised. "Really? *Why*?"

"April was the one that *convinced* me I *needed* to come back, that I *had* to see you all again and let you know that I was OK... and tell you *all* what you mean to me..." She paused and turned to look into Faith's eyes. "...and how much I love *you*."

Her cousin's eyes widened as she finally understood. "Did... did you tell *April* about... um... *us*? About 'the kiss' and my crush on you?"

Looking down, Erica nodded. "I *had* to. If she and I were to have *any* chance together, I needed to be *completely* honest with her." She looked back up into Faith's eyes. "No secrets."

Her cousin stepped back. "So... you came up *here*... and she *knows* how you *feel* about me... and me about *you*... and she was *OK* with that?"

"She *loves* me." Erica said simply.

Faith shook her head and looked away. "I don't know if I could have *done* that if I were in *her* place. I mean, I'd have been *terrified* that you would... that you might... give *in*."

Nodding, Erica grimaced. "I *did*. If you hadn't *stopped* me, I *would* have... well... I don't really know *what* I would have done... but we *would* have gone too far, for certain." she let out a sigh. "And now I'm going to have to tell her *that*, too. Well, *later* anyway."

Shaking her head vigorously, Faith tried to dissuade her. "No, Erica! *Don't*! She could *leave* you if you tell her!"

"She'll know the second she *sees* me, to be honest." Erica noted. "April could *always* see right through to the *heart* of me."

Faith started pacing the room. "Tell her I *forced* myself on you! Tell her... tell her you *tried* to stop me but I *overpowered* you and you only stopped..."

"*Faith!*" Erica interrupted. "I *can't!* Even if I *could* get away with it, I'd know I lied to her *forever!* It would taint *everything* between us from then on in the light of a *lie!* I'd spend the rest of my *life* in fear that she would learn the *truth...* that I... that I couldn't... *resist* you."

"*Damn* it, Erica! You *have* to! You have to tell her with such conviction that *you* believe it! Eventually it'll just *become* the truth! If you tell her you *couldn't* stop yourself, she'll never trust you around another woman *again!*"

Sighing, Erica ran her hand under her hair along the nape of her neck, massaging the muscles there. "I'm pretty sure she *expected* it. I think she wanted to see if *you* would stop it, which you *did*. She knows you're a special case for me... a once in a lifetime kind of love that I find irresistible. She knows I've never been tempted by *anyone* else, even when you two were both *lost* to me for what would seem to be the rest of our *lives.*"

Sitting down again, Faith looked at Erica in a mild amount of awe. "You *meant* it when you said you've never... I mean... not even a one-night *stand?* Just for *sex?* Not even just to *do* it with someone?"

She shook her head slowly. "Not even a *kiss.*"

Her cousin rose quickly, a look of hunger on her face. "Oh, *God!* Erica, that's *so...*" She leaned forward like she was about to move toward her, but stopped as a look crossed her face, almost as if Erica could see her thinking, *What am I doing?* Instead, Faith sighed and moved toward the door. "Sorry! Oh *God*, am I *sorry!* I... think it's time for us to go downstairs. You're *right...* I can't *trust* myself around you alone. It's too *easy* to give in to temptation."

"I think it's for the *best.*" Erica nodded in agreement. She took a cleansing breath before opening her eyes and putting on a smile. "Shall we?"

As Faith opened the door, she turned and looked at Erica walking up behind her. "Erica? I... just want you to *know*... if... if you ever find yourself *alone*... I mean, if it doesn't work out with *April*, and... um... you *need* somebody..."

Smiling, Erica nodded quickly. "I know. And who *knows*, maybe someday I'll take you up on that offer!" Faith looked at her with longing, biting her lip as Erica winked at her seductively.

Shuddering, Faith quickly walked out of her room and out into the hallway. Taking a cleansing breath of her own, she heard Erica close the door behind her. "*Alright*, time to face the music." Looking over her shoulder, she smiled at Erica. "*Together?*"

Erica walked up beside her and took her hand. "*Together!*"

Chapter 19 - Memories and Motivations

Following her cousin down the stairs, Erica reached the bottom and looked out into the living room to see her aunt talking with April; Cook and Franchesca listening from the couch while Fredrick stood by the dining room entryway impassively. She smiled at the sight of April and her aunt, the two talking freely and seeming to enjoy each other's company.

Faith walking ahead of her, she saw April look at her cousin, then into her own eyes. Shame burned in them and Erica watched April's face cloud over. Trying to say so much without a word, Erica subtly shook her head. Her oldest friend's expression changed to a mild confusion, then smiling back at something Heather said, returning to look at the woman once more.

Stopping a short distance from her mother, Faith waited for a pause in the conversation. "Mamma? I want to apologize. I had no *right* to blame you or... or to... to *hate* you for doing what you knew had to be done." She looked at Erica who nodded encouragingly. Turning once more to her mother, she smiled weakly. "Erica told me about the things she's *done*, things that would've never *happened* if she'd stayed here." She looked down ashamed. "I... I was *selfish* for wanting her to stay."

Heather regarded her daughter, then Erica. She had figured out in a short time of Erica's arrival from California that Faith had an unfamilial affection for her cousin. It had been why she eventually made them sleep in separate rooms and part of why she had talked herself into sending Erica away. Her greatest fear had always been that as they matured they would end up sleeping together. While she wasn't sure of the damage it would do to Erica's mental health, or Faith's, she knew it couldn't have helped. "It's alright, dear." she answered.

Standing up, April looked at the three of them nervously. "I think I'll make myself scarce so you can talk *freely*. I know *family* issues can be a little uncomfortable to discuss when a *stranger's* around, so I'll just see my..."

"No! Please stay!" Faith interrupted her. "In a way, you've *always* been a part of this family! You've always been a part of *Erica's* life. So *much* so, that sometimes I feel as if I knew you *myself!*" Faith walked slowly into the living room and sat next to her mother once more. "I *swear!* Erica could spend *hours* talking about you! It... it sometimes made me a little *jealous* that you were such a *big* part of her growing up."

Smiling sweetly, April still searched Faith's eyes to try and puzzle out what had happened upstairs. She'd heard yelling, then moving around, then yelling again, and then that terrible silence. She had listened with one ear while trying to listen to Heather with the other, doing a poor job at both. Finally, she had to just ignore what could be happening upstairs and focus on getting to know Erica's family.

It was easy to see what Erica had fallen in love with in this home. Heather's intellect was keen, but she wasn't a braggart or stuck up about it. The fact that she employed three people to cook and clean for her said she had been born to money, but she had a very down-to-earth feel about her, and the 'help' seemed more like extended family than just hired workers.

"I feel the same way about all of *you!*" April replied. "You were such a big influence on her life, I wish I could have moved here *with* her!"

Stepping in, Erica took a seat next to her. She felt her first love shift slightly away from her, just enough to look like she was 'making room'. "April *really* had a hard time with her folks after I was gone." she explained.

Her aunt nodded, seeing the mild tension between the two. "So I *understood*, sweetie. I still can't fathom *why* they felt it necessary to cut you two off from one another so *harshly*. It wasn't *necessary* and certainly was an *unhealthy* situation for you *both*."

"At first they told me that if we kept in touch it would have just drawn out the hurt." April explained. "In the end, when I was leaving home, they

finally admitted the *truth*. They *never* liked Erica... or her mother. I know they didn't like the gold star in the front window of Erica's house. They complained about it a *lot*. I think they were also afraid that I'd end up a teen mother." Looking over at Erica who sat shyly beside her, she smiled. "Who knows? Maybe they were *right!*"

"Ha!" Francesca scoffed. "I know my little *Erica*! She's *always* been a *good* girl... and she loved you even *then!*"

Bumping shoulders with her, Theresa added, "I think that's exactly what they were *afraid* of, dearie!"

Heather turned to her guest. "I don't know *them*, but I know *people*. It *sounds* as if they were *very* controlling... more than parents *need* be."

Only half listening, Erica looked over at Faith seeing a distant look in her eyes. Thoughts of what they might have done had Erica stayed ran through her head, certain that Faith was thinking the same thing. Blushing, she looked to her aunt. "*Mamma?* I *assume* the guest room is still available?"

"Why, *sweetie!*" her aunt blinked. "That's not a *guest* room anymore! That's *your* room, and it always *will* be, as far as I'm concerned."

She glanced at her watch and looked to April. "I know you're pretty tired. Why don't *you* take my old bed. I can be *fine* down here on the couch."

"*No, E!* This is your *home!* If *anyone* sleeps on the couch, it should be *me!*"

Faith was about to make a suggestion when her mother held up a hand to end the debate. "*Enough!* We're all *adults* here. Erica? You and April are perfectly welcome to *share* your room."

Fidgeting slightly, Erica explained as best as she could manage. "That's very *understanding* of you Mamma, but April and I have never... that is,

we don't share..." Her voice trailed off, letting everyone figure out for themselves what she was getting at.

Looking at the two of them, Heather raised a brow. "Oh! I had just naturally *assumed*... oh, I *am* sorry! I didn't mean to make you feel *awkward*!" She turned to April. "When you told me that you had moved in with Erica, I..."

Smiling, April took Erica's hand. "It's perfectly *fine*, Mrs. Hargrave..."

"*Please!*" she asked. "Call me *Heather!*"

"Alright... *Heather*." April corrected herself. "I was just saying, you *shouldn't* feel bad. After all, our relationship *is* a bit weird! We're taking things *slowly*. OK, *glacier-like!*" she joked. "We've spent most of the last *month* living together, and we aren't even actually *dating* yet. We're both living in Erica's apartment, but we sleep in different rooms and I have my own bathroom."

Franchesca stood up. "You two are too young to even know what dating *is*! Take my *word* for it, you're *dating*! You're just *doing* it wrong!" At that she headed toward the stairs. "I'm going to run a duster around Erica's room and check the toiletries. You all carry on!"

"And I have a *kitchen* to clean." Theresa said rising. "*Fred?* You're *helping!*"

Fredrick raised an eyebrow. "*Me?* Help in the *kitchen*? My, what an auspicious day *this* is!"

As the two left the living room, Erica, Faith and Heather laughed. April could only look on confusedly.

"You have to understand," Erica explained through her laughter, "Cook doesn't let *anyone* touch *anything* in *her* kitchen! I once tried to rinse my own *breakfast* bowl and nearly got beaten with a wooden spoon!"

Faith's eyes widened. "Oh! And remember that time you got up early and tried to surprise her by making *breakfast* for her? God! I thought she was going to have a *coronary*!"

"So what happened?" April smiled at the cute stories. "Did you make a *disaster* or something?"

Giggling, Erica recalled the incident.

Moving down the stairs as silently as she could, Erica could barely see as the winter overcast had blocked even the moon and starlight. Reaching the bottom step, she turned and saw the faint glow filtering in from the living room windows.

Creeping into the kitchen, the girl turned on the light once the door had swung shut. Proud that she'd managed to get up, sneak downstairs, and make it to the kitchen unseen and unheard, she knew the rest would be a cinch. She'd settled on eggs over easy, bacon, and toast when she learned that it was Cook's favorite breakfast. Working quickly, she knew that Cook would get up and come down to spoil the surprise in less than an hour.

It had taken her three weeks to get a look in Cook's purse and read her ID to learn when her birthday was. Now it was here, January sixteenth, and Erica was going to do something nice for her.

Within twenty minutes, she had the bacon frying and the eggs cooking up nicely. Feeling smugly proud of herself, she had finally stopped paying attention to every creak and groan from the old house that had caused her to jump with fright, each one making her think Cook had caught her before she was ready. Turning around, she nearly dropped the spatula and gasped in fright. "Faith! What are you doing up!" Erica whispered.

"I got cold!" she muttered. "You were gone! What are you doing, anyway?"

Slowing her breath, Erica laughed quietly. "Today is Cook's birthday! I'm making her breakfast in bed!"

Grinning sleepily, Faith asked, "May I help?"

"Shhh!" Erica scowled. "You'll wake her up before I'm ready!"

"Sorry!" Faith whispered. "So, may I?"

"Sure, just watch the bacon while I get the milk out." Erica ordered.

Faith looked at the bacon. "What am I watching for?" she asked innocently.

Having learned to make eggs and bacon for her mom, Erica rolled her eyes and looked sideways at her cousin. "It's a good thing you're rich!" she remarked. "'Cuz otherwise when you grow up you'd starve!"

Crossing her arms, Faith glared at her. "It's not my fault! No one will teach me how to cook!"

Seeing she was upset, Erica sighed. "I'm sorry, Faith. Here! I'll teach you!" She spent the next five minutes explaining what she was doing and why. "See? It's not really that hard!"

"It's actually kinda fun!" Faith giggled. "I wish Cook would teach me! I'll bet she knows about a million recipes!"

When the eggs finally finished cooking just right, Erica carefully scooped the two onto the fine china plate. Putting two pieces of bacon next to them while Faith buttered the toast, she smiled. "I wish we had a flower to put on the tray."

"Why?" Faith asked.

Erica explained as she placed a glass of milk next to the tumbler of orange juice. "It's sort of tradition. When you take someone breakfast in bed, you're supposed to put a flower on the tray, sometimes in a tiny vase."

Getting an idea, Faith smiled. "I'll be right back!" she whispered as she put down the half-buttered toast and took off through the house.

"Faith! Quiet or she'll hear you!" Erica yelled with a whisper. Grumbling, she finished the toast Faith had abandoned and, after putting it on the tray, picked it up and started toward the kitchen door. "Great! Now that I can actually use her help, Faith isn't here!" she said to herself. Turning around, she backed into the door and pushed it open slowly with her behind.

Making her way through the dining room and then the living room approaching the stairs, Faith came dashing out of the library and nearly ran into her. "Careful!" Erica barked, wincing at her own loudness.

"I made this real quick!" Holding something out, Erica could see it was an origami rose.

"That's perfect, Faith!" Erica smiled. "Put it on the tray next to the plate!" After she did, Erica started slowly stepping toward the stairs.

"Let me go ahead of you." Faith insisted. "That way I can open her door!"

"Good idea!" she whispered. Erica had to admit, having Faith's help made things easier and a lot more fun. When Erica reached the top of the steps, she whispered, "Go down the hall and see if her door is still closed."

Watching Faith silently jog ahead of her, she carefully walked down the long hallway. Noticing the tray was starting to get heavy and not wanting to drop it, Erica put it down in the middle of the hallway to rest her arms.

"Erica? She's still asleep!" Faith whispered as she came jogging back down the hall.

She stopped Faith just inches from stepping into the middle of the tray. "No!"

Faith looked down, barely able to see the tray in the middle of the floor. "What's it doing there?" she whispered.

"It got heavy!" Erica explained. "I needed to rest."

"Oh." Faith smiled. "May I carry it the rest of the way?"

"Oh, sure!" Erica grumbled. "I do all the work and then you take it across the finish line!"

"Hey! I made the flower!"

"And I cooked it and carried it all the way up here!"

"So? Just 'cuz you're weak and out of shape and you can't finish the job!"

While the two stood arguing at full volume, the lights in the hallway clicked on. Immediately they stopped talking as Cook came out to see what the commotion was. "What in the world..." She looked down at the two pre-teens and the tray behind them. "Alright." she demanded. "What's this?"

Erica looked down at the floor and fidgeted with her fingers. "It's um... breakfast for you?" she answered.

Smiling broadly, Faith shouted, "Happy Birthday!"

Theresa was flummoxed into speechlessness as Fredrick, Franchesca, and Heather all ran out into the hallway to find out what was going on.

Dancing in the hallway, Faith sang 'Happy Birthday' while Erica turned red. "I... I made you breakfast in bed. I wanted it to be a surprise!"

The family's cook was touched, until realization set in. "You mean you've been fiddling around in my kitchen? Without supervision? You could have burned the house down!" Her shouting caused Faith to stop singing before reaching the end of the song.

Tying her robe as she approached, Heather tried to defuse the situation. "Cook, I think Erica was just wanting to show how much she cares for you." Looking down at the rapidly growing girl, her heart ached at the sight, knowing that far too soon her fantasy would have to come to an end... one way or another. "Erica sweetie, how did you know what to do?"

She stammered out a reply. "I... I... used... I used to... make it for my mom."

"I made the flower for you, Cook." Faith noted shyly.

Her mother smiled. "That's nice, dear. It's a lovely flower!"

"I helped cook the bacon, too!"

Theresa blustered. "Your mother may have taught you how to cook, but she didn't teach you how to cook in my kitchen!" Looking down at the tray, she saw its contents. "Is that eggs?" she barked.

"Y-yes ma'am." Erica half smiled. "I... I know they're your f-favorite... eggs over easy!"

"Yes, but what am I to do about eggs now that you've used them? I needed those for the soufflé tomorrow!" Seeing hurt in the girl's eyes, her anger melted instantly. "I'm sorry, dearie. It was a lovely thought. Thank you!"

Picking up the tray, Erica offered it to her. "H-happy Birthday... Theresa."

Taking it, she smiled down at the girl. "That's Cook to you, dearie! Now if you'll all excuse me, I have a breakfast to go eat!"

Erica smiled while Theresa headed back towards her own room, thinking about going downstairs to clean up the breakfast dishes when she heard Cook call out from down the hallway.

"And don't you dare touch those dishes!"

The three laughed along with April as they finished telling the story.

Wiping a tear of laughter out of her eye, Erica composed herself. "I swear, right when she said that, I was just thinking of doing the dishes for her! It was eerie! Like she could read my mind or something!"

When at last the laughter died down, Heather stood slowly. "Well, I think *this* would be a good time to turn in. I'll leave the sleeping arrangements up to you three. You're old enough to figure *something* out." Turning to her niece, she hugged Erica tightly. "I'm so glad you came home, sweetie! We've all missed you... very much!"

Returning the embrace, she felt like she was a little girl all over again. "*Thank you, Mamma. For everything.*"

Releasing her, Heather turned to April. "I'm so glad you *found* one another, my dear. It is truly *wonderful* to finally *meet* you!"

Blushing, April smiled and, unsure, extended a hand. "It's lovely meeting you, *too*... Heather. Thank *you* for taking care of Erica growing up."

Still full of guilt for having sent the daughter of her heart away and not adopting her as she felt she should have done, Heather wiped a tear from her eye. Pushing April's hand aside, she took the young woman into a gentle hug before silently turning to the daughter of her body. "*Faith?*"

"*Mamma?*" she replied. Tears threatening to break free again, she ran into her mother's arms. "I'm *sorry*, Mamma! *So sorry!* I... I *love you!*"

Her mother cried with her. "It's *OK*, dear! I *understand!* I love you, *too.*"

Handing a tissue to each of them once they'd separated, Erica let them dry their eyes before saying, "Goodnight, Mamma." While her aunt headed up the stairs, Erica looked at April, then Faith. "Well, what *are* we going to do?"

"I'm sleeping *here.*" April took charge. "You two can go to your *rooms!*"

"I... I have an idea, if you two aren't comfortable *sharing* a room yet." Faith offered. When the two looked to her, she turned to Erica's guest. "You and I could share *my* room, April. It's a king with *lots* of space."

"It's up to *you.*" Erica said, looking at April.

Unsure, she looked at Faith suspiciously. "I get the feeling you just want to keep an *eye* on me to make sure I don't sneak into Erica's *bed* tonight."

Shaking her head, Faith swallowed hard. "A-actually, I was thinking it would be for *you* to keep an eye on *me.*" She looked at Erica longingly. "So *you* know that *I* won't." Looking at April once more, she gave her a hesitant hug and stepped back. "I... I'll leave it up to *you* two. Goodnight." Faith left quickly without even giving her cousin a goodnight hug.

The two now left alone, Erica sighed. "Well, it's *your* call."

She looked at Erica and smiled. "I could always follow your *aunt's* advice and sleep with *you!*" She put her arms around Erica's neck.

Pulling her down to sit on the couch with her once more, Erica took a breath. "April, about *earlier.* I... I need to tell you what *happened.*"

"What *did* happen up there?" April looked at her quizzically. "When you two came *down*, you both looked... um..." She stopped and just let Erica explain.

Taking April's hands in hers, she sighed. "She... she *kissed* me. Like a *serious* kiss." she closed her eyes. "Like a *lover's* kiss."

"I *see*." April answered. "And you *let* her?" When Erica simply nodded in reply, she probed further. "Did you kiss her *back*?"

"Yes." Erica replied ashamedly. "She stopped it from going too *far*, though."

"How far did it *get*?" she asked, half not wanting to hear the answer.

"Just *kissing*... but..." Erica stammered out the rest. "...I *couldn't*... I *tried*..."

Using a finger, April lifted Erica's gaze up and placed it on her love's lips to still her stammering reply. "You don't have to *say* it. I *know*. You *couldn't* stop. You didn't *want* to. And you didn't want *her* to stop, either. *Did* you?"

She shook her head and screwed up her face, trying to hold back the tears. "No! I *failed* you! I don't know how she can *do* this to me... make me forget *everything*! Make me forget *you*." She took another breath, slowing the flow of shameful tears. "She just makes me feel so... *beautiful*."

April ran her fingers through Erica's hair, sighing in exasperation. "We *talked* about this, E. You *need* to work this out with her. You *can't* move forward until you know what you *really* want." She leaned in and kissed Erica's cheek sweetly. "You *know* I love you, and I *know* you love *me*. I can *wait*. I've waited six *years*... what's a few more *days*?"

"April... I... I know what you're *saying*, but I *know* what I want." Erica looked into her lovely gray eyes. "Faith and I don't trust each other *alone*. We can't resist the *temptation*." Looking away, she began justifying their agreement. "Besides, what kind of future could we *have*? Never able to live the lives we would *want* together? It just... it wouldn't *work*! We've decided to just never *be* alone... never let temptation have a *chance* to make us do something we'd *all* regret."

"You can *say* that all you *want* E," April lectured, "but the heart *wants* what the heart *wants*. What are you going to do if circumstances *force* you two to be alone with one another? Run *away*? What happens when your aunt *passes*? You'll have to spend a *lot* of time with her going over the details. Are you just going to *forsake* that and let *Faith* deal with it? *Alone*?"

Shaking her head, she sighed and looked at Erica. "You *need* to *resolve* this. I'll *be* here 'til it's settled. If that's only as a *friend*, then that's what I'll *be*." Pulling Erica up to stand next to her and embrace her lovingly she added, "And if it's as something *more*... I'll happily be there for that, *too!*"

"I *love* you, April." Erica smiled. "Always *have* and always *will*."

"And I *love* you, Erica." April sighed. "Always *have* and always *will!*"

The two hugged and started up the stairs together. Looking around, Erica shook her head as they did. "God, it's so *funny*. I only lived here a *year*, and it's like I never *left*... like I've *always* lived here."

Snaking her arm around Erica's waist, April smiled. "From a certain point of view, *Erica* never lived anywhere *else*. She was *born* and *grew up* here."

"I'm *really* messed up, *aren't I?*" Erica laughed and put her arm around April's shoulder.

"Most *definitely!*" April quipped.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Erica saw their bags in front of her bedroom door. "So then... where *are* you going to sleep?"

She spiraled out of Erica's arm and walked backwards toward the bedroom. "Where *I'm* sleeping isn't the *question*. Where *you're* sleeping *is*." Nodding toward Erica's bedroom door, she smiled. "Come on! We'll take the bags in your room, unpack, and *then* figure things out!"

Following April into her old room, even as Erica stepped in, it was as though time had turned in on itself. The room was the same as the first day she'd arrived, not a single thing different or out of place. Entering and closing the door behind her, Erica pointed up at the gaslights along the wall. "Those are what I was telling you about! Real *gaslights*! I remember how scared I was that first night when the power went out! Then Fredrick went around and lit all the lamps and it was like turning back the clock a *century*!"

Opening her suitcase, April took the contents out and opened a drawer. "Um... *honey*? I think your aunt *forgot* something."

Walking over, she looked inside and almost died of embarrassment. "Oh, *Lord*!" She withdrew a pair of panties she'd worn when she was thirteen. "I wonder..." Erica walked over to the wardrobe and drew the doors open.

"Is this the way to *Narnia*?" April joked as she looked at the dresses, skirts, and blouses in Erica's wardrobe. "Wow! You had good *taste* at thirteen!"

Erica pulled down one of her old school uniforms and showed it to April. "I asked Mamma to get me these for home-school. I wore them *every day*! It made me feel *proper* and *elegant*, like the daughter of a wealthy *aristocrat*!"

Nodding in approval, April raised an eyebrow. "Well *weren't* you?"

"I suppose I *was*, in a *way*." Erica admitted. Returning the dress, she closed the wardrobe. "There *should* be room in my *bottom* drawer. I almost *never* used it." Moving back to the dresser, she opened the drawer and froze.

Reaching in, she pulled out Faith's nightgown, the same one she'd worn her first and last nights in her adopted home. Smelling it brought back a flood of memories. "I *forgot*. I put this in here that last morning. I... I guess no one's been in the drawers *since*." She smiled wistfully and set it aside. "Here... there's *plenty* of room."

Starting to put her clothes in the drawer along with Erica, April saw her reaction to the child's nightgown. "It's *Faith's*, isn't it?"

Without pausing in putting away her things, Erica nodded. "I borrowed it from her that first night. It's the first nightgown I ever wore."

She picked it up and sniffed it and suddenly could see the best friend she once knew. "It *smells* like you... I mean, like the *old* you I remember."

Nodding without looking at April, Erica finished unpacking. "I *know*." Standing up with a fresh nightgown and underwear in hand, she walked over to her toiletries bag and retrieved her toothbrush, paste, and mouthwash. "Did you want a shower *before* or *after* me?"

Shaking her head, April got out her flannel pajamas. "No, I'm *bushed*. I'll take mine in the *morning*."

"Breakfast is at *seven*." Erica noted with a shrug as she headed for the bathroom. "Plan *accordingly*."

"*Seven!*" April shouted. "What is this, a *farm*?"

Turning and leaning out of the bathroom door smiling at her, Erica shook her head. "No. It's an *estate*."

"*Oh!*" April responded snootily. "Well then, We guess We shall rise at *six* to shower *ourselves* and get *properly* attired to *dine*!"

"To break our *fast*, April." Erica joked back. "If you're going to poke *fun*, at least do it *right*!"

Twenty minutes later, Erica entered her room once more, hair wrapped in a towel and a terrycloth robe covering her nightgown. "*April?*"

"Yea?"

Flipping her head over, Erica rubbed her hair. "Could I get a *hand*?"

"*Sure*, babe." April replied, setting aside the book she was reading and padding over to the vanity, pausing to stare at it as Erica took a seat. "*Wow!*" she exclaimed. "Just how rich *is* your aunt, hun?"

Erica tossed her towel into the bathroom, shrugging. "I actually don't *know*. *Very*, I guess. The only thing *she* ever told me was that she had more than she could ever spend and not to *worry* about it."

"*I guess!*" April noted, antiques being a hobby of hers. "Honey, this *vanity* is worth more than my *car*!"

Shrugging, Erica just brushed out her hair. "She had it since before *I* came to live here. It *might* be part of the house's original furniture. I really don't *know*, though. It *might* be a family heirloom. Her parents were wealthy, *too*."

Picking up the brush, April took over. "And she let a *twelve* year old use it?"

"It's not like I was carving my *initials* into everything!" Erica giggled. "I was a *good* girl!" She smiled at April's reflection in her old vanity where she'd first and last seen her mother's youthful reflection.

Switching to a heated curling brush, April mused. "So what *did* twelve-year-old you do for *fun* around here? I know there's no *cell* service and you didn't get your computer 'til you were *thirteen*."

"In the fall we went on *hikes* a lot." Erica answered as April brushed and dried her hair. "Once *winter* set in, we played in the snow and inside, mostly with *Faith's* toys until I got some of my *own* for Christmas. By the time *spring* got here, I was moved into *this* room and *mostly* entertained myself with books and writing my first stories. Then *summer* came and

Faith, Mike, and I spent a lot of time playing outside." Erica sighed as she remembered how wonderful that last summer had been. "When I turned thirteen, I spent a *lot* of time on my computer... looking for *you*."

"Summer five years ago?" April rolled her eyes. "God! I think I was in my *Goth* stage then! Can't you just *see* me, dressed in all *black*, *brooding* about *everything*? I think even if you *had* seen a picture of me, you wouldn't have *recognized* it!"

"I bet you were still *adorable*, though!" Erica flirted. Turning to look in April's eyes, she sighed. "I tried *so* hard for *so* long to find you and reach out to you. I... I *really* needed you. I wanted you to tell me what to *do*. I *knew* I wanted to be a girl... I guess I always *was* inside and just never knew what it was, but I couldn't keep it *up* much longer. I... I wanted you to *tell* me... tell me what was the right thing to *do*."

April turned Erica back around and continued brushing. "If you *had* asked me *then*, I would have told you to go take a long walk off a short *pier*! I was so *angry* with you then. I thought you'd *forgotten* about me. It's what my *parents* kept telling me... that *that's* why you never called or wrote. *Done*!"

She stood and wrapped her arms around April's neck. "Thank you! And I could *never* forget you, even if it took me a *lifetime* to find you!"

"Aww! Aren't you so *sweet*!" Kissing Erica on the nose, April sighed. "Now I think *you* should go across the hall and see what's *what*."

Terror crept across Erica's face. "I... I *can't*! April! I don't *want* to! I... I want to stay *here*, and I want *you* to stay here... with *me*!" Seeing April about to object she added, "We don't have to *do* anything! Not even *kiss*! I just... I want to be *near* you." Looking down at her feet, she sighed wistfully. "Maybe wake up in each other's *arms*?"

She shook her head. "That sounds *really* nice, but you're just not *ready*, E."

"We can just *leave!*" Erica suggested. "Just... just go back to the *apartment!* Eventually I'll get *over it!*"

April laughed. "It's not a *cold*, Erica! It's *love!* You can't just 'get *over it!*' You have to *face* it... *learn* from it... understand what it really *is...* and *then* you'll know what to do. *I* won't need to tell you. You'll just *know*. Then *I'll* know what *I* need to do."

"Can't I just *wait* a few years? It's probably just *hormones!*"

"For *six years*, Erica? Through puberty... *twice?*"

She nodded in grudging acceptance. "Right. 'You can't run from trouble..."

"...there ain't *no* place *that* far!" they recited together.

"Right!" April nodded. "Now *go!* I'm going to take my book downstairs and relax on the *couch*. I'll see you in the morning."

Untying her robe, Erica slipped it off and started for the bath to hang it up.

"Whoa!" April cried looking at Erica's white satin nightgown. "You going in dressed like *that*? She'll jump your bones before you can close the *door!* Hell, *I* might!"

Blushing, Erica looked at her nightgown. "Too *much?*"

"Put the *robe* back on!" April ordered. "Jeez! *Slut!*"

"Runaway!"

"Tranny!"

"Junky!"

"Hey! Low *blow*, E!"

Slipping back into her robe, Erica tied it closed. "You wanna talk about low blows, I need to tell you about *Chet Mansfield* sometime!"

April shook her head. "Somehow I get the feeling I won't *like* this story..."

"Depends on your point of view." Erica noted. Turning around to show herself she asked, "*Better?*"

"*Much.*" April kissed her nose again. Turning serious, she said, "Now go *talk* to her. If you *need* me, you know where I'll *be*."

After April left, Erica walked around her room for several minutes gathering her courage. Steeling herself, she opened her door. Looking across the hallway at the door that used to be her own, she froze in fear for a moment before she forced herself onward.

Erica was determined to face Faith, stand strong for April's sake, and prove that no matter how much her body craved her cousin, her heart could conquer the desire with April's love.

Unfortunately, her heart was on desire's side.

Chapter 20 - What a Girl *Really* Wants

Faith heard a faint knock on the door. "Come in, April." she said dismissively, thinking that she had decided to keep an eye on her through the night after all. Walking back into her bathroom, she called back over her shoulder. "I'll be out in a few, alright?"

Entering as Faith closed the bathroom door, Erica waited patiently. First sitting at Faith's vanity, she decided that if she *really* wanted to test herself, she should sit on Faith's bed. Moving quickly, she sat down and waited again. As she lingered, she began to think that maybe it was too explicitly sexual to be sitting on Faith's bed in nothing but a robe and nightgown. She was about to move back to the vanity when Faith came out.

"April, I was hoping we'd get a chance to talk." Faith began as she came out, not looking at her guest. "I wanted to tell you that Erica and I..." Looking up, and seeing who was sitting on her bed, she jumped. "*Erica!*"

"What *about* us?" Erica asked shyly.

Quickly tiptoeing over to her, Faith lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "*Erica!* Are you *crazy*? What are you *doing* here!? I thought we agreed being *alone* together was a *bad idea*! What if *April* comes in?"

"She *sent* me here." Erica stated calmly. "What were you going to tell her?"

"I..." Faith moved closer to Erica, stopped, turned away, and wrapped her arms around herself. "I was *going* to tell her that you and I were OK and that she didn't have anything to *worry* about. Now I'm not so *sure*."

Erica slowly stood and walked up behind Faith. "*Hold* me?" she asked.

A tear of frustration rolled down Faith's cheek. "I... I *can't*! Don't you *understand*, Erica? If I *do*... I... I don't know *what* will happen!"

"Neither do I," Erica replied softly, "but I know I *missed* you, that I *love* you, and that I want to *hold* you and know that everything is going to be *OK* between us." She placed her hand on Faith's shoulder. "*Please?*"

She turned around slowly. They were still very close in height, Erica only half an inch taller. Looking up slightly into Erica's beautiful green eyes, Faith tried to speak, but words wouldn't form. Her mouth moved inarticulately as she was overcome with desire.

Erica slowly opened her arms and wrapped them around Faith, pulling her in tightly. "I... I *missed* you." she whispered.

Tears flowed down her cheeks like running water. "I missed you *too*, Erica! Oh *God*, did I miss you!"

They stood there holding one another for what seemed like hours. Neither of them speaking, they just reveled in the comfort of each other. Finally, Faith's tears stopped and she stepped back. "I... Erica I... I still *want* you." she warned. "You should *go*."

"*Never.*" Erica replied. "I will *always* be here for you, Faith. As God is my *witness*, I will."

Pulling back, Faith's face hardened. "I... I don't *believe* in God." she said. "Not *anymore*."

She stepped back and sat on Faith's bed. "Why? Because life got *hard*?"

"No! Because if God was *real* and *loved* me, He wouldn't let me *feel* like this!" she nearly shouted.

"*Really?*" Erica challenged her point. "You think that God just goes around *making* people feel whatever He *wants* them to feel? If *that* were true the whole *world* would be one giant *paradise*! But it's *not!* It's *messy*,

complicated, and full of mistakes! But they're our mistakes Faith! Not His! He doesn't condemn us... we condemn ourselves!"

"See? That's why I can't believe in Him! If He is real, he's a sadistic bastard that likes watching us suffer!"

Shaking her head sadly, Erica almost laughed at how similar Faith's words were to her own thoughts when she was twelve. "We make our *own* choices, Faith. You, me, Mamma, April... *everyone*. We chose to be kind or cruel, generous or greedy, hateful..." She paused to rise and walk over to Faith. "...or *loving*." She leaned in and kissed Faith tenderly.

Moaning as she felt Erica's lips once more, she slid her hands around her cousin's waist, then pulled back, carefully taking Erica's robe tie into her hands. Pulling slowly, she undid the knot and released it, letting Erica's robe fall open. Sliding her hands up over Erica's shoulders, she pushed the robe gently off, letting it pool at Erica's feet. Looking down, she drew in a breath at the stunning beauty before her. "Oh God, Erica! I... I don't think I can *stop* myself! I... I want you too *badly*!"

Erica took Faith's hands. "Then *I* will. Where *you're* weak, *I'll* be strong. Where *I'm* weak, *you* can be strong." Erica moved them over to sit on her bed. Looking into Faith's eyes, Erica smiled. "I *love* you, Faith. I want you to be *happy*, and God loves us *both* and wants *us* to be happy. If I have to let you *take* me tonight to *prove* it to you, I *will. Gladly*."

Looking at her cousin, the smile she saw warmed Faith's heart. She wanted desperately to just push Erica down on her bed and take her, use her, and love her. When she tried to move though, she found she couldn't. No matter how badly she wanted to, she just sat there and stared at Erica, frozen and powerless.

Tempted to leave, Erica paused and sat on Faith's bed, extending a hand to her. "I... I want to talk to you... about *April*."

Feeling a pang of jealousy, Faith pushed it aside and took Erica's hand. "Um... *OK*. What *about* her?"

Trying not to hurt Faith's easily bruised feelings, Erica chose her words carefully. "I... I *love* her, Faith... and *she* loves *me*. So much so that she risked *losing* me to you, *made* me come to you tonight, just so I could be *sure* of what I *really* want."

Swallowing against the fear, Faith looked at the beautiful girl sitting on her bed in nothing but a sexy nightgown. "So then... what *do* you want?"

"*You*." she began. "Your happiness, *most* of all. I... I couldn't *stand* if I hurt you... but... I love April, *too*. I *know* she loves *me* and don't want to hurt her *either*, but it seems that no matter *what* I chose, *one* of you gets hurt."

Sighing sympathetically, Faith looked down at her sadly. "It's *OK*, Erica. You should chose *April*. Mamma would never let *us* be together, *anyway*. I... I'll be alright. I mean, we'd still be *family*."

Gripping Faith's hand, Erica shook her head. "It's not that *easy*, Faith. I *love* you and *want* you, just as much as *you* do. That's *not* just going to just go away, for *either* of us. If it *was*, it would have happened *years* ago."

Tempted to drag Erica into bed to finish what they'd started earlier, to cross that line, Faith made herself pull her hand away. "No, Erica. You *can't*. We can't. You can have a *future* with April. A *family*. If we..." Collecting herself at the thought of Erica and her having a family of their own, Faith forcibly shook the image from her mind. "We just *can't*. I can't *let* you lose April! Not *again*! I *love* you too much to *let* you lose her!"

"Either way, I won't *lose* April." Erica shook her head happily. "She's already *told* me that she'd be there for me no matter *what* I decided, even if it was just as a *friend*. So *really*, it just comes down to what I *really* want... and if *you* still want *me*. I... I know being with me would make life *harder*,

for us *both*, but if *you're* willing to endure the hardships, then so am *I*. We can move to another *state*! We could get married in nearly half the *country* where it's legal! I... well, I'm still *legally* male... for *now*... so even *that* can't stop us!"

"*Erica!*" Faith whined. "You're forgetting about *Mamma*! She'd *never* give us her *blessing*! We'd move out of state and never *see* her again! You just got her *back*! I can't *do* that to you!"

Sighing fatefully, Erica saw that Faith wasn't going to budge. Suddenly a thought that ran through her head that made her giggle slightly. Before she realized it, she found herself saying, "Too bad we..."

Faith sat next to her quickly. "Too bad we *what*?" she probed.

Shaking her head dismissively, Erica smiled. "*Nothing*. Just a stupid *idea*. It would *never* work... it never *does*."

Now almost begging, Faith began to insist. "*Please!* Just *tell* me!"

Rolling her eyes, she sighed. "OK, *fine*! I was thinking that if you could be happy with having me only when I visit, knowing the rest of the time that I'm with April, and if *she* could be happy that way, it would 'magically' solve *everything*. *See*? Stupid idea, *huh*? People try it all the *time*, but it *never* works out. Jealousy's a real *thing*!"

Without the slightest hesitation, Faith nodded. "OK. I *agree*."

Smiling at her, Erica sighed. "I'm glad you understand. I *knew* you would never *seriously* consider..."

"*No*." Faith interrupted. "I mean, I agree to the idea of sharing you with April... if *she's* willing, that is."

Stunned at the sudden reversal, Erica shook her head. "No, Faith! Weren't you *listening*? People have *tried* this before! It *always* ends badly! No! Besides, April would *never* agree to *that*!"

"How do *you* know?" Faith debated. "You thought *I* would disagree."

Thinking how to argue that point, Erica paused before answering. "Because she loves me and..."

"...wants you to be happy." Faith interrupted. "So much so she risked *losing* you to me by *making* you come here tonight. Sounds pretty *selfless* to *me*." Changing tactics, Faith pressed the point. "She *obviously* isn't freaked out at the idea of you and I being a *couple*, even though we're cousins. Do you think you picking me over her would make her stop *loving* you?"

"*No*." Erica answered hesitantly. "That's why..."

"So what makes you so sure she *wouldn't* agree?"

Unable to answer, Erica shook her head. "Faith... you *know* I love you. I *know* you love me, too. Do you still *want* me?"

"Of *course* I do!" Faith admitted freely.

"Then *forget* that stupid idea of mine and..."

"It's *not* a stupid idea, Erica!" Faith continued her argument. "It's a *wonderful* idea! We should *do* it! Don't you *see*? It's the only way you'll ever be truly *happy*! I *can't* let you give up April for *me*... but I couldn't *stand* the idea of hurting you by *rejecting* you... and I'd be *happy* to see you happy with *her*!"

"It won't *work*, Faith." Erica sighed. "Eventually *you'd* resent April's time with *me*... or April would resent my time with *you*."

Silence hung between them for almost long enough to become awkward. Eventually Faith asked, "Will you hold me like you used to?"

"Of course!" Erica smiled as she lay down on the bed and waited while Faith crawled up next to her so they were facing one another. Extending her hand until Faith took it, the two intertwined their fingers together and smiled back at each other happily, if somewhat nervously as though they were thirteen all over again and sharing their last night in bed together.

Lowering her voice to a whisper, Faith asked, "If I tell you something, do you promise not to get mad?" Seeing Erica nod and smile at the shared memory, Faith shook her head. "No you have to *promise*!"

"OK, I *promise* not to get mad!" Erica whispered.

"I think you're *beautiful*! I'm *glad* you came to me tonight!"

"*Faith*? If I tell you a secret, do you *promise* not to tell?"

"I *promise*! What *is* it?"

"It's *really* nice to be in bed with you again. You're kind, and beautiful, and you give me a feeling like I'm the most *desirable* woman in the world! But remember you *promised* not to tell *anyone*... especially not *Mamma*!"

"I wanted to tell you something." Faith continued. "I know why you needed to go away. I've wanted you almost the entire time I've known you. I've dreamed about you. Felt you *taking* me... *loving* me... and I *you*. Sometimes, before you got your own room, I would lie awake at night and hold you as you slept and pretended we were *married*. You've been the star of nearly every sexual fantasy I've ever *had*. I think that's the main reason why Mamma sent you away." Faith gripped Erica's hand a little tighter as she scootched closer. "I am. *Curious*, that is. About *being* with you. About what it might be *like*."

Erica's smile never faltered. "Faith, I *love* you. More than I could *ever* say."

Noticing that this time Erica didn't say 'But', Faith's breath caught. "Erica... *please* don't tease! I... I don't think I could *stand* it if you *rejected* me!"

"Who says I *would*, Faith?" Erica responded breathily. "I *meant* what I said. If you *want* me, and taking me is how you want me to show you how *much* I love you... and how much God loves *us*, then I'm yours to *have*."

Remembering something from the night her mother split them into separate rooms, Faith took on a serious tone and changed the subject slightly. "I've wanted to tell you something *else* for some time. Remember when I told you that I turned you on and you said you weren't a *perv*? It *hurt* that you said that... because I *was* turned on and it made *me* feel like a *perv* for it."

"Oh, *Faith*!" Erica sighed. "I'm *sorry*! I was a stupid little *girl* and thought that you'd *hate* me if I admitted the truth... that I *was* attracted to you... and still *am*. I was so *scared* that you'd get *mad* at me again!"

Scootching closer, Faith was now so close that their clasped hands were touching both of their breasts at the same time and their faces were only inches apart. "I remember that night you promised never to *leave* me."

"Sometimes I wish I *hadn't*." Erica admitted. "But then I never really *left* you... we were *separated*. I no more left you *willingly* than I left *April* willingly. Besides, I think in the end it *was* for the best. We *both* needed that time. To see if what we had was real or just..." She paused and leaned in until her lips were less than an inch from Faith's. "I think five years is long enough to tell that what we feel isn't just a childish *crush*."

Leaning forward to close the gap, Faith let their lips gently brush against one another. After a moment she smiled. "I *like* this! I... I think I could be happy just having you like this every once in a while. Just to know that you love me *this* much... *trust* me this much. That I *could* take you and *nothing*

or *no one* could *stop* me. That for *this* moment, you're really *my* Erica. You have to ask April about your idea. The worst she can say is 'no'."

Sighing in resignation, Erica nodded. "OK... I'll *ask*." looking up with a smile, she added, "You know what?" Seeing Faith shake her head, Erica continued. "*This*... what we have right *now*? It was *worth* what it took to get us here. God *does* know best!"

Rolling Erica over, Faith cuddled up against her back, her arm draped over Erica's slender waist and her hand nestled between Erica's perfect breasts, gripping her nightgown like she used to do. After a short time they fell asleep like that, Faith waking several times just to see that it wasn't a dream, that Erica was really there and loved her. *This is enough... and it was worth it!* she realized, running her hands over Erica's smooth and perfect body. Relishing the sensuous way her cousin responded to her touch as she slept, Faith knew then that no matter what else she did in life, that loving Erica was not only right, but the way things were *meant* to be.

Just before six, Erica awoke out of habit. Faith was sound asleep and she didn't want to disturb her, but knew that their night had to end. She knew now what she wanted out of a relationship with Faith. It had never been just about sex; it was about *intimacy*. The closeness, shared affection, and love... the true romantic love they had for one another... sweet and beautiful. Turning over to face her, Erica luxuriated in the feel of Faith's arms wrapping around her waist and her legs intertwining with her own.

"Faith." she said just above a whisper.

Her eyes slowly fluttering open, she smiled and pulled Erica tightly against her, letting their bodies do what they yearned for. "Good *morning*, love!" she moaned before kissing Erica slowly and sensuously once more.

Closing her eyes, Erica relished the adoration Faith showered on her. Having had major body image issues for years, it was beyond flattering to

have a beautiful young woman so desire her that even the fact that they were related couldn't stop her need to have her. When Faith's tongue slid past her lips, she yielded to the intrusion willingly, reveling in the feel of unbridled passion while Faith's hands roamed up and down her back delicately, making every nerve in her body tingle with desire.

Feeling her breasts press firmly but delicately against Erica's, Faith moaned through her nose and began running her hand down over the slightly younger woman's rear. Caressing the skin through the satin panties that were all that stood between her fingers and Erica's blissful release, the nightgown having ridden up in the night, she knew then how desperately she wanted Erica. More than ever in her life. Pulling her hips tightly up to Erica's with their intertwined legs, she was nearly overcome with the passion.

Suddenly aware of how serious they were getting, the two stopped and looked deeply in one another's eyes. Each seeing the desperate desire of the other so obviously, but knowing if they went any further they would cross an invisible line from cousins to lovers, they both made themselves turn away from the burning ache in their bodies that was screaming for them to cross that line, consequences be damned.

Backing off slowly, Faith continued to caress Erica's exposed skin and kissed her gently once more, letting the fire in her belly die down to a slow ember. When as last Faith's craving for Erica's body began to be sated, she slipped her legs free and pulled her arm back to herself. "I... I want *more*, but I *can* be happy with just *this... for now!*" she smiled.

Erica's breath was still deep and deliberate, each intake of air trying to stem the tide of need in her own body. "I know what you *mean*, Faith." she gasped. "I... I've never... *never* been so tempted to let someone have me as I am right *now!* I *want* you to take me! To *use* me for your pleasure!"

"But?" Faith intuited Erica's hesitancy.

"No... no *buts*, Faith." she smiled. "If you *want* to take me, you *can*. I'll... I'll *let* you. I love you *that* much, even though I want to wait."

Tempted nearly beyond her ability to resist, Faith began to move forward again, ready to roll Erica on her back, strip her naked, and spend a few hours learning every sensitive part of the woman's body. She would have too, had it not been for the voice in the back of her head screaming at her to stop... to not hurt her beloved Erica that way.

Sighing frustratedly, Faith moaned her need into submission. "No... I, I just *can't* do that... not *yet*, anyway. You... you're not *ready*." Smiling wickedly, Faith slipped her body up against Erica's sensuously once more, sliding her legs up and down Erica's smooth skin. "But the *second* you are, *nothing* is going to *stop* me!"

Smiling back at her, Erica loved the feel of Faith's tempting flesh against her own. "*Good!* I *promise*, you'll be the *first* to know!" Pausing a moment, the young woman's smile turned mirthful. "OK, *maybe* the *second*!" she giggled as she pressed her own body up against Faith's, letting the smooth satin of her nightgown that covered her breasts slide over Faith's chest once more, causing her cousin's body to shudder in need. Running her fingers through Faith's blonde curls slowly and seductively, Erica was barely able to make herself stop.

Disentangling from Faith's loving embrace, she slowly slipped out of the bed and retrieved the discarded robe from where Faith had let it drop to the floor. "I *love* you, Faith." she said just above a whisper. "More than words can *ever* express! When I'm *ready*, I fully intend to *show* you just how much!" At that, she slipped out the door and back to her own room.

Chapter 21 - Families' Reunions

Erica waited outside her bathroom door. "Hurry up, April! We're going to be *late!*" She heard the water turn off and the shower curtain open. Waiting a minute, she saw the door open as April exited, wrapped in a towel and smiling gaily as she pulled off the shower cap.

"*There!*" she said. "Bathroom's all *yours!*"

"Oh, *thank you* so *very* much, dear!" Erica quipped. "We have about five *minutes* to get downstairs and you *still* need to get dressed!" Entering the bathroom while April dressed, she brushed her teeth, rinsed, and ran out to the vanity to finish her makeup. "*Hurry!* They'll be here any *minute!*"

Hearing a knock at the front door made the two pause and look at one another. Racing furiously, April dashed into the rest of her clothes, giggling crazily, while Erica finished her face and touched up her hair.

Standing and heading for the bedroom door, Erica watched April drop her dress over her slender body. Giving her dark hair a flip, it settled into place perfectly, a quality Erica loved, and envied, about her. "*Ready?*" she asked as April slipped her shoes on.

"*Ready!*" she cried as she ran over to join Erica at the door.

Exiting into the upstairs hall, they linked hands and smiled at one another. Approaching the top of the stairs, Erica could feel April's arm tense.

"*Nervous?*" She asked as they started down the stairs.

"Just a *lot!*" April nodded vigorously.

Descending, Erica saw Brooke and Jenny just taking off their coats and handing them to Fredrick.

Brooke looked up at the two coming down the stairs together. "Erica!" she cried. Meeting the two at the bottom of the steps, she couldn't believe her eyes. *She looks... happy!* Brook smiled. Opening her arms, she took Erica into a quick hug. "Oh, girl! I missed you!"

Her honorary niece returned the sentiment. "I missed you, *too!*" Repeating the process with Jenny, she stood back a little. "Aunt Brooke? Aunt Jenny? I'd like you to meet *April!*"

The teen was hugged by them both before she had a chance to speak. Finally, she turned to Brooke. "I understand you knew Erica's father, Jack."

She nodded solemnly. "I *did*. He was a good *man*. My *best* friend."

Looking at Erica, April smiled. "He *must* have been. His *daughter* is *amazing!*"

Just then, Heather walked in from the living room. "Brooke! Jenny! I'm *so* glad you two could make it!" she greeted them.

Erica was happy to see the bright shine of the woman she'd known as a child once more. Gone were the sweatpants and simple top. Her aunt had dressed for dinner as she used to.

While Fredrick escorted the five ladies to the dining room, they were joined by Faith, who'd managed to find a simple but elegant black dress in her tangled mess of a room.

"Sorry I'm *late*, Mamma!" she apologized. "I... I had trouble finding something to *wear!*"

Taking her seat, Heather shook her head. "We'll have to *fix* that." she commented.

Hugging Faith, they kissed each other on the cheek. "You look *great*, Faith!" Erica complimented her.

"*Please!*" Faith rolled her eyes. "I look like I dragged this dress out of the bottom of my wardrobe... because I *did!* You two look *lovely*, though!"

She blushed and said, "*Thanks!*" while April just smiled.

After they were all seated, Cook came out twice, serving April, Erica, and Faith after Heather and their guests were served. When everyone but Faith looked up toward Heather to say grace, she just looked at Faith with sadness in her eyes.

Shyly, Faith lowered her head with the rest of the table. Then, just as Heather was about to speak, Faith shocked them all as she spoke. "Dear Lord, thank you for the blessings you have seen fit to bestow upon us, and make us truly thankful for them. In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, Amen."

Stunned silence followed until Heather smiled and repeated, "Amen!"

Slowly the others followed suit before Erica looked over at her cousin. "*Faith!* I'm... well... OK, *that* was a thing!"

Laughter erupted before Heather bade everyone enjoy their meal.

Making small talk through their shared meal, Brooke looked across the table at April sitting next to Erica, with Faith between Erica and her mother; the girls' usual places switched. She watched them for some time, eating and talking, obviously at ease with each other, and envied them their comfort. Finally, after being unable to tell just by looking, Brooke had to say something.

"Erica, I was wondering something. Are you and April..."

Looking at her father's best friend with a puzzled expression, Erica couldn't resist the temptation. "Are we... happy? ...healthy? ...*boinking*?"

Stunned as Erica cracked a half grin and everyone else laughed, it was then that Brooke finally saw so much of Jack in Erica, even though she looked nearly the same as the girl's mother did the day they'd met. "No, you *clown*! Are you a *couple*!?"

The two teens looked at one another smiling before they nodded together.

Dropping her fork, Heather had expected their typical long-winded explanation. "When did *this* happen? Last night you two wouldn't even admit you were *dating*!"

"This *morning*, Mamma." Erica said, turning to face her. "Try and keep up!" Seeing her aunt was not pleased with her flippant answer, Erica elaborated seriously. "Sorry, Mamma. This morning, April and I sat down together and talked about our future together... what we *wanted*... what we *needed*... and eventually we decided it was time to take the next step."

Heather dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "Well, what *changed*?"

"Coming *here*." Erica answered. "Seeing you all." She looked at Faith sitting next to her. "Settling some issues. It's one of the main reasons why April talked me into coming home. To find out where I *stood*, if I even still *had* a family, and what I really *wanted* out of life."

"Well, I guess I owe a debt of thanks to *April* then." her aunt remarked. "Didn't you *want* to come home, sweetie?"

"Frankly, I... I thought you didn't want *me* to come home." Erica answered nervously honest. "I thought that maybe you only wanted... um... *Eric*... to come home. I... uh... I thought *he* was the only one you would *accept* in your home."

"Are you *happy*?" Brooke interrupted bluntly.

Turning to her, Erica smiled. "So happy that I'm glad of *every* part of my life! I wouldn't change a *thing* that got me here!" She reached across the table with her hand to her father's best friend. "I... I wanted to thank *you* for all that *you* did for me while I was growing up here, Aunt Brooke. It meant more than you'll ever know... and I know it was *really* hard for you to do."

The girl's answer brought a chill to her spine, having come so very close to something Jack had told her often over the years that she'd known him.

Reaching under the table, Jenny took her wife's hand, squeezing it to get her attention. When Brooke turned to look at her, she said very simply, "*Told* you so!"

When at last the six finished dinner, they retired to the living room as usual. Faith took a seat next to her mother, while Erica and April took the couch. Brooke sat in the other loveseat with Jenny nearly sitting in her lap, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

Turning to Erica, Heather asked, "So, what are your plans you two? Will you be staying long?"

Looking at April, Erica then looked back to her aunt. "Well, we only have two weeks before we need to get back. I want to show April all the things around here that I remember so fondly. The town, the woods..." She perked up. "Do the Dempseys still have their annual Halloween party? That's only four days away!"

Faith and her mother looked at one another before Heather answered her. "Well sweetie, we haven't *gone* to any of them in the last four years. It... it just wasn't the same... without *you*. I honestly don't *know* if they still have them or *not*. I asked them to stop inviting us so we wouldn't have to keep declining."

"That's too bad." Erica sighed. "I *really* would have liked to see them and introduce them to April. They were all a pretty big part of my life here... almost a second *family*."

"I see *Mike Dempsey* every once in a while." Brooke offered. "Now that he's eighteen, he's running a lot of the ranch for his parents. They've been hard pressed to keep things going these last years, the economy hit everyone pretty *hard* around here, but I know they *still* have their yearly Halloween party." Seeing Erica's curious look, she explained. "I work at the market. Not enough customers to keep my salon running full time."

"*Oh!*" Erica exclaimed. "So he comes in to pick things up. How *is* he?"

"Getting *along*. Sad, but... keeping *busy*. Did you hear about he and the Wilks girl?"

"I told her." Faith noted.

Thinking a moment, Heather opined, "Erica dear, I'm *sure* that if *you* showed up at the party with April, the Dempseys would be *happy* to have you, costume or *no*!"

"Especially your *boyfriend*!" Faith smiled mischievously.

"Ugh!" Erica rolled her eyes. "Are you *ever* going to let that *go*, Faith?"

"*No!*" she replied exuberantly.

"Well, if we *do* go, we *should* get costumes." Erica noted. "Otherwise we'll look *awfully* out of place. Does Miss Fuller still have her shop?"

"Janet *died* last winter, dear." Heather answered, looking away. "She had a heart attack when she was alone in her shop. No one even *knew* for a few days. It was her *son* that found her, poor boy."

The mood threatening to turn somber, Faith got an idea. "Erica? Would you be willing to try something a little... *unorthodox*?"

"Probably *not*." April replied for her.

"Oh, come *on*!" Faith pressed the point. "You want to take April to the *Halloween* party, don't you?"

Her cousin nodded tentatively. "Yes... but you have a funny *look* in your eye... like that time you told me you saw an eagle's nest up in that tree and talked me into climbing it when you *knew* I wouldn't be able to get down!"

April turned to Faith. "Why on *Earth* would you *do* that?" she asked.

"She wouldn't tell me where she put my copy of '*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*'!" Faith justified herself.

"Well you wouldn't stop calling me *Rebecca*!" Erica countered with a smile.

"*Girls!*" Heather interrupted. "That's *enough*! Faith? If you *have* an idea, then please *share* it so we can see if it's *workable*... and *appropriate*!"

Faith laid out her idea. After some disagreement and discussion, the four finally agreed how to proceed while Brooke and Jenny just listened.

Four days later, they rode together in Heather's limo and talked about events in Erica's life after she came to stay with her aunt. Some of it was reminiscing, the rest was telling April just how precocious young Erica could be.

"You hit him in the *nuts*?" April said shocked.

Hiding behind her hand, Erica answered embarrassedly. "For the *hundredth* time, I didn't *mean* to! He was like two feet *taller* than me!"

April stared at Erica, her mouth hanging open. "You stood up to a *bully* for him? So is *that* why this Mike guy was crushing on you?"

Shaking her head, Faith grinned. "No, he was doing that almost from the *start!* I *still* say she did it because Chet insulted her *date!*"

Wanting to crawl under the floorboard to hide, Erica blushed heavily. "I was never anything but *polite* to him!"

"Well, you must have done *something* to push his buttons, E!" April joked.

"She stood up to Chet for him, then wouldn't dance with anyone *else...* the *tease!*" Faith ribbed her cousin. "I *warned* her! He followed her around for the next *year* like a lovesick Irish Setter!"

The car pulled off the highway and onto the Dempsey's driveway, lurching and making Faith bump her head on the top of the car.

"*Shit! My hat!*" Faith exclaimed.

"*Language, dear!*" her mother warned.

"*Sorry, Mamma!*" she said as she tried to get it back on, not being helped by the car's jarring movements.

Finally, the vehicle came to rest behind others parked around the Dempsey's yard. Faith reached out her hand and waited for Erica to give over her cell phone. Dialing the number she got from Brooke, Faith waited while it rang.

"*Michael? Oh, Mike!* Hi! This is Faith... Faith Hargrave." A long pause went by, Faith mouthing the words, "I can't understand anything he's saying!" Finally, she interrupted. "Yes... Yes... Mike... hold on a sec." Handing the phone to Erica she whispered, "*Talk!*"

"No!" Erica mouthed back at her, eyes wide in surprise.

"Erica! You're the only one that can understand what the heck he's *saying*!"

Taking a deep breath as she heard him saying "Hello?" over and over, she closed her eyes. "Mike? No, this isn't *Faith*. It's... um... it's *Erica*." The entire car heard him shouting over the phone.

"Yes!... Yes?... Well I... huh? Mike! Take it *doon*, man! Let a *bhean óg* get ah *word* in!" Finally getting him to quiet down, Erica lowered her voice. "Yes, it's *great* to hear your voice *too*, Mike. I was wondering, are you having your *Halloween Party* tonight? Uh-huh... well... *Mike!* Will ye' let me *talk*? I was *wondering*... *Mike!* *Mike*, let me *finish*! I was wondering if I could drop by with Aunt Heather, *Faith*, and a guest. Yes... *alright*. We'll see you *soon*! *Bye!*" Closing the call, Erica glared at *Faith*. "This was your plan all *along*, wasn't it? You *knew* he couldn't say *no* to me!"

Faith pressed her fingers to her breast as her voice turned smooth as butter. "Who? Me? Really, Erica... you *do* have a suspicious mind!"

Letting Fredrick know they were ready, they waited for him to open the door. Erica got out first, looking around the ranch and smiling as she took in a breath. *Hay, horses, pumpkin pie, wood smoke, and frost! Some things never change!* As the rest followed her out, they made their way to the Dempsey's front door, knocking on it just after hanging up with Mike.

Mike Dempsey was frantic. "*Mamaí!* Do Ah look a'right?"

Emma looked at her son like he'd lost his mind. "Are ya *daft* now? Ya look th' same as ye' did when ye' got *dressed*! How good kin ah *pirate* look? Will you go help yer *daid* oot in th' *barn* now? Before he gets so *steamin'* that he kinna *walk* straight?"

"But ye' dun understand *Mamaí*..." he replied as he heard knocking.

She held up her hand, forestalling further debate. "Git th' door an' *then* ya kin explain!"

He grumbled while heading toward the door, figuring that someone had slipped on the ice near the pumpkin patch again and needed to come in and sit for a while by the fire. "*Oi, mate! Quit yer bangin'!*" he shouted as the person knocked a second time. Flinging the door open, he started in on the intruder immediately. "*Go on then...*" His voice stopped cold as he saw who'd been knocking. "*Jaysus!*"

His eyes looked her up and down. He would have known her no matter what costume she wore, but the blue gingham dress and her hair in braids made her look not much different than the day they'd met when she'd worn a similar costume.

"*Dia duit, Mike. Would ya be mindin' some company?*" Erica smiled through her acquired brogue as she pushed past him.

Standing clear of the door in shock, he watched Erica enter, only vaguely aware that she was followed closely by a woman he didn't know in a princess gown, Faith in a nurse's uniform, and Heather in a Glinda costume only slightly different from the one she'd worn six years earlier. Closing it after them, he was still stunned speechless when his mother came storming out.

"Who will it *be* now?" she asked as she came from the kitchen. When Emma looked up and saw her guests, she drew in a sharp breath. "Heather, Faith! *Erica!* How in th' name o' Jaysus *air ya!?*" She ran forward and hugged Erica briefly and then turned to Heather. "Kin ya' be stayin' a bit fir a *céilí* a'fore ye' be headin' fer th' party?"

Heather smiled warmly. "Certainly, Emma! A visit *would* be nice!"

While the five ladies headed for the living room to chat in front of the fire, Mike caught Erica's arm. "Sure it's *grand* ta' be seein' ya', *girseach!*"

"Aye! But Ah'm nay a *girseach* na more, Mike! Come set wi' us! Ah want ya ta' be *meetin'* someone!"

"Who's that now?" he asked, following Erica with a curious smile.

Heather, Faith, Emma, and April took their seats as Erica walked up to stand in front of April. "Mike? *Mamaí*? Ah'd like ya' ta' be meetin' *April*!"

A perplexed expression ran over his face as he looked from Erica to April and back. After a moment, he started to remember the girl Erica had always talked about and his eyes grew wide. "Ya mean *yer* April? Th' *girseach* ya' lost back in *Cali*?"

"The *same*!" Erica beamed. "We reconnected a few months back and Ah wanted ta show her where Ah call *home*! Ah couldn't very well do *that* wi'out showin' her *yer* place! Ah must'a spent more time *here* than anywhere else but mah own *gaff*!"

"It's good ta' be finally puttin' a face ta' th' name!" Mike extended a hand.

Tentatively, April took his hand and shook it gently. Looking to Erica she asked, "*Girseach*?"

Sitting beside her, Erica took her free hand. "It means 'young girl'." Turning back to Mike, she could see him eyeing their joined hands. "Mike? Why don't you set? April? Kin ya' scootch *doon*?" Making room, Mike sat next to her.

"Where ya' bin, *cailín*?" Emma stared at Erica. "Ah haven't seen ya since ya' ware a *chiseler*!"

"Away ta' *scoil*, *Mamaí*." she answered. Mike's mother had always been so sweet to her that she'd started calling her the Irish word for mother shortly before she left. "Ah went ta' study writin'. *Aintín* Heather made sure'n Ah had th' best *oideachas* Ah could be gettin'. It ware *grand*!"

The Irish woman looked next to her at Heather ashamedly. "Ah feel Ah be needin' ta' apologize ta' ye, Heather. Ah'm *scarlet* ta' say Ah was *belivin'* th' things that people ware *sayin'* aboot ya'."

Heather took Emma's hand. "Pay it no mind, Emma. I'm just glad Erica got the chance to do what she *wanted* with her life!"

Nervously, Mike tried to change the subject. "So... how ware *scoil* then?"

"Ah ware *aduanta*s, but after a time it ware *class*! Ah learned sah *much*!"

Tapping her on the shoulder gently, April looked confused. "I feel like I'm missing most of the story here and getting more than a bit lost! What's '*oideachas*' and '*aduanta*s', honey?"

"*Oideachas* is an education." she answered easily, but struggled to define the other term. "*Aduanta*s is hard to explain. It doesn't really *have* a word in English. It's the nervous feeling you get when you're someplace new, like when I came here, or when you moved to Concord with me?"

"So will ye' be stayin' on, *A stór*?" Emma asked hesitantly.

Erica bit her lip and looked at April. "Ah be wishin' Ah could, *Mamaí*... but we kin only be stayin' a week. Ah have ta' be gettin' back."

"Ah see." Emma pursed her lips.

"Ah'll be comin' back *more*, though!" the girl smiled. "Ah been missin' me *gaff* somethin' *fierce*! Ah'll be back fir *Nollaig*, an mebe Thanksgivin'! Will ye' be here *then*?"

Smiling back weakly, she nodded. "Aye, we will, *bhean óg*, but Ah think *Mike* had been hopin'..." she looked to her son.

"Ach, *Mamaí*!" Mike blushed. "Ah always *knew* Ah had nay chance wi' her! I *told* ye tha' she ware *aerach*!" he looked at Erica. "An' it looks like she already found her *A rúnsearc!*!"

Looking back and forth between Mike and April, Erica noticed April's confused look and blushed. "*Beloved.*"

"*Oi!*" Mike exclaimed. "How did ya be knowin' *that* one, *bhean*? Ah never taught ye' *that*! Ah thought Ah *had* ye!"

"Ah ware at *scoil*, ya *plank* ya, nay *kippin'* down! Ah studied *Gaelic*!"

"Dun be cheesed off!" Mike was visibly impressed. "Ah ware jus' *askin'!*"

Smiling at the exchange, Faith glanced at her watch. "Shouldn't we be joining the *party*, though?"

Emma stood up quickly. "Ach! Ah nearly *firgot*! Mike? Will ya be takin' 'em over then?"

Nodding, Mike stood up. "Aye, *Mamaí*. That I'll do."

When the four ladies made their way to the door, Emma hugged each of them. When she got to April, she stopped and eyed her carefully. "Air ya *good* ta' mah Erica?" she asked.

April smiled shyly. "I... I'd like to *think* so, Mrs. Dempsey."

Taking her into a tight hug, Emma sighed. "Then Ah give mah blessings ta ya! An call me *Mamaí*!" Pulling back, she admired April's good looks. "Ya certainly air a *catch*! Ach! I was wantin' ta ask ya... what air ya dressed as?"

Looking over at Erica, April smiled. "We got our costumes last minute. I'm *supposed* to be Princess *Ozma*, but I don't think anyone will *get it!*"

Erica smiled as she turned to follow Mike out the door. "That's OK, A rúnsearc! We get it!"

The five of them entered the barn, Erica looking around to see that nothing had changed much other than there not being as many people present as the last time she'd been here. That last Halloween had been bittersweet for Erica. She'd decided that if it were to be her last Halloween as a girl, she would go full out and dressed as a fairy princess. It had also been the last time Faith had worn a costume, choosing to go as pirate wench, while her mother had been a twenties flapper.

Mike at last spotted his father, drinking a glass of Guinness. "*Daid!*" he called out, waving his arm.

The older Michael turned and his face fell ashen. "*Jaysus!*" he whispered. Putting down his beer, he crossed the room, his face masking fury. "*Mike!*" he barked quietly as he stopped in front of his son. "*What'r they doin' here!*"

"*Daid!* Look *again!*" he retorted.

Michael looked once more at Faith and Heather standing with a strange girl, then noticed that someone else was standing behind them. Craning his neck, his eyes grew wide as Erica came out from between them.

"*Dia duit, Dadaí!*" Erica greeted him. "'Tis good ta be seein' ya!"

"*Erica!?*" Looking from her to his son, he could see that Mike was happy they were here. Gathering his wits, he swept the girl into his arms. "'Tis good ta see ye too, me *girseach!*" Standing back after putting her down, he regarded her. "But ye nay be me *girseach* na more, *air ya?* Ya've grown inta a fine and darlin' *bhean óg*, ya have! *Deadly* ta be *sure!* Ach! Ah bet ye broke aboot a million hearts ba noo! Not th' *least* o' which is me own *Mack!*"

"*Daid!*" Mike whined. "Didn't Ah *tell* ye..."

"Hush now!" his father chided. Straightening up, he regarded the four ladies. "Ah... Ach! Ah ware fiery *cheesed* at yer *aintín* Heather fir sendin' ye away!" He looked at Heather who looked away ashamedly, still embarrassed at the pain she'd caused.

The girl he'd known for a year touched his arm. "Don't be, *Dadai!* She ware *good* ta me and got me th' best *oideachas* Ah could *get!*" Looking back at her aunt, she smiled. "Ah owe her *everythin'!*"

Michael ran his hand along the back of his neck. "Ah... Ah guess Ah be owe'n ya an *apology*, Heather. Seems... Ah... seems ye done *a'right* by th' *bhean óg*." He stuck his hand out toward her.

Smiling, Heather took his hand gently. "Forget it, Michael! All water under the bridge! I'm just glad to see my baby *home* again!"

Clearing a table for the four ladies, Michael returned to his guests, leaving them to re-connect with many of the people they'd once been fast friends with. As Erica sat next to April, her smile melted when she saw someone approaching she *didn't* expect to see. "Oh, good *Lord.*" she said frostily.

Chet kept his distance and just nodded. "I... um... I just came to pay my respects, Mrs. Hargrave... Faith... *Erica.*" His eyes drifted to April and he grinned. "I don't believe I know *this* young lady though." Stepping up to her, he extended his hand. "Chet Mansfield!"

Smiling, April regarded him cautiously as she shook his hand. When he tried to kiss it, she pulled it back sharply and smiled mischievously. "Careful, Chet! Erica might *slug* you again!"

Fuming at his attempt to pick up April, Erica glared. "Goodbye, Chet!"

His hands dropping down in front of him, he bowed slightly and wordlessly made his way back to his mother.

Heather looked at her niece. "Sweetie, you really *should* apologize to him."

Shaking her head as she took the cup of punch that Mike brought her, Erica refused. "No way, Mamma! Now I'm thinking I didn't hit him *hard* enough!"

"Since when did ye start callin' her *Mamma*?" Mike looked at her curiously.

"Since th' day Ah left fir *scoil*." she replied, April taking the cup of punch from Erica's hand. "She may not be ma *mother*, but she ware as good ta me as *Mamaí* is ta *you*." When the next song began, Erica smiled at him. "Shall we? Fir old *time's* sake?"

Mike smiled as he stood and offered to help her stand. "*Surely!*"

The two making their way to the dance floor, Faith wistfully watched Erica happily dancing with much greater skill than she'd shown the last time she was in the Dempsey's barn. Turning, she saw April doing the same until April looked back at her, making her blush and turn away. Feeling a tap on her hand, she looked over to see April smiling at her.

"I wanted to *thank* you." April said before taking a drink.

Faith blinked. "*Me?* For *what*?"

"For coming up with this idea, so Erica could show me this part of her life that I missed." She paused and took another drink. "And for everything else. *You* know? Not making her have to *choose*?"

Looking back toward Erica, who seemed to be truly enjoying her time with Mike, Faith sighed. "You'd *better* love her!" she warned. "Hurt her, and you'll *regret* it!"

"Always *have*... and always *will*." April replied simply.

As the evening wore on, Erica sat between April and Mike while his father told ghost stories, smiling, laughing, and basking in the glow one gets sharing time with those you love. When they left that night, Erica kissed both father and son on the cheek, with April and then Faith behind her.

Mike stopped Erica just as she was about to leave. "Um... Ah want ye' ta know, if'n ye' ever be *needin'* anythin'... well... Ah'll always be a *friend* ta' ye'." Looking over at April, he nodded. "An' tha' goes fir ye', *too!*"

"Ya be like mah *deartháir*, Mike!" Erica hugged Mike warmly. "Th' same goes ta' ya!"

Walking to the car together, April turned to Erica. Before she could even ask, Erica simply said, "*Brother.*" and kept walking with a smile as April stopped and stood in stunned silence.

Turning as she continued walking backwards toward their car, Erica's smile showed more than a hint of a seductive grin.

April started walking toward her, tilting her head. "Oh! Somehow I think that this trip is going to be one to *remember!*"

Chapter 22 - The Parting of the Ways

Sitting at her vanity, Erica brushed out her hair. She loved that the braids she'd taken out had given her hair a cute wavy look. She'd braided her hair before her shower, blown it dry, then taken the braids down and brushed it out, just like the night of the Halloween party. "April? What do you think?" she asked, turning to look toward the bathroom.

April stood up from the old fashioned sink, her toothbrush still in her mouth, and looked out the door at Erica. "'Bout what?" she asked innocently around a toothbrush and a mouth full of toothpaste.

"My hair!" Erica groused. "God! Don't you even *notice*?"

She turned back to the sink to finish brushing and spit. Once her mouth was clear, she retorted, "Honey, I think it looks *beautiful!* I just didn't know what you were *talking* about is all!" returning to the sink after.

Coming up behind her, Erica leaned against the opposite wall, looking at April in the mirror. "I was thinking about braiding my hair sometimes when we get back home, just overnight. I like the way it looks after I brush it out."

"I *like* it!" April noted. Turning around, she walked up to Erica and wrapped her arms around her waist. "But then, I like *everything* about you!"

Draping her arms over April's shoulders and around her neck, Erica smiled. "I hope you had a good time tonight!"

She nodded. "Uh-huh! It was *nice* having one last dinner with just Faith and Heather... just the four of us. I feel like this last week has been one giant string of family reunions after another!"

"Anxious to get back to *Concord* tomorrow?" she asked.

"Don't get me *wrong*," April explained. "I *love* your family, and I'll *miss* them, but I'm also looking forward to some time by *ourselves* for a while."

The woman she held tried to look innocent. "Oh? And why is *that*?"

Pursing her lips, April's eyes half closed into slits. "Oh, you think you're so *funny*, do you? Well..." At that her gentle hold on Erica's waist changed to a firm grip as she dug her fingertips into Erica's tender flesh.

Erica jumped and squealed as April began furiously tickling her. "No! Stop it! April!" Laughter rang out from their shared bathroom and into the bedroom as April pursued the fleeing teen. Turning to face her, Erica took a defensive stance. "No! April? No *tickling*! Now, *stop it!*" she said, still trying to keep the mirth from her voice.

She slowed and held her hands up. "Alright, I'll *stop*. In *exchange*..."

"In exchange for *what*?" Erica asked hesitantly as she dropped her guard.

"A *kiss*!" April demanded.

Blushing, Erica sat on her bed and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I thought you wanted to wait until we got *back*?"

She smiled wickedly as she closed in on Erica. "I changed my *mind*. I want our first *real* kiss to be right *here*... in your *bedroom*... with your cousin across the hall... your aunt just downstairs... and Cook, Franchesca, and Fredrick right next door!"

Laughing a little, Erica's blush deepened. "April! Mamma could walk in any *second* to say goodnight!"

"And?"

"You can be just *terrible* sometimes, April! I don't want *Mamma* to see *that!*" Her smile grew wider as April continued to get closer.

"So... you're telling me 'No', *then?*" she asked.

"*No!* I mean, no, I'm *not* telling you '*No*'... I mean..." Erica rolled her eyes and glanced around the room as though someone were about to catch them.

Carefully lowering herself to sit on the bed next to Erica, April slid over until their hips were touching. Reaching out, she pulled gently on Erica's shoulders to turn Erica to her, a hand then drifting up to caress Erica's wavy auburn hair, gently pushing it out from in front of her face. Leaning in seductively, she let her fingers trace around Erica's ear and down her neck, making her oldest and best friend lean toward her. When their lips were less than an inch apart, April closed her eyes and sighed out, "I *love* you."

Erica melted at the words. She only managed to get out, "I love..." before their lips joined for the first time. Caught by surprise, Erica's eyes shot open wide as she drew in a sharp breath through her nose, letting it out in a nasal moan; her eyes gently closing.

She'd wanted to wait for Erica to return the sentiment, but the moment the girl's breath hit April's lips she couldn't hold back her desire any longer. Plunging forward, she savored the moment she'd been dreaming about for over half a decade, held back only by Erica's uncertainty, and then by her own desire to make their first kiss as memorable as possible.

While the kiss lingered, April opened her mouth and let the tip of her tongue slip out and tenderly caress Erica's lips into opening like the petals of a flower. She moaned at the deliciousness of their intimacy, delicately probing the feel of her love's lips, teeth, and tongue. Gently she slid her hand back around Erica's neck and ran her fingers through her tinted hair, trapping her love in an erotic embrace.

Erica's mind exploded with feeling. Fear at being walked in on, joy at finally getting to be with her long lost love, desire to make April feel just as good as she was making her feel, exhilaration to see just how far this first kiss would go, and lust for it to go a lot farther than it probably would or should. She mirrored April's hand, running her own up and into her love's dark hair. Relishing the feel of it, she found her free hand being taken by April's, their fingers interlocking in a romantic expression of what their hearts desired... to be one.

Slowly April pulled back, letting their first of many kisses end, as all things must. Their eyes opened as their lips parted, a smile creeping across both their faces as Erica exhaled dreamily.

"Oh, *April!* That was..." She tried in vain to put a word to the perfection of the moment. Deciding that no one word sufficed, she strung together a collection of them. "Magical! Incredible! Beautiful! Hot! Breathtaking! Lovely!" She took a deep breath and sighed. "*Perfect!* I *love* you! Always *have...*"

"...and always *will!*" April finished with her. Pulling back, she looked at Erica who seemed to be lost in a dream world. "Hey! Are you *OK*? Do you need a *breather*? *Smelling salts*? *Stiff drink*?"

Laughing, Erica leaned forward, giving her another loving kiss just like their first, taking her time and relishing the feel of their intimacy. Finally pulling back, she answered, "No! I'm *fine!* *More* than fine! I'm..."

"...in *love*?" Heather asked. She smiled as she watched her niece turn toward the door in surprise and quickly move away from April.

"*Mamma!*" Erica yelled. "Wha... wha... we... um... that is, we..."

"It's *alright*, sweetie!" Heather laughed. "I knocked, but when no one answered, I let myself in. If you want *privacy*, you need to *lock* the door!"

"How long were you *standing* there, Mamma?" Erica asked as she started flushing red.

"Just a short time is all. I think I came in at 'Breathtaking'. I'm *sorry*, sweetie! I didn't *mean* to interrupt!" Heather started to move out the doorway to close it behind her. "Why don't I go wait downstairs a while..."

Jumping off the bed, Erica stood next to her bedpost. "No! It's *fine* Mamma! We were just... um... we were just *finished*!"

Still standing in the doorway, she looked at Erica and sighed. "It's *OK*, sweetheart! I *know* what it's like to be young and in love! Just... *here*. Give me a quick kiss goodnight and I'll head off to bed and then you two can get back to..."

Standing up, April grabbed a pillow and her book. "It's *alright*, Heather. I was just getting ready to go down and read for a while."

"Are you *sure*?" Heather looked at the two with concern. "I just want you to know that I really am *OK* if you want to stay *together* in Erica's room. She's an adult and this is her *home*. You don't have to keep *pretending* on my account! I may be a *lady*, but I'm a *woman*, too!"

"There's no *need*, Heather! It's *fine!* *Really!* I just..." April looked over at Erica who still stood by her bedpost turning beet red. "Right before you came in, Erica and I just shared our first real kiss. That's *all*!"

"*What?*" Heather blinked dumbly. "Your... but you've been here now for close to two *weeks* and I thought... well, since you were *dating* now..."

"*What?*" Erica looked up. "You thought we... *Mamma!* In my old *room*?"

"Well *naturally*, sweetie! I didn't think you'd be sneaking off out of the house..." Heather paused. "Well *wait* a minute. Do you mean to say that..."

*April? You've been actually *sleeping* on that old couch every night for the last two weeks?"*

"Well, *naturally!*" April echoed her. "Did you think I was sneaking up *here* and then sneaking back *down* every morning?"

Heather crossed her arms defensively. "Well... quite *frankly... yes!*"

"*Mamma!*" Erica exclaimed in shock.

"What did you *think*, sweetie? That your cousin was born by *immaculate conception?*" her aunt asked bluntly. Seeing Erica turn even redder and look away, her smile melted as she began to worry. *Is this my fault?* she wondered. *Did making her leave cause her to have intimacy issues?*

Gently pushing past the older woman, April went out the open door. "I'll leave *you* two alone. I think you need to *talk* about some things!" Turning to Erica, she kissed air at her. "*Love* you, honey! *Goodnight!*"

While April headed down the hall toward the stairs, Heather stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. Moving over to the bed, she patted the mattress and waited for an embarrassed Erica to grudgingly sit next to her. "Alright, well I *know* you know about the birds and the bees, sweetie." She saw Erica bury her face in her hands.

"*Mamma!* It's *embarrassing!*" she nearly cried. "You saw me *kissing* April!"

"I'd assumed you'd done that *already*, sweetie... and a lot *more!*"

"How much more do you think we would *do*, Mamma? April and I have been dating less than *two weeks!*"

"Yes dear, but you've been in love for *much* longer than that, haven't you?" Heather asked as gently as she could.

Confused, Erica stood up and paced in front of her. "Yes, but... I mean... a couple should wait until they're *married*, shouldn't they?"

"Is that what *you* believe, sweetie?"

"Of course, Mamma!" Erica answered with frustration. She was trying to keep her voice down, but found it increasingly difficult. "You taught Faith and me to follow *The Word!* It's pretty *clear* on that point, *isn't* it?"

"Yes, sweetie." Heather smiled. "It's also *very* clear that we are all *human* and *all* fall short of the glory of God."

"I just... I don't want you to be *disappointed* in me, Mamma! You're acting like you were *expecting* me to... to... I want to make you *proud* of me!"

She reached out and took her niece's hand, guiding her to sit back on the bed. "I *am* proud of you, sweetheart! *Immensely!* But I *know* you're not *perfect!*" Feeling Erica relax a little, she decided to broach the subject. "Erica, I want to ask you something, and I want you to be *honest* with me."

"Of course, Mamma. *Always.*"

Taking a deep breath she asked, "Are you still a *virgin*, dear?"

Erica looked at her aunt with a stunned expression. "Of course I am, Mamma! I've only been eighteen for four *months*, so I haven't been *married* yet!"

"Do you think *I* was a virgin when I met your Uncle Richard at twenty-one? Or even at *eighteen*?"

From the way she asked it, it slowly dawned on Erica that she might not have been. "Well... I guess I never really *thought* about it. I just *assumed*... *Weren't* you?"

Laughing, Heather put her arm around Erica's shoulders. "Hardly! And there's nothing *wrong* with that! If you *love* April, and she loves *you*, then it's a gift from *God*! I wouldn't *expect* you to wait until you had a legal ceremony, unless that's what you both *really* want." She choked back a tear as she finished her thought. "I... I just don't want you to *waste* the time you have together. You *never* know when it will end. *Everything* does."

She looked at her aunt and nodded solemnly. "You mean, like you and Uncle Richard? Or Mom and Dad?"

"*Exactly.*" she answered, wiping a tear away. "I want you to have *all* the happiness this world can *give* you. Don't waste a *second* of it, sweetheart! Before you *know* it, it'll all be *gone*. You can't *know* when or how you and April will part ways. Maybe *tomorrow*, maybe in fifty *years*. *Enjoy* it! Of course, if it's *important* to you two to wait, then don't let *anyone* push you to it." She turned and pressed her forehead to Erica's. "Not even *me!*"

Smiling, Erica hugged her aunt, feeling like a little girl all over again. "*Thank* you, Mamma! You're the most *wonderful* mother in the *world!*"

"I sincerely doubt *that* sweetie, but thank you for the compliment just the same!" She kissed Erica on the cheek, stood up, and slowly walked over to Erica's door. "Goodnight, sweetheart. Do you want me to send April up?" she asked, hoping that her talk had made Erica less inhibited.

Sighing, Erica shook her head. "That's alright, Mamma. I'll go down and talk to her for a little bit though, if you don't mind."

"It's *fine*, dear! I'll make myself scarce! Goodnight!" Leaving for her bedroom, she left Erica's door slightly open.

Standing and stretching, Erica made her way to the door, opening it fully and looking out just as she heard her aunt's bedroom close. Tip-toeing into the hallway, she started for the stairs when Faith's door opened.

"Oh!" Faith exclaimed. "I... I didn't know if you were... I thought you would be in *bed* already."

"I was just going down to talk with April for a few minutes." Erica smiled.
"I'll be going to bed in a little bit."

"Oh, alright." she replied. "Tell her goodnight for me?"

Reaching the stairs as Faith closed her door once more, Erica started down. Quiet as a church mouse, she crept into the living room. Spotting April laying on the loveseat by the bay window, a blanket and quilt covered her legs while she sat up reading her book. The only light was coming from the tiny table lamp behind her right shoulder.

The teen could tell someone had come down the stairs, but didn't turn to look until she could almost feel them approaching. Turning around, she saw Erica smiling at her. "Hey you! I thought you would have gone to bed already." she whispered.

Sitting on the edge of the couch while April set the book aside, Erica took her hands and held them lovingly. "Mamma wanted to have a talk."

"I know." April smiled. "Was it the *sex* talk?" she joked.

Shrugging to one side, Erica arched an eyebrow. "Sort of, I guess."

Her eyes bulged out as she almost swallowed her words. "Really!? She never had it with you *before*?"

"No. Oh, I know about *sex*. Mamma had us do a report on it when Faith reached *menarche*, but we never talked about *love* or *romance* before."

"Oh." April looked distant as her mirth died on her lips. "My mother never had any kind of talk like *that* with me. Just the *sex* talk. You know, where

they tell you if you get knocked up before you turn eighteen they'll *kill* you, so use birth control pills and protection?"

"Mamma thought you and I were... um..."

"Yeah, I figured *that* out!" April giggled. "Ya *wanna*?"

"Do *you*?" Erica demurred.

Nearly growling, April wrapped her arms around Erica. "Yeah! I *really* do!" She sat forward and kissed Erica eagerly on the lips. Smiling as she sat back, she shook her head. "I think we can *wait* though, for a *bit* longer. We can talk about it when we get home tomorrow. Maybe *then*!" She waggled her eyebrows seductively at her lifelong love.

Smiling, Erica found herself slightly frightened by April's libido, as well as her *own*. "I... I wanted to tell you, I'd always *planned* on waiting until my wedding night. You know, the whole *purity* thing? But I... I want you to know that I... um... if *you* don't want to wait, since I *love* you and um... I guess I see us *eventually*..."

April swallowed hard. "Are you saying you want to get *married*?"

"Well... not right *away*!" Erica looked away. "I mean... not if *you* don't want to, but I mean... like... *eventually*? Yeah... I *want* to. Don't *you*?"

Unsure how to answer, April stalled. "Well, I guess I see myself getting married *someday*... not at *eighteen*, though!"

Erica's heart raced, sure that she'd misunderstood April's intentions all along and, faced with admitting it, April had never seriously considered spending their whole lives together. Tears started to form as she felt hurt, even though April had only said she didn't want to marry her *now*. *But she didn't say she wanted to marry me later, either. God! I must be crazy!* she beat herself up.

Why would April want to marry me? She's beautiful and wonderful... and I'm just... me... the crazy girl that thought she was her own mother!

Seeing the hurt in Erica's eyes, April reached out with a hand and turned her face to her. "Honey, I wasn't saying I don't *think* about it! I think about it a *lot*! I've been *imagining* it for *years*! I think I *first* did when I was eight and we were playing house, and I've been thinking about it ever *since*!"

Sniffing to hold back the tears, she looked down at April's lap. "*But*?"

"But now I understand that marriage is *much* more important than just a *fantasy* or a thing to *do*. Do I *want* to marry you? *God*, yes! But will I *rush* into it without being *absolutely certain* it's the right thing for us? *No*. When I marry, it'll be for *life*. One time, never again. Isn't that what *you* want?"

"I *guess* you're right." Erica nodded. "I'm *sorry*, love. I... it's just... I just wanted to wait to be... um... be *intimate*... I mean like... um... go all the way, I guess?... until I'm at *least* engaged. Do you understand? It's... it's *important* to me."

"*Oh.*" April replied disappointedly. "Um... well, I guess we'll need to do a lot of *talking* then, because... well... I *really* want to!" Yawning she added, "But not *tonight*! You go up to *bed*. I'll see you in the morning, *alright*?"

They both leaned forward and kissed just as passionately as the first time. Erica couldn't help but think of wedding bells, white gowns, rice, rings, kissing at the altar, and a lifetime of memories to come with her sweet April. April in turn was thinking of nights full of passion, romance, candles, carnal bliss, and her beautiful Erica lost in ecstasy. Neither knew just how different their dreams were.

Parting once more, Erica sighed lovingly while April growled with desire. Standing slowly, their hands linked, Erica sighed happily and said, "G'night, mah A *rúnsearc!* *Is ceol mo chroí thú!* You're the music of my *heart*!"

Moaning, April smiled while her body squirmed with want. "Goodnight, pretty girl!"

Just as Erica started to walk away, she stopped and turned. "Oh! Faith said to say goodnight, too! I saw her in the hall on the way down here."

"Say goodnight to her from me too, will you honey?" April asked as she picked up her book again. "*Love* you!"

"*Love* you!" Erica silently padded up the stairs, stopping once more to turn and look at the beautiful woman who loved her so much before climbing the rest of the way toward her waiting bed.

Opening her door, she slipped in quietly, taking off her satin robe. Draping it over the back of her vanity chair, she crept to her bed and lowered herself into it, relishing the comfort of her white satin nightgown against the peach satin sheets. Scooting back, she lowered the sheet and blanket over herself. Resting her head comfortably against the feather-filled satin pillow that smelled faintly of Japanese Cherry Blossoms, Erica sighed as she closed her eyes and relaxed.

She felt the hand on her hair first, fingers running through it gently and lovingly. Smiling, she purred in contentedness. Slowly, she felt the soft and warm body press against her back, full and perfect breasts pressing against her, taught and firm nipples poking gently into her shoulder blades signaling their arousal. A hand sensuously wrapped slowly over her round hip, down her firm thighs, back up again, then down along her tender tummy.

Tracing small circles through the satin and onto her sensitive skin, the hand traveled lower, threatening to invade the delicate secret between her legs. Her breath caught momentarily, erotic sensations bringing a slight wetness below. Then back up again, the hand slid up between her breasts, gently caressing the soft mounds to either side before finally coming to rest between them.

"April said to say goodnight." Erica purred.

"She is a *wonderful* girl, Erica." Faith sighed. "I'm *so* happy for you! I'm also grateful that she said you could be mine whenever you're *here*."

Snuggling closer together, Erica giggled. "She *kissed* me, Faith! A *real* kiss! Beautiful and romantic and loving... It was *perfect*!"

"*Mmmm!*" Faith smiled.

"Then *Mamma* walked in on us!" her voice turning sardonic. "She was *nice* about it, but thought April was sneaking up to sleep with me and... um..."

"Make *love* to you?" Faith asked. Erica nodded. "*Has* she?"

"No. We've only kissed three *times*, and that was all *tonight*. I told Mamma I wanted to wait until my wedding night. She said I didn't *have* to."

"*Good!* You *don't!* In fact you probably *shouldn't*." Faith admonished as she ran a fingertip along Erica's left breast.

Giggling slightly, Erica smiled again. "I think I *want* to wait until I'm at *least* engaged. Mamma said that if that's what *I* want, I shouldn't let *anyone* tell me it's *wrong*, even *her*. Why do you think I *shouldn't* wait?"

Moaning slightly, Faith pressed her body more firmly against Erica's. "Because God *loves* us and wants us to be *happy!* *Remember?*"

Reaching over her head, Erica ran her fingers through Faith's luxurious blonde curls. "But what if *waiting* makes me happy?"

"*Not* waiting would make you *happier...* much, *much* happier!" Faith cooed.

"*God*, your hair is so sexy!" Erica commented. "Faith? Have *you...?*"

"*Done* it?" she finished the unspoken question. "Not with a guy... but um..." Suddenly embarrassed, she stopped caressing Erica and rolled over, separating them. "I... I was trying to get over you. I *dated* some. Two guys and a girl. I never did anything but *kissing* with the guys, but... um..."

Rolling over to be closer, Erica ran her fingertips along Faith's shoulder. "It's *alright*, Faith. *Whatever* you did, it doesn't make me *mad* or anything. I was *gone* and you were trying to move *on*. That's *normal* and *healthy*. I'm *glad* you did, and... um... I'll understand when you find someone you can love. Like I did with *April*? I'll be *happy* for you *both*! You *deserve* love, Faith. Someone who... *deserves* you. *Tell* me about her."

"Who?"

"The *girl* you dated." Erica said. "Was she *pretty*? Prettier than *me*?"

Faith giggled. "No *one*'s as pretty as you, Erica... not even *you*!"

"Come *on*! Be *serious*! I... I wanna *know*... like... who she *was*... what you *did* together. Did you *love* her?"

She felt the pangs of regret at the memory of it. "I *thought* I did. Her name was Tamara. I knew her from school from before you moved here. She came out when she turned sixteen. She was sweet, pretty, soft, and gentle... a lot like *you*. I think that was the *biggest* problem. She was too *much* like you. I thought... if I dated a girl *like* you, it would help me get *over* you, but all it did was make things *worse*. She ended up reminding me of you all the *time*. It made me feel like I was *cheating* on you... because I told you I'd never love anyone else ever again."

Kissing Faith's shoulder gently, Erica reassured her. "I didn't expect you'd stick to *that*, Faith. We were *thirteen*. Back then six years was half a *lifetime*!"

"Don't I know it! I... don't know how you could *stand* it, being alone all that time. You didn't even *date* at all?"

"No." Erica shook her head sadly. "I was... *ugly*. Not like I am *now*, at *all*. *Ugly* and *gross*! I stank like a teenage *boy* no matter *what* I tried to do!"

Rolling back over to face her, Faith smiled. "You could never be ugly to *me*, Erica. Even dressed like a boy with short hair and *pimples*, I would know who you were *inside*. My beautiful *Erica*!" She reached out and took Erica's hand. "But *you* wanted to know about *Tam*. She invited me to her sixteenth birthday party. Not *many* people came because she'd come out, but I wanted to be *supportive*, so I went, we had fun, I asked her out, we went out a few times, and then a few weeks later we started fooling around. Just... *touching*, you know... *intimately*. One night we got carried away and she wanted to... um... 'go downtown'. I told her she was my *first*, so she went slow and it *was* nice, but..." Faith's voice trailed off shakily.

Squeezing her hand, Erica looked at her reassuringly. "It's *alright*. Go on."

Faith started to cry. "I... I kept imagining it was *you*! I let her *take* me, but in my mind it was *you*! Afterwards, I *cried*... a *lot*. Tam thought she'd *hurt* me somehow, but I... I broke up with her the next day. I felt *so* bad. It wasn't *fair* to her. I... I should have *stopped* her." Pausing to wipe away a tear, she sighed. "Maybe you're *right*. Maybe it's better to *wait*. I just... I want so *much* for you to be *happy*, and I *know* April won't be the same for *you* as Tam was for *me*."

"Don't be so *sure*." Erica whispered. "I... I think when April... I... I don't know that we ever *will*. I mean, she wants to *now*, but I want to wait until we're *engaged*... and I think we might not..."

"It'll be *OK*." Faith whispered back. She slowly extended a fingertip and ran it along Erica's right cheek. "I know when you two are together for the first time, it'll be *beautiful*, *sweet*, and *fun*. You two are *so* into one another!"

I... I doubt *I'll* even enter your mind... and that's *OK*. I think it's *better* that way. It should just be about *you* two."

"Faith?"

"Yeah?"

"You're a *hopeless* romantic!" The two teens giggled together before Erica leaned forward and let their lips touch for a moment before becoming more passionate. Letting their hands roam wherever they felt like, the two lost themselves in the sharp pleasures of simple touches and deep soulful kisses until they threatened once more to cross the line from making out to making love.

Mere moments away from crossing that line, the two slowly backed off, Erica sighing. "This is *really* nice Faith... being close like this... because it's *you* and sweet and beautiful! I couldn't *imagine* actual *sex* being *better*!"

"*Thank* you!" Faith said grinning as her breath slowed from nearly climaxing just from Erica's intimate touches. "Now roll over and lets *cuddle* for a while."

Doing as Faith asked, Erica turned toward her vanity as her cousin slipped up sensuously behind her and they wrapped their smooth legs around one another. Faith's hand once more drifted up over Erica's hip and delicately traced its way up to her cousin's soft bosom, Erica gasping in ecstasy as Faith's hand caressed her taught nipples.

"*Cuddling*, huh?" Erica giggled. "Seems like *someone* wants to cross a line."

Faith sighed, desperate for Erica to finish what she'd started. "I... I *admit* it... I *do* want to cross that line. Right *here*... right *now*! Erica, I *want* you so *badly* I *ache* for it!"

"You *know* I'll give you whatever you *want* of me, Faith." Erica admitted before loosing the ability to speak and gasping once more as Faith's hand drifted down her tummy, gently slipping her fingernail just under the elastic waistband of Erica's panties through the satin nightgown. Tracing back and forth without delving further downward, she teased Erica's skin.

"I *know* you will." Faith cooed in Erica's ear, sending shivers down the younger girl's spine. "Do you know how *close* you had me, Erica? Another few *seconds* and we would have become *lovers*. Did you *know* that?"

Shivering at Faith's breathy questioning in her ear and the exquisite torture of Faith's hand giving rise to own pleasure, Erica nodded. "Y-yessss... I... I knew! I l-love seeing you th-that happy, Faith!"

"Are *you* ready to cross that line?" Faith dared as her fingers dipped lower into Erica's silk panties, barely touching a few pubic hairs. "Are you ready to be *lovers*, my beautiful Erica? Still want to wait until you're engaged?"

Reaching behind her head, Erica ran her fingers once more through Faith's golden locks. "Oh, *Faith!* I... I want to *so badly!* You *know* I do! I *love* you!" As Faith pressed her breasts into Erica's back, she slid her leg up and down Erica's legs, causing the satin nightgown she wore to rise up while her fingers slid out of her panties and traced up over her hip, hooking a thumb and pushing the tiny garment downward. "Oh, *Faith!*"

Laughing gently, her cousin slowed her assault. "Still think actual sex can't be *better*?" she teased. "Want me to *show* you?"

Nodding slowly, Erica prepared herself for whatever Faith asked of her.

Sliding her hand back up to Erica's breasts, she teased them for a few more moments before sighing and slipping her hand between them as her body relaxed. "Thank you for showing me that I *can* have you if I *want* to, love." she sighed. "Fair warning for *next* time though... I'm *not* going to stop!"

Erica awoke early as usual, rousing Faith by slowly and sensuously kissing her. When their lips separated, Erica smiled. "I meant what I said last night, Faith. I really *do* hope you can find someone to love. It would make me so *happy* for you! *Whoever* gets you is going to be one lucky person!"

Giggling, Faith ran her hands over her love one more time. "I think I *can* now... truly *love* someone, that is. I... I'm *really* glad you came home... and I can't *wait* for you to come home *again!*" she sighed, reminding Erica that their next visit would have no boundaries. Her fingers drifted over Erica's chest, causing the redhead to twitch and moan in pleasure.

Waiting for the sweet torture to ebb, Erica shivered when it finally did. "We're going to try for Thanksgiving weekend, then a long stay over Christmas." Erica sighed as she recovered her composure and returned the favor, letting her fingers drift over the naked body lying next to her and plying moans of desire from Faith's luscious lips. "I'll *miss* you."

"I think two weeks will be tolerable... it's better than five *years!* God! April must have gone *crazy* living without you for *six!*"

"She *did*, a little." Erica replied, relenting in her erotic assault, leaving Faith gasping for more. "I think she had an even harder time than *we* did."

"You have that *effect* on some of us!" Faith said as she ran a finger along Erica's arm. Sighing, she sat up, the sheet and cover falling down to expose her naked body. Erica rose to kiss her goodbye one last time before she and Faith parted ways once more, Faith closing her eyes and relishing the feel of Erica's fresh young breasts against her own while their mouths and bodies said wordlessly what was in their hearts.

Smiling, Faith took Erica's breasts in her hands through the thin fabric of her nightgown, running her thumbs over the sensitive nipples, making Erica quietly cry out in pleasure. "Just remember. I won't *stop* the next time I have you in my bed. There will be *no* lines. I'm *going* to show you how

much I love you... and you'll finally and truly be mine." Slipping silently out of Erica's bed, Faith picked up her robe and slipped it over her arms, tying it as she left her cousin alone once again.

Laying in bed awake for another hour in a waking dream of what might have been... of the road not taken... then in blissful memory of their joyous parting a short time earlier and the eager anticipation of their next meeting, Erica found herself wishing it was already Thanksgiving.

Hearing the household start to wake, she rose and quietly slipped into her bathroom. Taking her essentials with her, she brushed her teeth quickly before getting partially dressed and slipping her robe on. Heading back out into the bedroom, she smiled.

"Good morning, Franchesca!" she chirped. "Busy day!"

"You ain't *kiddin'*, sister!" she replied. "Between you two leaving and Faith going into town with your aunt, I'll be left with a half dozen rooms to clean, not the *least* of which is *her* pigsty! At least she won't be moping around *here* all day in yoga pants, getting in my way anymore!"

Erica pulled out the outfit she had chosen for the return trip as she listened to Franchesca. "I'm sure the fans of 'New Hampshire vs. California' will understand if this week's article is late, Fran."

She stopped making the bed and put her hands on her hips. "*What* did you just call me, young lady?"

Turning and smiling, Erica headed for the bathroom once more. "*Fran!*"

When she closed the door quickly behind her, Franchesca huffed, blustered, and finally threw up her hands in frustration. "Well *go on*, then! Call me what you *like*!" As she finished making Erica's bed, she smiled wistfully at the diminutive her favorite little girl had given her.

Shortly after breakfast, April and Erica were once more in the entryway, this time saying goodbye as they parted ways with Hargrave House.

"Call when you get in?" Heather asked. "I just don't want to *worry*, is all!"

Erica hugged her and kissed her on the cheek. "I *will*, Mamma." She turned to Francesca and hugged her quickly. "Try not to miss me *too* much, Fran. *Love* you!"

Returning the hug she only said, "You be *careful*, young lady!"

Enveloping Erica in a bear hug, Theresa threatened to squeeze the air from her lungs. "Bye, girlie! Hurry home again, soon!"

"Thanksgiving, barring natural *disaster*!" Erica laughed. "*Love* you!" Turning to Fredrick, she smiled shyly and closed in for a gentle hug. "Love you *too*, Fredrick! Try and stay out of trouble!"

"*Me*, Miss Erica?" he huffed. "I should think *you* would benefit from that advice!" As they parted, he genuinely smiled. "Do come back soon!"

While April made her way through the others, Erica stopped in front of Faith. Folding into each other's arms, it was a chaste hug, but both of them felt differently about it and wanted so badly to make it much more. "I *love* you, Faith!" Erica cried.

"I love you *too*, Erica!" Faith returned, trying to stem the tide of both tears and yearning.

Pulling back and just holding Faith's arms, Erica smiled. "Remember! God *loves* us and wants us to be *happy*! *All* of us!"

Nodding as she freed a hand, Faith wiped her eyes. "I will! You remember it, *too*! Drive careful!"

Erica laughed as they released one another. "*She will!*"

With good-byes done, she and her lifelong love headed for April's car. With a four-hour drive ahead and the weather taking a turn for the worse, Heather watched pensively as Erica climbed into the passenger seat. "Be *safe!*" she shouted. "Come home *soon!*"

Closing her door, Erica waved through the open window. "We *will! Love* you! See you at *Thanksgiving!*"

The car speeding off down the driveway, the rest started inside to leave Faith standing alone to watch Erica drive away once more. Her heart was sad at watching her go, but the tears that fell silently from her eyes were not of sorrow or grief, but happiness. Happiness for her sweet cousin who had managed the impossible; to find true love not *once...* but *twice...* and yet somehow managed to make it all work.

Turning to enter the house once more, the car long out of sight, she thought of her future optimistically for the first time in years. Walking in as Fredrick closed the door behind her, she smiled. "Mamma? I'll be ready to go in a little bit." *To town today... then school in January... Erica was right! Nurses are just as important as doctors!*

Chapter 23 - Life's Little Changes

Erica and April entered their shared apartment in Concord, having just driven the four hours from Hargrave House. Erica had barely put down her suitcase when she felt a hand turn her around quickly. Just as she was about to ask what April wanted she felt the girl's lips press into her own with an urgent need. Surrendering to her own passions, Erica responded in kind, pulling April in close and relishing the feel of their bodies pressed together.

Feeling Erica respond to her advances, April pushed her up against the front door, closing it and pinning the girl in place so she could press all the more urgently against her body. After several minutes of groping and passionate kisses, April's need partially sated, she at last pulled back and looked in Erica's eyes. "Sorry!" she giggled.

"For *what*?" Erica smiled back. "For showing me you *love* me?" Gently pulling April close again, she kissed her slowly and romantically. "It could have waited until we were at *least* unpacked, though!"

Laughing together, April ran her fingers over Erica's cheeks. "I... I just couldn't *wait* any longer." she admitted. Backing away, and self-conscious of Erica's sensibilities, she took a deep ragged breath as her smile evaporated. "But, you want to *wait*."

"April, I... we need to *talk*."

Fear spreading through her whole body at those words, April turned away. "You're... you're going to leave me for *Faith*. Aren't you? You changed your mind and only want *her*." she exhaled, hugging herself.

"No!" Erica exclaimed. "April! I could *never* leave you!"

Not really listening, April started picking up her suitcase. "It's *alright*." she lied. "I... I understand. We can still be *friends*! I *told* you that..."

"April!" Erica shouted as she stormed in front of her oldest friend. "I said I'm *not* leaving you! I'll *never* leave you! I *love* you!" Lowering her voice, she gently took April's suitcase in hand and lowered it to the floor before taking her love's hands. "I just *meant* that there's some things we need to *talk* about. I *promise* I do *not* want to break *up* with you! *Ever!*"

Nodding rapidly, April took a breath and calmed her emotions. "O... OK."

"But *first*," Erica asked with a smile, "can we *unpack*? I need a *shower*!"

Mirth slowly spread between them before they both started to laugh. After a moment, April looked away embarrassedly. "I'm *sorry*, Erica. I... I guess I'm just a *little* insecure about..." Her voice trailed off, knowing that Erica understood her meaning.

Nodding, she sighed and backed away. "Second *thoughts*?"

"*No!*" April denied. "I... Erica, I could *never* make you choose! I don't want you to *have to*!" Looking at their joined hands, April was near to tears.

Seeing the fear in April's eyes as she looked away, Erica smiled and leaned down until their eyes met once more. "Hey! I *love* you! Come here." Erica led them both to the large plush couch occupying the middle of the living room. Sitting down, she waited until April joined her.

When after a moment Erica didn't say anything, April finally looked up at her. "*What?*"

Smiling, Erica shook her head. "I... I want you to *know* something, OK?" Taking a moment as she watched April nod in understanding, Erica took a breath. "I want you to know that, if... if I *had* to make a choice, I would choose *you*. OK? I decided that on the way here. It's what I *really* want!"

Looking away and blushing, April smiled weakly. "I'm not so *sure*."

"Well I *am*!" Erica stated flatly. "April, I *love* Faith. She helped me see who I really *am*... and *loves* me for just being *me*! But *you* loved me before even *I* knew who I was... when I was 'orphan boy Eric'... and when you found out I was *Erica*, you *still* loved me, and I *never* stopped loving *you*!" Pausing to let that sink in, she concluded, "So you see, if I *had* to choose, it wouldn't even take a *moment* to decide. I'd... I choose *you*, April."

Smiling slowly and shyly, April looked into Erica's eyes and saw her lifelong friend was telling her the truth. She could always tell. Wrapping her arms around Erica, she nearly cried at the beauty of the girl's love. "I... I'm *sorry*, Erica!" she lightly sobbed. "I... I should *never* doubt you!" Holding each other a moment in silence, she eventually pulled away to look her in the eyes again. "You *don't* need to choose, Erica! I... I'm *happy* that you and Faith can find happiness with each other! You *both* need each other so *badly*, I could *never* stand in the way of that!"

Sighing happily, Erica looked into April's eyes and also saw the honesty in her oldest friend. "Thank you!" she murmured. "Um... I guess now is as good a time as *any* to talk about what I wanted to say." Gathering her nerve, she closed her eyes and took a breath, but opened them to look April in the eyes as she spoke. "Faith wants to... um... go all the way... the next time we see each other... at Thanksgiving."

Perplexed, April furrowed her brow. "I... I thought you wanted to *wait*."

Nodding and looking down at their still joined hands, Erica shrugged. "I *do*, but... well... I've been doing some *thinking* since my talk with Mamma last night." Suddenly looking up with eyes wide, she gasped. "Mamma! I forgot to *call* her and let her know we're *home*!"

Laughing, April shook her head. "OK, you get a *reprieve*! Call your *mom*! I'll go put my things in the laundry! But after *that*..."

"After that I *promise* to explain!" Erica smiled.

Faith was walking through the living room when she heard the phone ring. Moving to pick it up, she saw Fredrick heading her way. "That's alright, Freddy! *I'll* get it!"

"As you wish, Miss Faith." he intoned with a nod and a vague smile, glad that the family was whole once more.

Picking up the handset on the old rotary phone, Faith cleared her throat. "*Hello?*"

Smiling at the sound of her voice, Erica lit up. "*Faith!* It's *Erica!*"

"*Hi!*" she replied. "Couldn't *stand* to not hear my voice for two weeks?"

"Ha ha!" Erica retorted as she watched April eyeing her with a sly grin as the young woman carried her bags toward the laundry for the maid to do the next day. "No... well, *that's* not true! Yes, I can't *stand* missing you that long, but I was *actually* calling to let Mamma know we're home safe."

"Oh, *I* see." Faith smirked. "Well then, I'll let Mamma know."

"Let me know *what*, dear?" Heather asked as she entered the room.

"*Oh!*" Faith jumped in a start, her mind racing over her flirting with Erica, afraid that somehow her mother knew just what she was thinking at that moment; thoughts which were decidedly unfamiliar toward her cousin. "*Mamma!* Oh! It's *Erica!* She called to let us know they're *home!*"

Looking at Faith, she could see the tells of deception. More certain than ever that Erica and Faith had become intimate following their reconciliation and they were hiding it behind Erica's apparently chaste relationship with April, she cocked an eyebrow before answering. "Oh *good!* May I *talk* to her a moment, dear?"

Handing her mother the phone, Faith gulped in fear. *Does she know?* she wondered. "Here." she almost stammered.

"Hello?" Heather began. "*Erica*, sweetheart?"

"*Mamma!*" Erica cried in surprise, about to say something sweet and romantic to Faith. "Faith and I were just... um..."

"Yes, sweetheart." she answered, not waiting for the lie. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm *glad* you're home safe and look forward to seeing you and *April* over Thanksgiving! We *all* are!" she emphasized, watching Faith blush.

Blushing herself, knowing what Faith wanted to do over the holiday, Erica swallowed hard. "Um... us *too!* Can... can't wait!"

"We can't wait to see you then, as *well!*" Heather echoed as she watched Faith shyly look away. "Did you want to talk to Faith before you *go*, dear?"

"N... no, Mamma." Erica stammered. "*That's OK!* We already said our good-byes!"

Cupping her hand over the mouthpiece, Heather looked at her daughter sympathetically. "*Faith* dear, is there anything *else* you'd like to say... to your *cousin?*" She intentionally added the last part as a reminder for her daughter as to just who Erica was to Faith.

Nodding almost shamefully, she desperately wanted to hear Erica's voice just once more.

"Faith wants to say *goodbye*, sweetheart." Heather said, giving the lie to Erica's last statement. "I *love* you, Erica! Give my best to *April* as well!"

"I love you *too*, Mamma." Erica said guiltily. "Bye."

"Goodbye, sweetheart." Heather answered lovingly before handing the receiver to Faith. "Here you *are*, dear."

Taking it, Faith tentatively put it up to her ear. "Erica?"

"Faith... I..." Thinking about her aunt standing there and watching Faith as they said goodbye, her desire to be sappy and romantic suddenly seemed like a bad idea. "I... um... I *love* you, Faith. I guess I'll see you... *soon*." She hoped that mentioning their next encounter would convey her feelings.

Seeing her mother's knowing look, Faith raised her chin almost defiantly. "I love you *too*, Erica. I look forward to seeing you at Thanksgiving, *too*."

"Goodbye, love." Erica nearly whispered, almost afraid Heather might hear.

"Goodbye." Faith said softly in return before hanging up. Turning to face her mother, she waited to see what she'd say.

"Faith, we need to *talk*." Heather said gently. "Shall we use *your* room?"

I knew it was too good to last. Faith mused hopelessly. "Alright, Mamma." she answered embarrassedly as they headed toward the stairs.

Erica hung up the phone slowly after hearing Faith's goodbye. Getting up, she followed April in getting her own bags unpacked and into the laundry. Her aunt's voice over the phone seemed almost *too* polite. Opening her suitcase, her thoughts darkened. *She knows! My God! Mamma knows!*

Entering the bedroom once shared by the two teens, Faith took a seat on her bed as her mother sat at the girl's vanity. Looking everywhere but at Heather, Faith waited for the lecture.

"So..." Heather began simply. "Why don't you *start* by telling me what's going *on*."

Faith fidgeted with her fingers idly. "I... I don't know what you *mean*, Mamma." she lied badly.

Sighing, Heather pressed her fingers against her temples. "Faith, *please* don't treat me as though I'm a fool. You already *confessed*, in front of the whole *household*, that you've had feelings for your cousin Erica. Don't *compound* that with *lies*, please."

Frustrated, Faith stood and paced her room. "What do you *want* me to say, Mamma? That I *love* her? That she loves *me*? We *do*, and it's *not* going to just go *away*! It's *real*!"

"I *know* that, dear." Heather said calmly. "What have you *done* about it?"

Stopping to face her mother, Faith took a breath. "*Nothing!*" she lied again before correcting herself. "Well... nothing *much*."

"I *see*." Heather replied as she tried to maintain her composure. "Have you two been *sleeping* together?"

Biting her lip, Faith looked away from her mother. "That depends on what you mean by *sleeping* together."

"Having *sex*." Heather stated impatiently. "Please don't *equivocate*."

"*No!*" Faith denied. "Just... you *know*... actually *sleeping* together!"

Closing her eyes, Heather looked away from her daughter. "I *see*." Pausing as her trained ear heard the unspoken, she added. "And?"

"*Mamma!*" Faith protested. "Do you *really* want all the *details*?"

Pursing her lips, Heather looked at the floor. "*No*, I guess I really *don't*." Looking up at Faith once more, she stood and moved cautiously toward her.

"Faith... I... I'm *not* going to lecture you about *morality*. You're a grown woman now, and you've been of the age of consent since you were sixteen. I know you love her. I've known you were *attracted* to her almost from the first."

Looking away embarrassedly, Faith heard her mother move closer until the woman took her hand. Pulling gently, Heather turned Faith to face her.

"Faith. I *love* you and don't want to see you get *hurt*." Heather explained. "I... I know that sending Erica away was hard on you *both*. If I *could* take it back, I *would*. You two *obviously* have a depth of feeling toward one another that is not *likely* to go away anytime soon. I just..." she paused as she held her feelings in check. "I don't want you to *do* something you'd *regret* later, dear. You *know* you can't have a full and complete *relationship* with her, don't you? A marriage? Family? *Children*?"

"I *know*, Mamma." Faith sniffed. "It's just..."

Nodding slowly, Heather sighed. "It's just that the heart *wants* what the heart *wants*, and nothing anyone *says* or *does* will *change* it." Seeing Faith look up at her, Heather smiled gently once more. "I... I *can't* give my blessing to you two. You *know* that, don't you?"

Smiling weakly, Faith nodded. "I *know*, Mamma." she mumbled before turning to embrace her and beginning to cry.

"It's *alright*, sweetheart." Heather consoled her child. "I *know*. I *know*."

"Oh, *Mamma!*" the younger girl cried. "I just love her *so* much! I... I always *have*! From the day she *got* here I've loved her! Almost from the first moment I *saw* her! *Why?*"

"I don't *know*, dear." Heather admitted. "Lord knows why *any* of us love who we love. Erica's mother was the *same*. She fell in love with your uncle Jack

at age *ten*, and loved him with all her heart the rest of her *life*, even after he was *gone*." Smiling wistfully, she almost laughed at herself. "Maybe it's something about the *Dunning* family! They're *too* easy for us Hargraves to love! Even your uncle *Jack*! I loved him *almost* as much as your *father*!"

Laughing with her through her own tears, Faith pulled away from her mother and retrieved a tissue from her vanity, blowing her nose and wiping her eyes. "*Mamma?* I want you to know that I *tried* not to love her."

"Oh, *sweetheart!*" Heather exclaimed as she pulled Faith to sit next to her on Faith's bed. "You can't *choose* not to love someone. That's not *up* to us."

Nodding in understanding, Faith exhaled heavily. "I know... it's up to *God*." Sighing again, she fiddled with her tissue. "But why did He make me have to love *her*? Someone I can't *have*!"

"I don't *know*, dear." Heather shrugged. "Maybe she *needed* that love to sustain her until she could find April." Pausing, Heather broached a delicate subject. "*Faith*... about *April*. Erica has a chance at a good *life* with her. Do you intend to stand in their way?"

Blushing, Faith tore the tissue in half. "No. I'm *glad* Erica has April! I just want her to be *happy*, and April makes her *happy*."

Nodding, she watched Faith's reaction and knew there was more. "Go on."

"*Mamma!*" Faith whined as she stood and paced her room again. "I don't think you *want* to know the rest."

"If you want me to *understand*, I think I *need* to know the rest." Heather retorted, "Whether I *want* to know or not, this... *thing*... between you and your cousin could lead to an end *far* worse than even my sending her *away* did. Besides, I think I'm a fair and open-minded woman. Just *talk* to me. You should *trust* me, dear."

Unsure, Faith tossed the remains of her tissue in her wastebasket and pulled out a fresh one, only to start tearing it up in her hands right away. "Um... well... see, Erica had an *idea*..."

Sighing as she relaxed on the couch in a nightgown and robe after a good shower, Erica closed her eyes. The next thing she knew, she was being awakened by a kiss. Smiling, she opened her eyes to see April leaning over her with a grin of her own. "*Hi!*" she purred. "Sorry I dozed off."

"*That's OK.*" April grinned as she sat on the edge of the couch next to her. "*I liked* waking you up! *I nearly fell asleep in my tub!*"

Sitting up to try and shake off the sleepiness, Erica wiped her face with her hands. "Um... so *anyway*, I was going to tell you about my talk with *Mamma*."

"The *sex* talk?" April smiled seductively.

"*Yeah...*" Erica answered as she looked away shyly.

Laughing, April slipped her hand into Erica's. "You're so *cute* when you get all *embarrassed!*" she giggled.

Rolling her eyes, Erica giggled back. "So *anyway...* um... she asked me if I was a... um... a *virgin*. When I told her I *was*, she told me that since we *love* each other, you and I, that it's a gift from God so it would be... um... *OK...* if we... um..." Stammering, Erica couldn't make herself say it.

"*Make love?*" April finished for her. Seeing Erica nod, she smiled. "Your mom's a wise *woman*, Erica! You should *always* follow a mother's *advice*!"

Laughing together a moment, Erica looked away shyly. "I... um... so I was *thinking*, if you... I mean... do you... *you know*... still *want* to? With *me*? I mean... if you still *want* to, I would like it... um... if we..."

Pulling Erica to her feet, April wrapped her arms around her best friend. "With you? Yes! Always!" Leaning in to kiss her gently and lovingly, April sighed when they were done. "But not *tonight*. We're *both* pretty tired, which is a *terrible* state to be in for *this* kind of discussion!"

Nodding in understanding, Erica only briefly considered the idea that April was dodging being with her now that she was willing before dismissing the idea as nonsense. *April loves me and wants me.* Erica reminded herself.

"So why don't we go to *bed* and pick this up first thing *tomorrow*?" April suggested. "*That* way we're *rested* and thinking *clearly*."

"You're *right*." Erica agreed disappointedly. "We *shouldn't* be discussing it at *this* hour." she noted the large clock over the fireplace that showed it to be after eleven. Straightening her robe, she embraced April again happily. "I *love* you, April!" she sighed.

"Always *have* and always *will*!" she answered back. "Come *on*!" Heading to Erica's bedroom door, they stopped at the entrance.

"See you in the *morning*!" Erica smiled.

"Mmm *hmm*!" April wordlessly answered.

Opening her bedroom door, Erica headed in, but was surprised when the door wouldn't close due to April being in the way. "Was there something *else* you needed?" she asked curiously.

"No!" April smiled back.

"OK." Erica nodded to her. "Goodnight!" Waiting for April to step back out into the hallway, her smile slowly melted. "Um... are you *sure* there's nothing you need? Did you want to *ask* me something?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." April answered as she squeezed past Erica, her breasts pressing against the room's owner as she moved into it. Pulling off her robe to reveal that she was wearing a short and sexy red negligée, April looked back at the shocked girl. "Which side do you sleep on?"

Erica blinked several times before she stammered out, "Um... my right side."

Nodding happily, April nonchalantly walked up to the right side of Erica's bed, pulled down the covers, slid gracefully under them, and lay down on her right side. "Coming to bed?" she asked simply.

Slowly, Erica made her way over to the opposite side of her bed until she could look down and see the teen's eyes were closed. "Um... *April*?"

Opening her eyes and smiling at her confused girlfriend, April patted the space in front of her. "Remember to turn out the *light*, honey!"

Gulping, Erica absently switched off the light, took off her robe, and slid under the pulled back covers. When at last she lay down and rolled onto her right side, she felt the bed move and soon April was snuggled against her back. Scarcely able to breathe, Erica lay there wide-eyed for a few moments that seemed to take hours before April spoke.

"*I love you.*" she stated breathily against Erica's neck as her free arm snaked around Erica's waist and pulled the girl tightly against her body.

"*I love you, too.*" Erica replied as she slowly began to relax into the familiar comfort of having another girl sleep next to her and hold her throughout the night. Sighing contentedly after a few minutes, she soon drifted off into a soothing sleep filled with visions of April making love to her.

She awoke to a familiar feeling. Lying on her back, Erica opened her eyes to see the ceiling as April slid up the front her body, causing her to inhale sharply at the pleasure.

"Good *morning*, love!" April cooed, almost lying on Erica's prone form. "Ready to have the rest of that *talk*?"

Clearing her throat, Erica smiled and then gasped as she felt April's hand slide up her thigh. "Um... *talk*?" she asked, still not fully awake.

"Yes." April said through a smile. "About you and *I*? About what we might do with one another? *Together*? *Alone*?"

Slowly recalling the previous night's discussion, her mind was ripped apart by the exquisite sensations April was inflicting on her. "Oh, *April*!" she gasped. "That feels..." Gasping again, she couldn't finish her thought before April lowered her lips down to Erica's, kissing her passionately as she let her fingers glide gently and slowly all over Erica's sensitive skin.

"I know." April answered happily as she ended the kiss and her fingers drifted places no one other than Faith had ever touched. "I was thinking about what you were telling me last night... about *Faith*?" She paused a moment as Erica shuddered with pleasure. "Are you going to *let* her take you?" Giving the poor girl a chance, April slowed her sensual assault and just let her free hand come to rest on Erica's slender waist.

Recovering the use of her lungs, Erica gasped and breathed heavily for a moment before looking up at April. "Um... do you want to be discussing her *now*? While we're... um..."

"Making *out*?" April smiled.

"Yeah! I mean... yes, while we're making out." Erica stammered.

Kissing Erica again even more passionately, she felt the helpless girl's fingers comb through her dark naturally curly hair, sending shivers down her own spine. "Oh, yes!" she sighed. "Do you want me to *stop*?" she asked.

"No..." Erica admitted, "...but maybe you *should*, so I can actually *think!*"

Laughing throatily, April rolled off her captive and lay next to her smiling. "Alright, *party pooper!*" she jokingly grumbled. "You *win!* *Admittedly*, I was trying to *fix* the decision."

"What do you *mean?*" Erica asked, furrowing her brow.

"I *mean...*" April explained lovingly, "...that I was going to make *love* to you, so you can make love to *Faith* when you see her at Thanksgiving."

"*What?*" Erica squeaked. "*Why?*"

"Because I *love* you, *stupid!*" April giggled.

"You love me *stupid?*" she asked confusedly.

"*Yes!*" April agreed. "I love you *so* much you become *stupid, apparently!*" Giggling until Erica finally joined in, April was happy to feel Erica's hand slipping into her own. "Seriously though, I... I don't want you to have *any* hesitation when Faith wants to take things to the next level. I... I *want* you to." she admitted.

Again she asked, "*Why?*"

Exasperated, April groaned. "*Why?* Because I *love* you and want you to be *happy!* I want you to be able to feel the *joy* she can give you without feeling so... so *guilty* about it!"

Rolling away from April, Erica gave voice to her shame. "I *should* feel guilty. She's my *cousin!*"

"And you *love* each other." April added. "What *else* matters?"

"Why doesn't it *bother* you!" Erica snapped. "It *should!* Even if she *wasn't* my cousin, it should *bother* you that I want to make love to another *woman*!"

Sighing, April rolled onto her back. "I'll admit I'm a *little* jealous."

"*See?* So then why..."

"Because I'd rather have ninety-nine *percent* of you than none at *all*!" April shouted. Calming down, she rolled back to face Erica again. "*Erica*, you *love* Faith. *Nothing* is going to *change* that, and I *know* it. So I can either have *part* of you, or *none* of you. *Some* of someone as special, beautiful, and *wonderful* as you is better than *none*."

Caught off-guard by the depth of love April was demonstrating, Erica swallowed hard. "You *really* love me *that* much, April?" she asked.

"Yes." she answered quickly and simply.

"And Faith being my cousin..."

"...doesn't bother me one *bit*!" April smiled. "I *know*, at *first* I thought you were both *pervs*, but *then* I saw how much you actually *love* each other. It's... it's *beautiful*, Erica!"

Smiling lovingly, the moment was shattered with April's next statement.

"Actually it's kinda *hot*!" she added. "*Taboo!* Like... like *incest* porn only..."

"*April!*" Erica shouted with an indignant look on her face.

Cracking up, April began laughing so hard she soon had Erica's serious countenance cracking to a smile, then giggles, and finally full laughter at her side.

"You're *sick!*" Erica giggled.

"I *know! I am!*" April admitted through laughter. "I'm *so demented!*"

Slowly, their giggles faded as they looked into each other's eyes. April moved first, propping herself on one arm as the other hand reached out and caressed Erica's cheek. "*Seriously, I just want you to be happy. She makes you happy. Nothing else matters.*"

"*You matter.*" Erica corrected her. "I don't think I could ever *deserve* you."

Moving closer, April let her hands drift down across Erica's soft breasts before roaming lower. "You don't *have* to deserve me, honey. *We* deserve each *other.*" At that, she leaned down and they resumed their passionate kissing as April at last got her heart's greatest desire.

They finally became one.

Chapter 24 - Theory vs. Reality

Opening the door the same as he'd done thousands of times before, this time Fredrick cracked a smile at the person greeting him. "Welcome *home*, Miss Erica!" he said almost joyfully.

Erica swept into the house with April close behind, Fredrick helping her off with her coat as their luggage was delivered to the front door. "Thanks, Eddie! *Fredrick?* This is *Eddie*, my chauffeur."

Looking the man up and down as if inspecting his worthiness to drive Erica around, he nodded respectfully. "*Eddie?*" he inquired.

"Edward *Green!*" the large man said happily, extending a hand to him once they were free. "So you're Fredrick! You're a hard act to *follow!*"

Raising an eyebrow at his familiarity, Fredrick nevertheless shook the man's hand formally. "*Indeed, sir.* Is there anything *else* for Miss Erica or Miss April?"

Coming up alongside the giant man, Erica hugged him. "Oh, *Fredrick!* No, that's *all!*" Turning to her own driver, she nodded. "Thanks, Eddie! I'll see you on Sunday at *three!* Have a good holiday!"

"I'll *be* here!" he answered with a smile as he tipped his hat to his employer. "Happy Thanksgiving to you as *well*, ma'am!"

After the heavy door closed, Erica turned around to see her aunt sweeping down the stairs with Faith, both dressed in fine gowns. While Heather's was a lovely pale-blue floor-length chiffon Empire line with a modest neckline and long sleeves, Faith's was a deep crimson satin strapless A-line with a tea-length skirt and bustled half-wrap train that just touched the floor as she moved. Caught breathless by her beauty, Erica had to tear her eyes away from her cousin to look to her aunt who'd said something.

"The drive up was *fine*, Heather!" April answered for Erica. Looking at her awestruck girlfriend, she shook her head dismissively. The green satin evening gown Erica wore was conservative, but the way Erica wore it was enough to make a eunuch yearn. Her own black satin gown that Erica had bought tailor-made to fit her helped her at least feel like she fit in.

"*Mamma!*" Erica ran up and hugged Heather warmly as she reached the bottom of the stairs. "You look *beautiful!*"

"*Erica, love!*" Heather returned the embrace. "I'm glad you're *home* again!"

"Me *too, Mamma!*" she nearly cried. Finally releasing her, she looked around. "Where's Cook and Fran?"

"*Working!*" Francesca yelled invisibly from around the top of the stairs. "Some of us still *work* for a living, missy!"

Turning at last to Faith, she swallowed. "*Faith.*" she said nervously, trying to keep the desire out of her voice. While April hugged Heather hello, the two cousins looked at one another with hunger barely masked behind their eyes. Slowly, they stepped toward one another and embraced chastely, holding it for just a moment longer than prudent. "You look *stunning!*" Erica finally said as they parted.

"You're *breathtaking*, Erica!" Faith intoned wantonly.

Just then, Theresa came out to greet the two, wiping her hands on her apron, Erica pulled away from Faith and went to hug her. "*Cook!*" she shouted gaily.

"Now, now! None of *that*, dearie!" she barked, making Erica freeze in her steps. "That's a *lovely* gown you've got on and I'm covered in *turkey* goop for tomorrow's *dinner!*"

Smiling, Erica approached. "I don't *care*!" she stated as she hugged the large woman from the side, still trying to be careful not to ruin her dress.

Patting the girl's bare arms, Theresa relented. "I missed you *too*, dearie!"

Welcomes concluded, while Fredrick took their bags to Erica's room, her aunt led them all to the living room where she took her usual place on the love seat with Faith, Erica and April taking their place on the opposite love seat. "So you're staying until Sunday afternoon then, sweetheart?" she asked.

"Yes, Mamma." Erica politely answered. "I have to be back Monday morning for a book signing."

Smiling, Heather looked at her lovingly. "I'm so *proud* of you, dear!"

Blushing, she turned to Faith. "She's the one to be *proud* of, Mamma! Starting *nursing* college in the spring! I just write *mule-puke* that people pay me way too much money for!"

"Thanks, Erica!" Faith said, taking her turn to blush.

"I'm proud of *both* my girls!" Heather said with satisfaction. Looking from Erica to Faith, she sighed and put off discussing the uncomfortable situation until later. "We should be *going* soon. You got here *just* in time!"

"Couldn't get here *sooner* unless we rented a *helicopter*!" Erica giggled. "We left as soon as Mavis finished our hair!"

"*Mavis*?" Heather inquired.

"My hairdresser." Erica explained. Stopping, she corrected herself. "Sorry, *our* hairdresser!" she smiled as she looked at April.

"That's *better*, honey!" April sniffed.

"It is *time*, Madame Hargrave." Fredrick informed his employer with the punctuality of a Swiss clock.

The four rose together and headed toward the door. "Thank you, Fredrick." Heather said gracefully.

"Have *fun*, you four!" Theresa waved to them, glad to have the evening off cooking dinner to prepare for the next day's holiday feast.

A short time later they'd arrived at a local up-scale steakhouse. It was a beautiful autumn evening, only just starting to turn cool before the heavy snows sure to fall within weeks or days. Entering, they were quickly seated and wine was poured for Heather.

"May *I* have a sip, Mamma?" Erica asked mischievously.

"No you may *not*!" Heather laughed lightly.

"Just *kidding!*" she laughed in return. While April told Heather about her college plans, the two sharing an interest in psychology, Erica turned to Faith. "You look *captivating* tonight!"

Looking at Erica with barely restrained lust, Faith bit her lip and smiled. "I missed you *too*, Erica!" she giggled. "So, a *book* signing?"

"Yeah." Erica looked down shyly at her glass of water. "Nothing *special*, just a romance novel. It sold over a hundred thousand, though."

"I'm *happy* for you, Erica!" Faith sighed. Careful not to let her guard down, she straightened up some. "So April wants to be a therapist like Mamma?"

Nodding dreamily, Erica caught herself staring at Faith. "Um... yes. She wants to help people the way *she* was helped."

"She's a lucky *girl*." Faith sighed. "I mean... to have such *drive*."

Erica melted back into a warm smile. "She's not the *only* girl who can get lucky here tonight!" she said softly enough not to carry beyond the two.

Her mouth falling open at the brazenness of Erica's flirting, Faith found herself to be the one blushing and turning away, her need for Erica ramping up with each passing second.

When at last they headed for home, the women sat together in silence. Furtive glances between Faith and Erica in stolen moments were undercut by April's closeness to Erica and Heather's dower expression. Finally not able to take any more, Heather did something she almost never did.

Reaching for the controls above her, she closed the window to the front seat.

"Now then." Heather sighed. "We four are *alone* and are mature *adults*. I feel we can be *frank* with one another."

"Mamma, I don't..." Erica began to object.

"Erica, *please!*" she interrupted. "I'm *not* a stupid woman! Please don't *insult* my intelligence by pretending that I don't have *eyes* or *ears*!" Seeing the three cowed, she sighed and looked away. "You and Faith are in *love*."

"Yes, Mamma." Erica confessed.

"You're *also* in love with April?" she asked to confirm.

"Yes. We're in love, Mrs. Hargrave. Erica and I." April answered formally.

Closing her eyes, Heather repressed her instinct to immediately condemn the three. "And you all agreed to this... *arrangement*? No *coercion*? No ultimatums, threats, or *pressuring*?" At that she pointedly looked at Erica.

"No, Mamma." Erica answered shyly. "It... um... it was *my* stupid idea."

Immediately, Faith rushed to defend her cousin. "I was the one that *made* Erica tell me her idea and agreed to it *first!*"

"Mrs. Hargrave?" April likewise stood up for Erica. "I'd rather have Erica *most* of the time than *never*. I want her to be *happy*, so I just *couldn't* make her choose one of us over the *other!* It's just not *fair!*"

"Life is *rarely* fair, young lady." Heather admonished.

"But it *can* be this time!" April countered. "If we *choose* it to be."

Sighing in frustration, Heather shook her head. "I *should* put my foot down and *insist* that Erica and Faith have *nothing* to do with one another!" she nearly shouted. Calming herself, she added her caveat. "However, you three are all consenting adults and I cannot *make* you forget this notion."

Erica looked at her aunt with tears in her eyes. "Mamma? If you *tell* me not to see Faith, I'll do what you *say*."

"What!" Faith shouted. "Erica, *no!*"

"Erica!" April looked at her. "You can't *do* that! You *love* each other!"

"Mamma!" Faith turned to Heather. "Please! Don't *say* it!"

Heather looked sternly at Erica who sat silently crying across from her and next to April. She was moments from saying the words when she found herself utterly unable to speak them. *I... I just can't hurt her like that! Not again!* she admonished herself. Even as Faith and April both assailed her with objections and pleas, she simply raised her hand and waited for them to stop. The car at last silent once more, her eyes never looked away from her niece. "Erica? Why would you do this?"

Looking up at her aunt with wet cheeks, Erica took in a ragged breath. "Because I could *never* do *anything* that would make you *disappointed* in me, Mamma! I... I *love* you too much!"

Her heart melting at the sentiment, Heather felt the tear slide down her cheek and quickly wiped it away. "I... I could never *do* that, sweetheart. I've *already* caused *enough* pain in your life." Seeing Erica about to justify Heather's decision to send her away, she forestalled it with one final argument. "I *know* I did it for what I *believed* to be your own good, but it *did* cause you *both* quite a lot of pain, I nearly *lost* you *forever*, and *this* situation is no *different*. I *won't* take the same chance *twice*."

Softening her countenance, Heather smiled weakly. "I just... I don't want to see you *hurt*." Turning to Faith, she shook her head. "*Either* of you! You two are too *precious* to me! If *either* of you got *hurt* like that again, I... I don't think I could *take* it!"

"Oh, *Mamma!*" Faith cried as she flung her arms around Heather. "I *love* you! I *promise* we'll be *fine*!"

Returning the affection, Heather wept openly. "*Faith*? Are you *sure* this is what *you* want? I... I just don't want you to *regret* this, baby! If you two have a bad breakup, I... I just *couldn't* choose between my girls! It would *kill* me to even *try*!"

"You'll never *have* to, *Mamma!*" Faith promised. "I *swear*!"

Getting past the emotional trauma after several minutes, Heather collected her thoughts. "Very *well*. Before I can... well... be *OK* with this, for lack of a better word, *arrangement*, I *do* have a few requirements you'd have to agree to abide by. Nothing *unreasonable* for three adults, just some guidelines to help smooth things over for *everyone's* best interest. *Alright?*"

"Yes, *Mamma.*" Erica agreed before even hearing them. "What are they?"

Looking at the girl, Heather took a breath. "First of all, *no one* may know about it outside we *four*. That's for *everyone's* protection, including *mine*. Not *Fredrick*, not *Theresa*, not *Franchesca*... *no one!* If word of this got *out*, it would not only wreak havoc on *your* lives, but mine as *well* for *allowing* it! *Agreed?*"

Hearing all three agree, Heather continued. "*Erica?* You *know* this could potentially *destroy* your company if it got *out*, don't you?" Seeing her nod, Heather laid down her second condition. "If it *does*, I *won't* help you save your company. This is *your* choice, so *you'll* have to live with whatever *consequences* there are! *Faith?* Same to *you*. It will be *extremely* difficult to get a nursing job with *this* kind of scandal. If it gets *out*, you'll have to accept the result and I *won't* help you save your career. You *too*, April. Few would *trust* a therapist with *this* in her background. You three wouldn't get *any* help from me, save that you'll *always* be welcome in my home. *Agreed?*"

Seeing their assent once more, Heather moved on to her third rule. "I expect you two to be *discreet!*" she admonished Erica and Faith. "No public displays like I saw *tonight!* I may have to *tolerate* the situation, but I don't want to *see* it or *hear* about it? Is that *understood?* April? I expect *you* to make sure they *are* discreet! If you're so willing to let Erica have this... *tryst*... with Faith, then *you'll* have to see to it they're being discreet and *safe*. *Agreed?*"

Once more they acquiesced, Heather handing out her final decree. "Lastly, if at *any* point, *any* of you wishes for this... *relationship*... to end, it *must!* You must *all* agree that *anyone* involved can end it at *any* time for *any* reason, without argument or recriminations from *either* of the other two." Looking at Faith and Erica pointedly, she added, "That means if April no longer wishes to help you maintain the secrecy of your relationship, you *must* end it... *willingly*. Can you all agree to *that?*"

Looking at Faith and then April and seeing them nod, Erica answered for all three of them. "*Agreed*, Mamma. We promise it will only continue as long as all of us agree it *should*."

Nervously, Heather looked out the window. "Very well, then. I... I won't try to *stop* it." It was as far as she was willing to go. Turning to Erica again, she blushed slightly. "Sweetheart? I... I hate to ask something so *private*, but I *must* know. Are you... well... *fertile* still?"

Turning crimson, Erica shrank away from her aunt, but forced herself to answer. "N-no, Mamma. I... I'm not." Explaining briefly about what she'd done after turning eighteen, she was barely audible above the road noise.

"Well, there's *that* at least." Heather consoled herself. "Understand girls, I just don't want *either* of you two to get *hurt* by this. Love is a *wonderful* thing, but a *relationship* is *more* than just about love or sex... it's about a *commitment* to one another, one not to be taken *lightly*. Erica's relationship with April, while *non-traditional*, is at *least* socially accepted now and can be fulfilling in all the ways any *other* can. This... *relationship*... between you two will be very *difficult*. One or the other of you might want *more* down the road, more than the other is *willing* or *able* to give."

Taking the momentary lull, April stepped in. "Mrs. Hargrave, that's all true, but isn't it also true of *any* couple? I mean, take that *Mike* guy and his ex."

Examining the logic of it, Heather nodded and sighed in resignation. "Of course. You're *right*, April. *Every* relationship is a danger. This one just has *extra* dangers. A falling out between *them* would have effects for the *family*. Holidays and get-togethers would be *fraught* with the lasting effects. As long as you three can abide by your *agreements* though, I... I suppose I can learn to *live* with it." *I'll* have *to*. Heather mused silently.

By the time Fredrick had driven them home, the excitement and anticipation between Erica and Faith had been buried in the practical arrangements they'd agreed to. When the household began to turn in for the evening, Erica just having gotten out of her shower, she sat at her vanity brushing and drying her hair absently.

"April?" she asked curiously. Seeing her through the vanity mirror looking over at her from the bed, Erica put down her hot curling brush. "Um... are... are you *sure* you're OK with this? I mean, once we cross this line..."

"Erica." April sighed as she got up and walked over to stand behind her oldest friend, "We talked this to *death!* I *swear* to you I am *one hundred percent* behind you on this!" Pausing a moment, her gentle smile melted. "That is, if this is still what *you* want..."

Shrugging absently, Erica looked at her lap. "I guess I *do*, it's just..."

"*Scared?*" April half finished for her. Smiling as Erica nodded, she picked up the brush idly and ran it through Erica's hair. "I *know* this is a big step for you two. I *really* am happy for you, though."

Closing her eyes as she luxuriated in the feeling of April brushing her hair, Erica let out a cleansing breath. "I... I think I'm ready." she sighed.

Hearing a gentle knock on her door, Faith nearly jumped out of her skin. "C... come *in*?" she asked. When the door opened to reveal her mother coming to say goodnight, Faith relaxed. "Hi, Mamma." she said nervously.

Heather glided into her daughter's bedroom, the clutter of only a month earlier having been replaced by neat organization, reminiscent of Faith's youth. Sitting on the satin comforter next to her baby girl, Heather reached out a comforting hand to Faith. "I just came in to say *goodnight*, dear. You seem *upset*." she asked without asking.

Looking away embarrassedly, Faith took the offered hand and fidgeted with her other. "Not really *upset*. Just more... um... *nervous*?"

Perplexed, Heather tilted her head slightly and furrowed her thin eyebrows. "*Nervous?*" she asked quizzically. "What on *earth* would you have to be..." Realization dawned on her slowly as she pulled her offered hand back and

looked away. "Oh! I... um... Of course. Erica's *here* and you know I won't *interfere*, so *naturally*..." Her voice trailed off before she turned back to look at Faith. "I... I am *trying*, dear." she stammered. "Are... are you *sure* about this, sweetheart? About only being able to be with her as... well... as a *mistress*? What about your *own* future? Don't you want a *family* someday?"

"*Mamma!*" Faith whined. "Yes! It's *enough* for me! Just knowing that she's *mine*, even for only a *little* while!" Laughing lightly, she added, "Like April said... I... I'd rather have *some* of her heart than *none* of it." Looking back at Heather, it was her turn to extend a comforting hand. When her mother took it, she smiled. "As for a *family*, I'm only *eighteen*, still! Who *knows* what the future has in store? Shouldn't I *enjoy* this while it *lasts*?"

Hearing a piece of her own advice to Erica from less than a month earlier, Heather nodded and looked down. "Of course. You're *right*, Faith. You know your own heart and... and I *do* want you two to be *happy*! I just wish..." Her voice cracked as she tried to come to terms with their love.

"...that we hadn't fallen in *love* with each other?" Faith finished for her.

Nodding quickly, Heather hesitated, thought a moment, then shook her head slowly. "No. I... I wouldn't take that away from *either* of you for *anything*, Faith! It's a *beautiful* thing, being in *love*!" Wiping away a tear for her lost husband, Heather took a breath and smiled. "I *love* you two *so* much! I... I just... I worry... that... that you might pass up a more... well... a more *acceptable* love, one you could express *openly* and *freely*, trying to hold on to one that you have to keep *hidden*."

Seeing Faith about to object, Heather shook her head dismissively. "I know! Erica loves you too *much* to stand in the way of *your* happiness. You two... um... you *three*... will work *something* out. I'll let it go." At that she got up, kissed Faith on the forehead, petted her hair a moment, and sighed, "Have a good... um... good *night*, dear. I *love* you."

"I love you *too*, Mamma!" Faith nearly cried as Heather drifted gracefully out her bedroom door, leaving her alone with her mother's thoughts.

Waiting patiently for her aunt to come say goodnight, Erica lay fidgeting in bed next to April, who sat up reading a new book; having finished her last one while Erica was showering. She'd tried reading Erica's novels a few times, but her tastes ran in a different direction and she didn't enjoy them, so Erica tried not to take it personally that she was reading a competitor's novel.

"*Still nervous?*" April asked without even looking away from her book.

"Sorry." Erica mumbled as she laced her fingers together and sat up next to April. "*Love?* Are you *sure...*"

"*Erica!*" April laughed as she put her book down and looked at her. "Will you stop *asking* me that? *Yes!* I'm *sure!* *OK?* *Positive!* Absolutely *certain!* One hundred and fifty percent in *favor* of it!" By the end of her tirade, she was giggling so hard Erica could barely understand her.

"I just..." Erica looked away. "I couldn't *stand* it if I *hurt* you. I can't take it *back* once she and I... um... *you know...*"

"*Believe* me, Erica!" April comforted her. "I *want* this for you! You're my *best friend* and I *love* you! How could I *not* want to see you happy?"

Erica nodded and swallowed hard as she heard the gentle knock from the door. "Come *in*, Mamma." she said with a sigh as she settled back down to lay on her pillow while April picked up her book and resumed reading.

Entering quietly, Heather moved over to Erica's side of the bed nearest the vanity and sat next to the girl she loved as much as Faith. "Just came in to say goodnight, sweetheart." Bending over and kissing Erica's cheek, she absently pushed the girl's bangs away from her eyes. "Need anything?"

"No, Mamma." Erica said softly. "Goodnight to you, too."

Taking a breath, Heather nearly tried to talk Erica out of her very obvious plans, but bit her tongue and simply smiled down at her. "Very well, sweetie. Sleep well." Pausing a moment, she added, "I... I think I'll listen to some *music* tonight." Rising to leave, she paused and turned to April. "Goodnight to you *too*, dear."

"*Night*, Heather!" April smiled as she tore her eyes away from her story.

As the woman left and April went back to her book, Erica's heart pounded in fear. "Um... I, uh... I think Mamma *knows*."

"*Duh!*" April answered with a giggle. "She's not *stupid*, Erica! You two *basically* have the green *light* from her, and have the *opportunity*. I don't think she's going to listen to *music* tonight out of a sudden need for *culture*!" Elbowing Erica until she looked at her, April smiled and looked toward the door. "*Well?* What are you *waiting* for? *Go!* I'll see you in the *morning*!"

Climbing out of bed, Erica made her way around it and kissed April on the forehead. "I *love* you." she stated simply. "*Goodnight!*"

Smiling back, April gestured for Erica to lean in closer. Giving her a quick peck on the cheek, she smiled. "*Goodnight*, honey! Have *fun*!" she giggled.

Suddenly flushed, Erica swallowed and nodded. "Yes, dear. Goodnight." Nervously, she made her way to her door and slowly pried it open. Hearing the soft strains of Tchaikovsky coming from her aunt's room, she quickly crossed the hall and, without knocking, slipped into the room she'd slept in so many times before turning thirteen. Turning around, she gasped as she saw Faith laying in her bed with the sheets pulled up to her neck.

The two stared at each other for what seemed to be hours before Erica slowly started toward the bed they would share once again. "Um... I wanted to say that you looked *really* sexy tonight, Faith." she said barely above a whisper.

"You *too*, Erica." Faith answered nervously. "So, coming to *bed*?"

Erica nodded and slowly removed her satin robe, draping it over the back of their once shared vanity chair. Clasping her hands and twisting them in knots, she slowly approached the bed.

"We don't *have* to..." Faith began as she looked away ashamedly.

Quickly moving up to the bed, Erica shook her head vigorously. "No! I mean... yes... I mean... not if you don't *want* to..."

"But I *do*!" Faith interrupted. "I mean... if *you* still want to..."

"I *do*!" Erica insisted as she slowly pulled back the covers. Seeing Faith smile sweetly, Erica relaxed and slipped into the bed next to her. "It's a little weird being on *this* side." she noted apprehensively.

"Do you wanna *switch*?" Faith asked.

"Well, I'm already in *bed*." Erica opined anxiously. "It would be *silly* to get *out* again, just to move over to the other *side*."

"*Here*." Faith offered, slipping down low and close up to her. "You... you can just... sorta... just slide *over* me." The shake in her voice gave away her feelings, no matter how hard she'd tried to ignore them.

Gulping, Erica nodded and rolled over until she was positioned just over Faith. Looking down at her as Faith looked up into her eyes, both saw the same yearning, but also no small amount of fear. Pausing only a moment, Erica continued to roll over until she was once more on the right side of the

bed where she'd slept for almost six months. Turning over onto her right side to face Faith, she saw that her cousin was still lying on her back and breathing heavily. "Are... are you *OK*, Faith?" she asked concernedly.

"*No!*" she whispered in answer. "I mean..." Rolling over to face away from Erica, she was almost crying. "You're *here*... we're free to do whatever we *want*..." Her voice cracked as tears began to fall down her cheek.

"Do... do you want me to *go*?" Erica asked sadly.

"*No!*" she sobbed. "I... I don't know *what* I want, Erica!" she admitted. "I've *always* wanted you! And now... now that I *have* you... that we can..."

"...cross *that* line?" Erica continued for her.

Nodding, Faith wiped away the tears. "Yeah... now that we *can*... I don't know if we *should*."

"I know what you *mean*." Erica sighed, a single tear dripping down her right cheek until it was soaked into the pillow. "Mamma *wanted* to stop us, but... she *can't*... but maybe we should stop *ourselves*."

Faith began to sob uncontrollably until she felt Erica slide up next to her and take her in her arms. Rolling over quickly, Faith snaked her arms around Erica and cried as they held each other. After several minutes and her fears had run their course, Faith looked at Erica. "Thanks." she sniffed.

"You're welcome." she smiled contentedly. "You know I'd do *anything* for you, Faith. I *love* you."

Slipping down to rest her head on Erica's shoulder, Faith sighed and closed her eyes. "I... I know I said I wanted to... to make love to you tonight Erica, but..." At a loss for words, Faith simply tightened her hold on her love.

"...but you changed your mind?" Erica finished for her as she gently petted Faith's soft blonde curls.

"No..." Faith rebutted. "Well, not *exactly* anyway. I mean, I *want* to... and I know we did all that stuff so we *could* be together, but... um... it's just that it feels like it's *expected* of us now... like..."

"...we don't have a *choice*." the two chorused.

Giggling, Faith lifted her eyes to look at Erica. "You *too*?"

Nodding, Erica sighed sadly. "Yeah. I mean, April was practically *pushing* me out the door! I felt like she didn't *want* me to be near her. I felt a little... um... *rejected*."

"April *loves* you, Erica!" Faith defended her. "I should *know*. I can see it in her eyes. She just wants you to be *happy*."

"What about *you*?" she asked, looking into Faith's eyes.

Looking toward the far wall, Faith sighed out a single word. "*Mamma*."

Continuing to gently run her fingers through Faith's hair, Erica nodded in understanding. "I *know*."

"It's just... um... she's so *afraid* that we'll *regret* it later, but she was *so* understanding to not try and *stop* us, and now, it's like... she just left it up to *us* and is *hoping* we make the right decision without her having to *make* us stop." Faith rambled. "It makes me feel *guilty* that I don't *want* to."

"Me *too*." Erica agreed. Sitting up as Faith did the same, the two sat next to each other, their hands joined, and looked into each other's eyes. "I still *love* you Faith. You *can* have me if you still *want* me."

With her free hand, Faith caressed Erica's cheek, prompting the younger girl to turn her head and kiss Faith's fingers, her eyes closing. "You are *so* beautiful, Erica." Faith nearly whispered. "And right now I *do* have you. You're *mine* and I could do anything I *want* with you."

When Faith's hand withdrew from her face, Erica opened her eyes and looked at her cousin. "So what *do* you want of me?"

Smiling, Faith lay back down with her head on her pillow. "Right *now*, I want you to turn around, lay down next to me, and let me hold you and feel you next to me all night."

Smiling, Erica turned to face the far wall and settled under the warm blankets and satin sheets. When Faith spooned up next to her, the feel of her body pressing against her back, Erica sighed contentedly. As Faith's arm wrapped around her waist and slid up her belly to rest her hand between Erica's breasts, she closed her eyes and relished the adoration. "Thank you!" she purred quietly.

With her nose buried in Erica's hair, Faith inhaled deeply and groaned with contented need. "Mmmm... for what?"

"For desiring me *this* much!" Erica sighed, putting her free hand on Faith's hip. "God, do you *know* how good it feels to have you this *close*?"

"Yes." Faith answered breathily. "I *do*."

Holding each other, the two spent hours luxuriating in their nearness before sleep took them.

Chapter 25 - Yours Always

The two were startled awake by knocking on Faith's door.

"Up and at 'em, Faith!" Franchesca barked through the door. Trying the knob, she'd found it locked. "Open up! I need to get the laundry started *early*, girl!"

Sitting up, Erica's eyes were the size of saucers. "Shit!" she whispered.

"Be there in a sec!" Faith shouted. Giggling as Erica scrambled to get out of her bed, Faith slid out calmly and tossed Erica her robe. "Here!" she whispered.

Catching it and tiptoeing towards the bathroom just as the maid knocked again, she closed the door a moment before Faith unlocked her door.

"Good morning." Faith said calmly as Franchesca swept into the room, making a beeline to the hamper.

"Morning." the woman scowled as she transferred the previous day's dirty clothes to her own basket. "I'll be up to collect the linens after you head down to breakfast." Seeing the teen standing in her robe and fidgeting, she narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "What're you *up* to?"

"Nothing!" Faith shrugged. "Just not *awake* yet." she forced a yawn.

Examining her a moment, Franchesca started toward the bathroom door. "Alright, you *stick* to that story!"

"Franchesca!" Faith drew in a breath. "What do you need in the *bathroom*? I put all my laundry in the *basket*! I haven't left *any* of it in the bath for the last two *weeks*!"

Stopping short, she sighed. "I need to check the linens to see what you *need*!"

"Can you do that *later*?" Faith asked as she quickly headed for the bathroom.
"I need to use it right away!"

Squinting at her as Faith ran in the bathroom and closed the door, Franchesca huffed. "I don't know what's gotten *into* you, but be *quick* about it! I'll be back in five minutes!"

Listening at the door, Faith heard the maid depart her room. Breathing a sigh of relief, she turned around to see the room empty. "*Erica?*" she whispered. She was startled for a moment when she saw the shadow move in her tub.

"I hid in *here!*" Erica whispered with a slight giggle as she climbed out. Running into one another's arms, the two held one another and shared a brief kiss before Erica started toward the door. "I... I need to get *back*."

"I know." Faith sighed.

"Faith..." Erica stammered, pausing a moment at the door. "I... I *love* you."

Closing her eyes, Faith took a slow deep breath. "I *know*. I love you, *too*."

Reaching the door to Faith's room, she cracked it open and saw the hallway clear. Quickly making her way across the hall, she closed her bedroom door behind her, sighing in relief that no one had seen her, until she turned around to see Franchesca staring at her. "*Fran!*"

Her normally stern face was cold and hard. "How *could* you!" she asked just above a whisper. "How could you *cheat* on April! With your own *cousin*!" About to storm out, she was stymied when the teen backed against the door.

"*Fran! Please!* I can *explain!*"

"Explain *what*?" she growled quietly. "I *loved* you and took *care* of you! And *this* is the result? You *sneaking* around behind April's *back*?"

"It's not behind my *back*." April said calmly as she came out of the bathroom wearing a terrycloth robe. "I *knew* where she was last night. Only you, Cook, and *Fredrick* weren't supposed to know." Looking at Erica, April sighed. "I'm sorry, honey. I forgot to set an alarm to make sure you were back here before six. By the time I realized it, Franchesca was knocking on our door."

"I fell asleep before setting *mine*." Erica sighed. "Not that it would have done any *good*. I left my phone here on the vanity. That's the first time I've slept past six in a couple years."

Stunned, Franchesca looked back and forth. "You... you *knew* about this?"

Shrugging, April stepped closer only to have the maid step back. "Actually, I *encouraged* it." she admitted. "They're in *love*. Have been for *years*."

Her mind racing, Franchesca tried to grasp it all. All those years she'd *known* that Faith was lovesick over the loss of Erica, but she'd never even *suspected* that the feelings were reciprocal. Looking at Erica, the girl's head hanging guiltily, she stepped closer to her and whispered, "Erica! She's your *cousin*! It's *wrong*! What if your *aunt* found out! It'd be the *death* of her!"

"She *knows*." Erica mumbled. "She's known since the day April and I went back to *Concord*." Looking up at the woman she loved like family, the teen took a ragged breath. "I... I can't *help* it!"

"You most certainly *can*!" Franchesca barked quietly. Turning to April, her eyes turned soft. "I... I've *been* where you are, *miss*. My George cheated on *me* right before Heather and Richard moved in here. That's why I moved *with* 'em instead of staying *there* and being a happily married *woman*!"

"Erica isn't *cheating* on me!" April insisted.

"What do *you* call it then?" Franchesca asked with a hand on her hip and a laundry basket under the other arm. "They aren't passing the time of *day*!"

"It's not *like* that!" April explained, stepping forward again. "Erica has my *permission* to be with Faith!"

Turning back to the girl blocking the door, Franchesca shook her head sadly. "I thought I knew you *better*. How *could* you have *sex* with your *cousin*?"

Swallowing hard, Erica looked away from April. "Well, we haven't *actually* done *that*. We just *slept* together... like when we were little."

"*What?*" April and Franchesca said together.

Confused, Franchesca stepped closer to the door. "*Erica? Look* at me." As the girl's head and eyes moved up to look back into her own, Franchesca scrutinized them. "Alright, maybe I *don't* know what's goin' on, and maybe I don't *wanna* know! You say nothing happened. *Fine*. You look awful *guilty* for a girl that did *nothing*, though." Taking a breath, the maid tightened her lips into a line. "Move out of the way of the *door*, girl! I got *work* ta' do!"

Stepping forward, Erica came up to the woman with a pleading look in her eyes. "*Please, Fran!* *Don't* say anything to anyone about this! It's *private*!"

"Say *what?*" Franchesca scoffed. "I don't know *what* goes on and I *don't* spread *rumors*! Until I *do* know something I don't have anything *to* say!" Moving around the girl, she opened the door. "Don't *dawdle* getting ready for *breakfast*!" she snapped before closing the door harshly.

"Erica?" April looked at her love standing near the door. "Are you *OK*?"

"*No!*" the girl answered through restrained tears.

Moving close, April took her hand and led her to the bed. Sitting together, April continued to hold it while petting Erica's head with the other to calm the hysterical girl down. "Do you want to *talk* about what happened?"

Nodding, Erica got up to get a tissue before sitting back down next to her. "We... um... we didn't... we just went to *bed*."

"*Why?*" April asked incredulously. "What *happened*?"

"I don't think we're *ready* to cross that line!" Erica explained. "I mean, we *want* to, but last night was just too... it felt... *forced*. Like we were *expected* to. It would have been all *wrong*."

Wrapping her arm around Erica, April sighed and shook her head. "I guess it's partly *my* fault. I... I was being *pushy*... like *always*!"

"You aren't *always* pushy!" Erica rebutted as she dried her eyes and sniffed. "Just when you want your *way*!"

"Oh, *very* funny!" April laughed.

Getting dressed, the rest of the day passed happily, if awkwardly on a few occasions. Franchesca didn't *say* anything, but just kept looking at the two. Meanwhile, Heather was trying to read their perplexing body language. She was *sure* Erica slept in Faith's room, but the way they moved, sat, stood, and talked only spoke of quiet frustration instead of the relaxed attitude of lovers.

After a brief trip down to the Dempsey ranch to visit, the four sat down to dinner with Brooke and Jenny, Heather saying the prayer of thanks before looking up to smile at the five seated at the table.

"Well, I know what *I'm* thankful for *this* year!" Heather sighed happily. "Having my *girls* back! *Both* of you! That, and getting to know *April*! These last few weeks have been *wonderful*, being a *family* again!" Turning to Faith, she waited expectantly.

"Well, I guess I'm thankful to have *Erica* back in my life, *our* lives I mean, that we're all still *here* to be a family again, to April for making Erica *happy*,

for getting into nursing college, and... um... to *you* Mamma, for being so *forgiving*. I haven't been as good as I *should* have been."

"*Forgiven* and *forgotten*, Faith!" Heather smiled, still noticing the girl's pensiveness. "*Erica*?"

"Yes, Mamma." the visibly tense teen answered. "I'm thankful that you all still *love* me, *unconditionally*." Looking at those at the table with her before turning her attention around the room to Fredrick, Cook, and Franchesca last with a mildly embarrassed blush. "I'm also thankful to be *here*, to have *April* back in my life, and... to be *me* again." Turning to April, she waited.

Looking at the five others sitting at the table looking at her, it took the girl a moment to realize they were waiting on her. "Oh! *Me*? Um... I guess *I'm* thankful to have *Erica* back, *too*... don't get a swelled *head* though!" she laughed along with the others. "Um... I guess *that* and getting to *meet* you all, knowing that *Erica* was *loved* and *cared for* after she left. *That's all*."

Taking a cleansing breath, Brooke looked at the three teens sitting across from her. "I'm thankful for a *lot* of things, but I think the one that stands *out* is getting to have a chance to know *Erica*." Her voice faltering, the retired Marine looked down. "I... I have a *lot* to make up for. When she *lived* here, I didn't *take* the time to know her. I didn't *want* to know her. When I *see* him, your *dad's* gonna give me an a... he's gonna have some *words* for me!" Looking up as the others at the table giggled, Brooke smiled. "I'm thankful of the *chance*, anyway."

Beaming happily, Jenny looked at the assembled family. "I'm thankful to have *all* of you in my life! *April*? You're a *doll*! I'm glad you two *found* each other! I'm *also* thankful that tomorrow I get to see my *parents*! They're *finally* coming back home from Asia, *this* time to *stay*!" Turning to Brooke, she smirked. "You're coming with me this time, love! Mom and Dad *missed* you last time!"

Rolling her eyes, Brooke sighed resignedly. "Yes, dear."

"Well then!" Heather smiled. "Happy *Thanksgiving*, everyone!" Diving into the meal, the six chatted and ate until they at last retired to the living room.

Looking over at her best friend's only child, Brooke smiled. "You look *so* much like your mother, Erica. There are *times* though that you're just like your *father!* You have his sense of *humor... and his wisdom.*"

Blushing as April squeezed her hand, Erica looked back at her. "I'll take that as a *compliment*, Aunt Brooke."

"I meant to *tell* you, I read your *book*." she continued. "It's *good*."

"Which *one*?" Erica asked curiously.

"Your autobiography."

"Oh." she said as she looked away with her cheeks flushing. "I... um... I wrote that when I thought you all *hated* me... the *real* me, I mean. I *tried* not to make *anyone* look bad, but..."

"It's *OK!*" Brooke smiled. "You were *right*, and you made us all look good in the *end*, better than we *were*, anyway. I know you made it so no one would recognize that the person you wrote about in chapter twelve was *me*, but *I* knew. I... I *wasn't* very nice to you, and not *nearly* as understanding as I *should* have been. You're a remarkable young *woman*, Erica. I... I should have seen that *sooner*."

"It's *alright*, Aunt Brooke." Erica consoled her. "It all turned out the way it *needed* to."

Listening to the two, Jenny spoke up. "Erica, I just want you to know that Brooke felt *very* bad about how she treated you when you lived here. It ate

her *up* inside for *years* afterward." Looking at her wife, she took a deep breath and got a stern look on her face. "I *told* her that you didn't seem like any boy *I* ever knew, but she had a lot of trouble *accepting* it."

"If it's any *consolation* Brooke," April offered, "I had a lot of trouble at first, *too*." Turning to Erica, she sighed sadly. "The first time I *saw* her I made her *cry*, I hurt her so badly. I... I didn't even stay a *week*. I flew back to Arizona early and tried to *forget* her, but she... *she* didn't give up on *me*."

"How *did* you two reconcile?" Heather asked.

Smiling wistfully, April shrugged a shoulder. "When I got back, I found out my boss *replaced* me. I got a call from her the next day. Her detectives hadn't been called off the job yet, so *they* told her what happened. Erica didn't just offer me money like *I thought* she was going to do, she... she made some calls and got me a job interview. She said she *knew* I didn't want anything to do with her, but she *had* to help in some way. *That's* when I knew she was the same person I grew up with. She offered to 'lose' my contact info after helping, but I felt bad that I'd treated *her* so mean and then when I got in trouble she was right there for *me*. We kept talking, and after a few weeks I realized that I was still in love with her."

Brooke looked at April guiltily. "I appreciate you trying to make me feel better about my *own* problems accepting Erica, but I had a *year* to accept it and *still* refused to see what was right in *front* of me." Turning to Erica, she grimaced. "I... I wanted Erica to be just like *Jack*. I missed my best friend *so much* that hoped I could get some of him back in his *son*. I'm *sorry*, Erica." Smiling, she added, "Turns out that's *exactly* who *she* is *anyway*... a little bit *Jack*... a little bit her mother *Erica*... and a lot just *herself!*"

When the evening turned late, the Hathaways headed for their own home while Hargrave House wound down for the night. Once more, Erica sat at her vanity brushing out her hair with April reading on the bed when Heather knocked lightly. "Come in, Mamma."

Silently, Heather made her way across the room to her niece. "Just came in to say goodnight and say Happy Thanksgiving once more!" she said softly. Seeing Erica smile as she brushed herself, Heather remembered the many times she'd seen the *child* Erica doing the same thing. "Could I help you, sweetie?" she offered as she'd done so many times five years earlier.

"I'd *love* that, Mamma!" she smiled. When Heather took the brush and ran it through her auburn hair, Erica sighed contentedly. "That feels *so* nice!"

"I remember you used to *love* me brushing your hair!" Heather reminisced. "Unless you had a bad *tangle*!"

Laughing lightly, Erica closed her eyes. "Yeah! You always made it *better* though, Mamma. *Faith* brushed out my hair *most* nights though, until..." An uncomfortable silence sprang up between the two as they remembered when Heather had forced the two girls into separate rooms.

Hearing the awkwardness unspoken, April got up. "You'll have to *excuse* me. I... I need to use the restroom." she lied as she headed toward it, closing the door behind her.

After a moment alone, Heather broke the silence. "Erica, I couldn't help but notice you and Faith seemed a little... *pensive*... today. Is everything *OK*?"

Shrugging, Erica wasn't sure how to answer.

"You... you don't *have* to talk to me about it." her aunt offered. "If you *want* to though, just know that I'll *try* to be understanding."

When Heather began brushing her hair once more in silence, Erica gathered her nerve. "Um... I slept in Faith's room last night. You *know* that, right?" Seeing her aunt nod in the vanity mirror, Erica closed her eyes and took a breath. "We... um... we didn't *do* anything. Just *slept* next to each other... like when we were *little*. It was *nice*."

Listening, Heather tried to keep her feelings in check. "I see. Well, that's fairly *harmless*. I take it you wanted... well... *more*?"

"We *both* did." Erica admitted. "But we... um... we *couldn't*."

Hearing the unspoken, the older woman stopped brushing. "I... I made you two feel *guilty* about your *feelings* for one another, *didn't I*?"

"It's not *just* that." she noted. "It was like we were *expected* to, so it wasn't just because it was what *we* wanted. We just *couldn't*. It didn't seem... *right*."

Resuming her useful distraction, Heather nodded in understanding as she worked a tangle out gently. "That makes *sense*, sweetie. You *know* how *I* feel about it. It's *dangerous*. That having been *said*, I don't want you two to feel that you need to deny your feelings for one another, so long as you abide by your *agreements*. No one can *know* about it, I won't help if it *does* get out, you must be *discreet*, and everyone has to *agree*."

"*About* that." Erica offered shyly. "Um... Francesca saw me come back to my room this morning. She *knows* and we haven't even *done* anything."

Stopping her brushing as she processed the information, Heather resumed after a moment. "Well, she didn't *seem* disturbed today and she didn't *say* anything, so she might not know as much as you *think*, but it would be best if you three call this whole thing off. If you can't keep it a secret a *day*, it's *inevitable* that it will get *out*, and you all agreed that no one would know."

Looking down sadly, Erica nodded as a tear fell. "You're *right*. I'll tell them."

Seeing her niece quietly crying and just giving in like a broken child, Heather nearly cried herself, from *guilt*. "No. I'm *sorry*, sweetheart. I... I let myself *use* the situation to push my *own* agenda. I never had the *right* to demand *anything* of you three. It was *wrong* of me to *try*. It *must* be your decision." Putting down the brush, Heather gently laid her hands on Erica's shoulders

reassuringly. "Ignore your old and inflexible *aunt*! You're all *adults*. You should do what *you* think is best." Kissing the girl on the top of her head, she started toward the door. "Goodnight, Erica. I *love* you."

"Love you *too*, Mamma." the girl echoed confusedly. "Goodnight."

Fifteen minutes later, Faith's door opened and closed, Erica locking it behind her just like the night before. "Hi." she said timidly.

Faith smiled at her weakly from her side of the bed nearest the door. "Hi. I... I thought that maybe you might not *come* tonight."

Approaching slowly, Erica nodded. "I... I almost *didn't*. I... I need to *tell* you something." Sitting at the vanity, Erica looked away as she continued. "Francesca *knows*." she said simply.

"Oh *God!*" Faith gasped. "*How?*"

"She... she caught me going into my room this morning. I told Mamma about it when she came to say goodnight. At *first*, she said that we had to call it all off, and *then* said we should do whatever *we* want. She released us from our promises. She said she didn't have the *right* to make us promise *anything*."

"Do... do *you* want to call it off?" Faith asked nervously.

"No." she answered with a shrug. "Do *you*?"

Faith shook her head slowly. "What about *April*? What did *she* say?"

Smirking, Erica looked away again bashfully. "What you'd *expect* from her! '*Not a chance!*' I think *she* likes the idea more than *we do!*'"

Giggling together, Faith nodded toward the far side of the bed. "Coming?"

Taking her phone out of her robe pocket, Erica put it on the nightstand next to her side of the bed before disrobing and climbing in. "No more *chances*!"

Snuggling up against one another, the two settled into a comfortable position before resuming their conversation.

"*Erica?*" Faith began, her hand nestled once more between the girl's breasts. "Do you think we'll *ever*..." Her voice trailed off, knowing that her cousin already knew the rest of her question unasked.

With a sigh and a shrug, Erica took a moment to answer. "I... I don't *know*, Faith. We *can*... if you *want* to. When I'm *here*, I'm *yours*... *always*."

Smiling, the older teen sighed contentedly as her naked body pressed more firmly against Erica's. "Just knowing *that* is *almost* enough to make me not even *need* it. *Almost!*" she giggled.

Giggling with her, Erica felt Faith's hand begin to wander. "*Almost!*"

The next two days were much more relaxed. Each night, Erica would go to Faith's room, returning to her own just before six. When Sunday morning came, Erica woke before her alarm as usual and turned it off.

"*Faith?*" she tried to rouse the girl. "Faith, it's *time*."

"*No!*" she grumbled as she pulled Erica in tighter. "Just a few more *minutes*?"

Prying Faith's arms from around her, Erica sighed sadly. "Sorry, love. I *have* to get back to *my* room before anyone gets up."

Groaning, Faith struggled weakly before giving up. "I *know*. It's just that Christmas is almost four weeks *away*! I'm *spoiled* by you, now! I don't *want* you to go!"

Slipping out of bed, Erica picked up her robe and slipped into it. "I know, but we'll be staying through *New Years*, so we'll get ten *days* together!"

Smiling wickedly, Faith reached out and took Erica's hand, pulling her back close again to wrap her arms around the girl's waist. "I'm looking forward to the ten *nights* together!"

Loving the feel of Faith so close, Erica sighed happily. "Mmm! Only *eight* nights though, love. *Remember? April* gets me on Christmas Eve and New Years Eve."

Pouting, Faith released her. "Not *fair!* She gets you all the *rest* of the time!"

"I *promised* her that our first Christmas and New Year would be *ours*, love. You *agreed!*"

"I wanna take it *back!*" she smirked.

"Sorry, love." Erica sighed. "See you at *breakfast!*" Leaning down, she kissed Faith lovingly and tenderly, letting it linger a moment before pulling away and heading toward the door.

Groaning, Faith flopped onto her bed. "Oh... I'm gonna *miss* that almost as much as you being *next* to me all night!"

Smiling from the door, Erica waited until Faith turned to face her. "I *love* you." she intoned seriously. "Remember, right *now*, I'm *yours... always.*"

"Mine *always.*" she sighed wantonly. "I love you, *too!*"

Erica slipped into her own bedroom, seeing April splayed out across the bed and giggling at the sight. Quietly, she made her way into the bathroom, showered, and was out just as April started rousing. "Good *morning*, dear!" she sang.

"That's *debatable*." April growled. "It's *freezing* in here!"

"Go get in the *shower*." Erica offered. "Water's *warm* for you!"

Smiling weakly, the older girl stumbled toward the bath. "Thanks." Stopping as she passed Erica, she wrapped her arms around the girl's waist, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Have a *good* night?"

Shrugging, Erica smiled. "A lady doesn't kiss and *tell*!"

"Uh-huh!" April smiled back. "I'll want *details* later! No *secrets*, right?" Letting the girl go, she swatted Erica gently on the rear as she headed for the warmth of the bathroom.

After breakfast, the ladies sat in the living room chatting while Francesca re-packed Erica and April's bags. When Erica's car showed up at a quarter to three, they moved to the entryway to say their good-byes.

Holding Erica tightly, Heather sighed in both happiness and sadness; happy to have had the time together, but sad to see it end and lose her niece again for four weeks. "I miss you *already*, sweetheart!"

"Me *too*, Mamma!" she nearly cried. "Four weeks isn't *that* long though, and we'll be here from the twenty-third until the second, so we'll have *lots* of time together!"

"Take care of *April*, sweetie!" she lightly lectured. "To paraphrase something that your father used to say, '*That girl still needs you!*'"

While Heather and Erica said goodbye, Faith and April did as well. With a brief embrace, the two smiled at one another.

"Have a good *weekend*?" April probed quietly.

Nodding with a smile, Faith looked down shyly. "Very! Thank you!"

April shrugged. "I'm just *happy* for you two, *whatever* you did."

Blushing, Faith stepped back. "Looking forward to seeing you two over Christmas!" she said in a normal tone.

"Me *too*." April nodded. Switching places as Fredrick and Eddie loaded the bags into Erica's car, April hugged Heather fiercely. "Thanks for *having* us, Heather!"

Returning the hug, she was slightly taken aback by the girl's affection, a change from the previous visit. "You two are *always* welcome at Hargrave House, April! *Anytime!*" Breaking off the hug, she regarded the young woman that she'd come to hold dear. "You'll take *care* of her, *won't* you?"

"Always *have* and always *will*, Heather!" she promised.

Holding Erica as though her life depended on it, Faith didn't want to let go. "Four *weeks*. I can last four weeks." she whispered in her cousin's ear.

"You *better*!" Erica whispered back. "Because *I* still need *you*!"

"*Mine!*" Faith nearly cried, kissing Erica's cheek tenderly.

"*Yours always.*" she answered back.

Chapter 26 - All Good Things

Typing furiously at her keyboard, tears poured down Erica's cheeks. The words she wrote were bittersweet, speaking of the love they could have had and the future denied by a single choice. The choice of one of them to give up on their love. They had overcome seemingly *insurmountable* odds. Torn apart so young, just as their love had begun to blossom, that they then found their way back to one another after so many years of pain apart was nothing short of a miracle.

She wrote of their stormy reunion, the words of anger back and forth, and then the faint glimmer of hope. Finally they'd kissed. Not much in itself, but the kisses after were so full of fire and passion that it threatened to consume them both. They'd wanted each other and admitted it, but it was doomed from the start. The things they wanted out of life just wouldn't mesh with the reality of one another. She'd been willing to give up *everything* and *everyone* for the girl she'd known her whole life, but it wasn't *enough*.

Standing at the doorway, a bag over her shoulder and a suitcase in her other hand, April's heart ached at the sight. "Erica? I..." She could see the tears flowing down the writer's face, landing in drops on her desk. She knew better than to try and say anything now, but she did anyway. "I... I'm going to take these down to my car. All *packed*." Erica didn't even seem to hear her. April turned and left, wishing there was some way to ease Erica's pain, but knew it would be futile. She would just have to work it out for herself.

Erica was only vaguely aware of April's departure. All there was in the world right then was her writing, and into this she buried herself. She continued to type away furiously, wiping tears from her cheeks as she went. Finally, she had said all there was to be said. She was done and it was done. There was nothing left but to hit send and move on.

A few minutes after she'd sent it, while Erica was wiping the tears away, her cell phone rang. The caller ID told her it was her aunt Heather. Grabbing a

tissue, she blew her nose and tried to finish drying her eyes, answering the call as she did so.

"*Hi, Mamma!*" she said, barely able to hide the sound of her recent tears.

Heather knew her too well. "*Sweetheart?* Have you been *crying*? I got a message, well *Franchesca* got it on her computer. What's the *problem*? What's *wrong*?"

Suddenly April came back in, slamming the door behind her. "*Erica!*" she screamed, enough to make the weeping woman jump.

"*Jaysus!*" Erica exclaimed. "Hold *on* a second, *Mamma! April! What?*"

Her first love was fuming. "*Erica!* We're going to be *late!* It takes *four hours* to drive up to Mom's house! Your cousin will be there before *we* are if we don't leave *now!* You can finish that story of yours *later!* You only have *one* cousin and she only has *one* twenty-first *birthday!* I sent a message to your mom that we were *leaving* and you're making a *liar* out of me!"

Remembering that her aunt was on the phone, she put it back up to her ear. "*Mamma?* Sorry, *April* is champing at the bit to get us *out* of here. We're leaving right *now!* *Love* you!"

"Tell April to drive *carefully*, sweetie!" Heather sighed in exasperation. "I'd rather you be *late* than *hurt... or worse!*"

Erica stood and grabbed her purse. "*Mamma* says not to *rush.*" She walked quickly up to April and kissed her. "*Thank* you for being *patient* with me!"

Grabbing Erica's phone out of her hand, April headed out the door. "*Hello, Mom?* We're just leaving *now*. I... I *promise*, Mom! We'll be *fine!* I can get us there on time and... *Mom!* I'm an *excellent* driver!" She shifted the heavy bundle in her hands again. Fast walking toward the car, she continued to

listen to Heather as Erica took the things from her hands and put them in the back seat for her. "Yes, Mom! I... I know other drivers get crazy this time of year. What?... Oh Mom, she's *fine!* I swear! She was just *writing!* Look, I'm getting in the car right *now*. Here's *Erica* again." Shoving the phone back into Erica's hand, she ordered, "You talk to her!"

Heather listened as the daughter of her heart took the phone. "*Erica!* You tell that girl she needs to drive *carefully!* *Precious cargo!*"

"*I will,* Mamma." Erica replied as she sat in the passenger seat and looked in the back seat to check that everything was there and settled. "Good to go, love." Turning back to talk to her aunt, she sighed. "*Mamma, don't worry!* You know *April!* She wouldn't take *any* chances! She knows you'd *kill* her! *OK, Mamma, I'm hanging up* now so I can navigate for April. *Love* you! Call you when we're *close!* *Bye!*"

Disconnecting the call, she took a cleansing breath, closed her eyes, and slowly let it out.

While April headed for the freeway, she smiled at her wife. "Get it all out of your *system, honey?*"

"I'm *sorry* I made us run late, love. I was just *so close* to finishing..."

April finished for her. "Yeah, yeah... *so close* you just *had* to finish it right *now!* You have a *tablet!* You could have done the last of the work in the *car* and *then* sent it to editing!"

Erica shook her head. "I *can't* write in the car! I get *carsick!* You *know* that, love! Besides, I have *other* duties." She placed her hand on April's knee.

"Know what *Mom* would say if she saw you doing *that* while I'm *driving?*"

"Mmm, *hmm!*" Erica smiled. "But Mamma's not *here!*"

"Hands on *your* side, honey. I think they're needed *elsewhere*."

As if on cue, a cry arose from the back seat. "Sounds like she's *hungry* again." Erica noted.

"She's *always* hungry! I swear that kid can drink half my *body* weight every day!" April suddenly felt a familiar feeling. "Better give her the bottle *quick* or I'm gonna *ruin* my blouse!"

Erica rummaged through the diaper bag until she found the bottle of breast milk. Leaning over the back of her seat, she handed the screaming child what she wanted. "It's *a'right*." Erica soothed. "*There ya go, babaí. Tá Mamaí anseo.*"

The baby girl settled down with her bottle and the sound of Erica's brogue, April waiting until she was turned back around. "You keep *talking* to her like that and everyone will think the *Dempseys* have a new daughter! You're going to *ruin* her speech patterns!"

"*Hush* now!" Erica chided. "An' what air *wrong* wi' a bit o' th' Irish tongue, A *rúnsearc*?"

Trying to be mad, April just couldn't stay that way when Erica was being so sweet. "You... are *beautiful!*" she replied.

Shaking her head, Erica looked out the window. "Matter of opinion." After a few moments, she turned to April. "Thank you, *again*."

"For *what*?"

"For putting up with my crazy *hobby*."

"I *love* you... *all* of you." she admitted. "Besides, that 'crazy *hobby*' puts *meat* on the table and a *roof* over our heads. Though sometimes I wish you could

learn to settle back and let the *other* writers keep things going. You have *enough* of them now that you don't *have* to write anymore."

"See, that's where you're *wrong* dear." Erica shook her head. "I didn't create Reflection Publishing just to publish *stories*, I created it to publish *my* stories. The rest is just *bonus*. I write because I *have* to."

"But you get so *emotional* over them!" April whined. "Like this *last* one, you were *pouring* tears as you finished it! I thought I was going to have to take you to the *hospital* for severe *dehydration*!"

"I'm not *that* bad!" she looked away. "Besides, *this* hit really close to home."

"*How* close?" April asked, stealing a glance at her wife.

"*Too* close." Erica wiped a tear from her eye just thinking about it.

"Well... I hope you're taking a good long *break* this time. Having you hole up in your office for two weeks is *murder* on my *sex* life!"

Not listening, Erica turned back to look at her. "*What*, dear?"

"Never *mind*, honey. You still upset about your *story*?"

Sighing, Erica looked back out the window again. "Yeah. I hope it does some good for *somebody*."

"I'm sure it *will*, honey. It nearly always *does*."

Hours later as they got close to her mother's house, Erica called. "*Mamma?* We're about ten minutes out. Wanted to call before we lose service."

Heather breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank *goodness*! I'm glad you *called*, sweetie. I get so *worried* with you, April, and the *baby* on the road." Looking

down at her watch, she scowled. "You made *really* good time. *Too* good! I wasn't *expecting* you for another twenty *minutes*! When April gets here I'm going to..."

"...tell her you *love* her, *missed* her, and are glad to *see* her. *Right*, Mamma?" Erica interrupted.

"*Yes*, sweetie." Taking a deep breath, she let it go. "I'll just be glad when you're all three *here* and safe at *home*! *Oh*... wait a minute... Alright. *Sweetie*? Franchesca just got a message from *Faith*. She's about ten minutes *behind* you."

"Faith is ten minutes behind us." she echoed to April.

"I'll stretch that to twelve before we get there." April replied, pressing the gas a little harder.

"Love, ten minutes is *more* than enough! Back *off* please? For the *baby*?"

"Alright, *fine*! We wouldn't *be* in this mess if..."

"...I could get out of the *house* on time. Yes... *I know*, love."

Heather listened to their exchange over the phone as it started to break up.
"*Sweetie*? I think I'm *losing* you!"

Erica looked at her phone before putting it in her purse. "No signal."

Driving quietly for a minute, April realized something. "Hey, *honey*? How did *Mom* know Faith is ten minutes behind us?"

"She sent Franchesca a message."

"Well... how can she *do* that if she's *driving*?"

Erica paused a moment, considering the options. "Maybe she took a *cab*. It's been known to *happen*. We *Hargraves* are *used* to being driven around by our *chauffeurs*! The only reason *Eddie* isn't driving *us* is because this Sunday is Easter and he asked for the week off to be with his family in Philly... so you'll just have to *do!*"

"I am *not* your bloody *chauffeur*!" April shouted and laughed at the same time. "You just drive like my dead *grandma*! If *you* drove us instead of *Eddie*, we wouldn't be there until next *week*!"

Several minutes later they pulled up the driveway and stopped in front of the garage, Fredrick there waiting to open it as they pulled up. "Looks like Mamma wants us to park inside so Faith doesn't get *suspicious*."

"She was *born* suspicious!" April quipped.

"No, she was born *stubborn*, she *learned* suspicious from *me*!"

Pulling into the garage, April shut off the engine. "Can you get the baby and her things, honey? I'll get the rest."

Opening the rear passenger door, Erica saw their angel sleeping peacefully, an empty bottle crooked in her arm as though she was carrying it. Sighing with contentment, she lifted the entire car seat out and opened the handle, carrying it in along with the diaper bag and a small suitcase.

Coming through the front door, she paused a moment and smiled at all the people she knew who were there waiting for Faith. "Hi, everyone! Faith's just a few minutes behind us, so get *ready*!"

Mike walked up and took the diaper bag from her. "Here, let an *expert* git that, ya' ol' *bean phósta*!" Looking down at Erica and April's sleeping baby, he grinned before shaking his head in disbelief. "She shurin' takes after ya' both! Ah don't know how ye *managed* it *deirfiúr*, but Ah think she's *grand*!"

Smiling secretively, the twenty-year-old knew that Mike and the others had never known her as anything but Erica, and she had no intention of changing their perceptions. Unable to resist, she answered, "Careful selection at the sperm bank!"

"Ach!" Mike shuddered. "I dinna need ta be knowin' *tha'* much, *eejit!*"

Coming in with Fredrick, April was carrying their bags and presents for Faith. "Think you could stop *gabbing* and lend a *hand*, honey?"

She blushed and took one of the bags from April, carting them off to the library for the moment. When they finally joined the rest of the well-wishers, taking their newborn back from Mike so he could go back to his own child, Erica got a moment to take in the decorations. She smiled at the sign that read, 'Happy Birthday Faith!' and the one that hung under it saying, 'Happy Graduation!'

Noticing the signs as well, April tapped Erica on the shoulder. "*Honey?* I thought Faith got her Nursing Degree *last* semester?"

"She *did*, but she hasn't been *home* since then. Remember Thanksgiving and Christmas? Something about her being too *busy*. *Nurses*, you know."

Just then, they all heard a car pull up out front, making everyone get quiet. Sitting in the silence waiting, Erica looked at April and kissed her quickly. "I figured I should do that *now*. Faith might not give me a *chance* later!"

Faith stepped out of the car and went around to the trunk, waiting for it to be opened before pulling the suitcases out. Looking at her mother's house, she breathed a sigh of relief. "*Home!*" she sighed happily, if nervously.

Walking up to the door, she wasn't surprised when Fredrick opened it for her with his monotone, "Welcome home, Miss Faith." in the same even voice she'd been hearing her entire life.

"Thanks, Freddie!" she said as she walked in the door. "This..."

"Surprise!" everyone shouted. The cacophony of "Happy Birthday!"'s mixed with "Happy Graduation!"'s created a kind of bedlam that Faith could hardly understand any of the shouts. She stood in shock as a sea of family, friends, and loved ones smiled back at her gaping mouth.

Her mother was the first to reach her. "Happy *Birthday*, dear!" she said, hugging her tightly. "Were you *surprised*?"

Half-grinning, a quirk she'd picked up from Erica that she in turn inherited from her father Jack, Faith nodded. "You could say that, Mamma!"

Standing behind her aunt, Erica waited for Faith to see her, which took all of a single heartbeat. Suddenly the room seemed almost silent, Erica's heart beating as fast and hard as if she'd just run a marathon. April having taken the baby, Erica stepped forward and held Faith tightly. "Happy *Birthday*, love." she whispered in her ear. "I missed you *so much*!"

Near to tears at the sight of Erica, Faith held her desperately. It had been nearly nine months since they'd last seen each other over the Labor Day weekend. Since then, she'd not been able to get away to see Erica for several reasons; first on Thanksgiving with studying for finals, then with her new nursing job over Christmas. Now finally here, she was in Erica's arms and she had to hold back her desire in front of so many people.

She finally managed to squeak out, "Congratulations to you *too... Mom!*" When they'd last seen each other, April had just found out she was pregnant, and the two cousins had celebrated the news in their own private way.

Smiling, Erica corrected her slightly. "Uh-uh. *April* is *Mom*, I'm *Mamaí*!"

They held their embrace for just a moment longer than appropriate, finally separating so Faith could greet all her other guests. She immediately spotted

Brooke and Jenny, Michael and Emma, Mike and *his* wife Marylyn, Greg and Betty, and a dozen others who she couldn't make out through the crowd. Turning to Erica, Faith took both her hands in her own. "Erica, I... I have something to *tell* you and it can't wait."

Even as she spoke, Erica looked over Faith's shoulder to see the timid girl still standing in the doorway. She was short, but trim and athletic looking. Her long dark hair seemed so black it took on an almost blue hue, her skin tan, but not dark, and her eyes seeming to be the darkest shade of brown Erica had ever seen. Looking back at Faith, she could see in her ever-vibrant blue eyes just who this young lady was to her love.

A lump rose in her throat at the thought that their relationship was now complicated by a fourth party; one who Erica didn't know and would likely spell the end of their time together. *She found someone!* Before that moment, Erica *thought* she knew what bittersweet meant, until she looked into Faith's elated and sad eyes reflecting the feeling of joy and sorrow in both of their hearts.

Taking Erica by the hand, Faith led her to the doorway as the crowd stopped shouting and cheering. "*Erica?* I'd like you to meet Cassey Walters. *Cassey?* This is my cousin, *Erica!*"

Cassey was more than nervous. She and Faith had been dating for six months and she'd gotten the idea that Erica was more than just a cousin to Faith. She seemed to be the girl's entire *world* until the two had met. It was always 'Erica says this' or 'Erica's done that', which started to make Cassey believe that Erica couldn't be a real person, or if she was she was some sort of angel descended from heaven.

Making her way over to the three standing in her open doorway, Heather stood next to Erica as Faith continued introductions. "And this is my *mother*, Heather Hargrave. *Mamma?* I'd like you to meet *Cassey!*"

Looking the young girl over, Heather guessed her to be younger than Faith, possibly only eighteen. Glancing at Faith, she saw a light in her daughter's eyes and smiled. Approaching Cassey to give her a warm welcome, she was shocked at the fear in Cassey's eyes, as though Heather were about to beat her with a yardstick. Gently extending her hand graciously, Heather waited for the girl to take it. "Welcome to Hargrave House, Cassey. Won't you come *in*?"

Over the next hour, Erica showed everyone but Faith and Cassey her and April's baby, the opportunity to introduce her cousin to her daughter never materializing. Frustrated and upset, she decided to take a short walk outside to clear her head. Walking around her 'mother's' front yard, she looked up at the stars with her hands shivering in her coat pockets.

The night was cold and completely clear. The first day of spring had come and gone nearly a month ago, but Coös County wouldn't know it for a few more weeks. While she gazed up at the crystal clear night sky, she heard the front door open and then close quickly. Turning, she saw Faith coming down the marble steps, walking slowly toward her with the sound of frosty gravel crunching beneath her feet. Turning back to look up at the stars, Erica shivered against the cold, as well as the empty feeling in her heart.

Cautiously, Faith walked up to the cousin who had become her sister in all but fact, and her love before that. Seeing no response, she just stood with her, staring into the night sky as Erica was doing, the frost tickling her nose. After a moment, Faith broke the silence.

"Sure is *cold* out tonight."

When Erica didn't respond, Faith looked down and sighed. "*Erica? Please talk to me.*"

Erica sighed, mirroring Faith. "I've been *trying* for an *hour*. I never even got to say *congratulations*... for *Cassey*, I mean." Erica looked at her and

tried her best to smile genuinely. "Does she make you *happy*?" Seeing Faith simply nod in reply, Erica did the same in return. "Well, then I can only wish all the *best* for you two. I... I truly *mean* that, Faith."

"*Walk* with me?"

The two started walking idly, looking at the yard, the stars, and everything except each other. Erica smiled as she saw the side yard where they'd made snow angels and their freakishly comical snowman so long ago. Laughing, she reminisced about it with Faith.

"*I swear!* I thought you were going to *explode* when you saw snow for the first time!" Faith laughed along with her.

"And that *snowman!* *God!* It was so *pathetic* looking!" Erica added.

Making their way through the side yard, their laughter slowed and Erica reached out a hand to Faith. Taking it, Faith walked hand in hand with her first love. "The baby looks *adorable!*" she commented. "She has your *eyes!*"

Erica stopped. "You saw the *baby*?"

"*April* showed her to me!" she nodded with a smile. "She's *beautiful!*"

"*Oh.*" Erica started walking again.

"I'm *sorry*, Erica! You probably wanted to be the one to introduce me to my niece, *didn't* you?"

Nodding, Erica breathed out and watched her breath form a momentary cloud ahead of them. "It's *alright*. Today is *your* day. I just... I wanted... oh *God*, sometimes it's *impossible* to *think* around you! You have that *effect* on me!"

Giggling, Faith wrapped her arm around Erica's. "I know the *feeling*!"

Reaching the wooden bench in the corner of the yard, they sat and huddled together. "Look at us!" Erica mused. "House full of happy *guests*, happy about your *birthday*, happy about your *graduation*, April's *baby*, warmth and love *everywhere*, and where are we? Outside freezing in the *cold*!"

Looking at Erica warmly, Faith smiled contentedly. "Funny. It doesn't *seem* so cold when I look at you."

They sat back and held each other, looking at the stars. "I... I..." Erica sighed heavily in exasperation. "I was a little upset that you *met* someone and I didn't find *out* for so *long*."

Nodding, Faith clung to Erica tighter. "I *know*. I'm *sorry*. I... I just... I didn't know *what* to tell you at first, then I was too *busy* to tell you, then it was too *late* to tell you."

"It's *alright*, Faith. I understand. I really *am* happy for you! You *deserve* to be loved. May I *ask* something? Why does she seem so... *timid*? She acts like we're going to gang up on her at any minute and beat the *tar* out of her!"

Faith didn't answer right away. They sat in silence before she finally spoke.

"Cassey is... well, she comes from Florida. She came *here* to live with her uncle after her parents were killed in a car accident. She was *in* the car, but she survived with only minor injuries. Her uncle *wasn't* like Mamma was to *you*, though. He *hated* her... *resented* having her around. He... he *did* things to her, Erica. *Bad* things. *Evil* things."

"Oh *God*, Faith!"

"Yeah... I *know*. When we *met*, she'd *just* left home, a little like the way *April* did. She was taking night classes at the college and cleaning campus floors

during the day. That's how *I* met her. She and I would talk occasionally, but she always ran off with some excuse when it got to asking about her. It *took* a while, but *eventually* I got her to open up."

"After a *while*, as we started to get *closer*, before I even *knew* it, I... I was falling in *love* with her." She looked away and laughed. "Was *I* relieved when *she* told me that *she* was, *too*!"

"You mean *she* was falling in love with herself, *too*?" Erica quipped.

Faith pushed against Erica's shoulder, laughing. "You *know* what I mean!"

Laughing along with Faith a moment, when at last their laughter died, Erica reached out and turned Faith to face her. "I still *love* you, Faith. I don't think that will *ever* change, but I know that this... *changes* things... between *us*."

Reaching out her cold hand, Faith ran her fingers across Erica's soft cheek. "I... I still love you *too*, Erica... and I don't think *that* will ever change *either*. I just... I don't want us to lose what *we* have with each other! So I'm afraid to *tell* her about us. About our... *relationship*. I'm afraid... afraid she'll..."

"Afraid she'll *leave* you?"

She shook her head sadly. "When you came *back*, I learned how to let you *go*, but you keep coming *back* to me! I'll *always* love you for that. I... I *need* it, maybe more than you *know*."

"*But*?"

"But that's not what I'm *afraid* of! I... I'm afraid that I'll lose *you*! I don't know what to *do*. I... I don't think I could *stand* to lose her... but... I don't want to lose you, *either*... and if I had to *choose*... I... I just *couldn't*!"

Erica held her hand, warming it with her own. "Well, you're going to have to tell her something *eventually*, right? Or were you planning on keeping this big of a secret from the woman you love for the rest of your lives?"

"One of the *women* I love, Erica."

"*You* know what *I* mean."

Faith took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "How... how did you tell *April*? About *us*, I mean."

"It wasn't *easy*." Erica explained. "I was telling her about my life at Hargrave House and... well... it just sort of came *out*. I told her about the day I left for school... and... um... the night *before*."

Swallowing hard, Faith asked, "How did she *take* it?"

"Not *well*." Erica answered. "At *first* she thought we were *pervs*, then she thought maybe just *you* were! It was why she went back to Arizona, but we kept talking. She kept *asking* about you, and I think eventually she realized that the heart wants what the heart wants and you just can't *change* it. That if after five years apart I was *still* in love with you, it probably was *never* going to go away and wasn't just physical attraction."

"In the end," Erica continued, "she accepted that you and I love each other and convinced me I *had* to come back, to find out what I *really* wanted."

"What if Cassey doesn't understand?"

"That's not really *up* to you, *is* it Faith? Unless you want to *lie* to your partner for the rest of your lives, she's *going* to either have to accept that there's a part of your heart that belongs to me, or move on to someone that *suits* her. Either *that* or *you're* going to have to choose. I... I don't *envy* you that. I know *I* never *had* to, but I got *lucky*. You and April never *made* me choose."

Shivering against the cold, Faith knew Erica was right.

"Come on. Let's go in the kitchen." Erica suggested. "I'll make you a warm cup of tea, and then you can figure out what you want to do."

Slowly, the two walked back to the house. "I *love* talking to you, Erica! You make *everything* make sense."

"*Writer's* gift. Everything's a *story* to me. *My* life, *your* life, all full of plots, subplots, foreshadowing, allusion, and subtext."

Sighing sadly as they approached the laundry room door that led to the kitchen, Faith's teeth chattered. "I miss *Cook*."

"Me *too*." Erica repressed a tear. "It must have been *murder* trying to find someone to *replace* her. I'm *sorry* I wasn't *here* for that part, that I couldn't *be* there for you and Mamma to *help*. The funeral was just... just too *hard*."

"We *understood*, love." Faith comforted. "She... she was the reason you got to stay who you *are*. She stood *up* for you, even against *Mamma*."

Erica wiped away a cold tear. "I just wish she could have lived to see the *baby*. She was *so* looking forward to it after April and I got married."

Suddenly, Faith stopped and gasped just outside the door. "The *baby*! I... April never told me her *name*! Or if she *did*, I *missed* it!"

Opening the door for her cousin, Erica laughed. "You couldn't have *missed* it Faith. Her name's *Hope*. Hope Theresa Dunning!"

Blushing, she smiled. "That's *beautiful*, Erica!"

Entering the kitchen, the sound of the party just beyond the swinging door, Faith warmed her hands at the sink while Erica readied two cups of tea.

After a few minutes, they sat together at the kitchen table, just looking into each other's eyes, lovingly and wantonly, and sipping their tea while they warmed their hands on their cups.

Perking up, Faith exhaled her worries away. "So, any *books* coming out?"

Erica nodded and smiled. "A *special* one."

"*Oh?*" she asked curiously. "What's it *about*?"

Looking at her, she smiled and looked down at her cup. "It's a *love* story. About a girl who moves in with her distant relations, and falls *desperately* in love with her *cousin*. She risks *everything* to be with her."

Her eyes growing wide, Faith looked at Erica in shock. "Isn't that a little..."

"*Risky?*" she completed her thought. "Yes, but it *needs* to be told. It's *different* enough that no one could make the connection, but *same* enough that the story still gets *told*. April already gave *her* nod of approval, but I... I won't *publish* it if you say I *can't*. Of course, now I need to change the *ending*!"

Biting her lower lip, Faith looked away. "Why? How *did* it end?"

Reaching out, Erica took Faith's hand. "They *loved* happily ever after."

Looking back with a weak smile, Faith sighed. "I think they still *might*. One way or the *other*, her cousin just *can't* stop loving her *back*, even if it means losing... losing *everything*. I mean, they'll still *love* each other, even... even if they can't *be* together anymore." Looking toward the kitchen door, she then turned back to Erica. "I... I'm ready to tell Cassey. Would you *get* her for me?"

Standing slowly, Erica made her way around the table. Leaning down, she gently brushed her lips against Faith's. "For you, Faith? *Anything!*"

Heading back out into the party, Erica spotted Cassey standing next to her wife by the fireplace, April seeming to be almost standing guard over the young girl. Acknowledging a few congratulations, she made her way to the two. "Hey, love!" Erica said to April. "Having a good time?"

"Ha!" April nearly snorted. "Just keeping the *jackals* from scaring the *life* out of poor *Cassey*, here! This mob can be a little *overwhelming* at times!"

"Really, April!" Cassey insisted. "You don't *need* to concern yourself with *me*! You should go have a good time with *Erica*!" Turning to Faith's cousin, she managed to stammer out, "H-have you *seen* Faith, E-Erica?"

Nodding, she slipped an arm around April. "She's in the *kitchen*. She needed a break from the crowd, *too*. Just go right through the archway into the dining room, then through the swinging door on the right."

"Thanks!" Cassey looked relieved. "I... I think I'll *join* her! If... if you'll both *excuse* me?" Moving quickly, the girl not quite nineteen hurried out of the crowded living room as fast as possible.

"What's going *on*, honey?" April asked, half knowing already.

"Faith hasn't *told* her... about she and I, that is." Erica explained. "Faith's waiting in the kitchen to tell her." Erica's voice beginning to tremble, she lowered it to a near whisper. "Looks like you may be stuck with me *all* the time now! No more having to *share*!"

April shook her head and wrapped her arms around Erica's neck. "Don't be so *sure*! Cassey knows a lot more than Faith *thinks*. While *you* two were out shivering in the *cold*, Cassey told me quite a *lot*. I don't know if she's open to the idea or not, but it's not settled *yet*!"

Looking at April, Erica smiled. "Either way, I think it'll all work out the way it's *supposed* to. *He* knows *best*!"

About the Author

Roberta Elder is a first time novelist. Her first attempt at writing a novel-length story, *Lost Faith*, was an original story that came to her in a dream in 2010, while the companion story, *Every Day Is Your Last* grew naturally from the background information for *Lost Faith* as her second novel.

Mrs. Elder was born in the summer of 1973 in Carson City, Nevada to a loving family who named her after a Great Uncle who'd recently passed on. Along with her older sister, she started life in a large family of dozens of aunts, uncles, cousins, great aunts, and grandparents.

Meeting and marrying her first wife Tami in 1999, and meeting her second wife Rachel in 2006, she was finally able to transition from male to female in 2008 with the full support of both. All three were married together in a religious ceremony in 2016, and she does her best to maintain a healthy relationship with the two of them without showing favoritism or preference.

Showing an aptitude for math as a pre-teen, she's now a retired Statistical Data Analyst. Enjoying her early retirement, she currently spends her days with the complex calculus of household budgets, grocery shopping, young adult maintenance (raising two children), and the day-to-day cooking and cleaning of being a housewife, all on top of the writing she began in 2019.

Between being 'Wife and Mother', she finds time to spend with her mother, father, sister, brother-in-law, niece, nephews, and friends. In addition to writing, she enjoys old movies, black and white TV shows, dancing to 80's music, playing tabletop role-playing games and older computer games, target shooting, and discussing everything from theoretical physics to politics.

A staunch conservative libertarian, she most values her faith, family, friends, country, personal liberties, and her right to defend herself from oppression from those who would try to define or limit her based on who or what they think she is, who or what she should be, or what she should believe in.