

Operation Rescue: The New Co-Ed
By ElrodW

A young man gets in trouble and loses his scholarship. It looks like his dream of college to escape a poor future is doomed - until he sees an ad recruiting 'surrogates'. His life is about to change in ways that could redefine him in ways he could have never imagined.

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Chapter 1 - A Journey Begins With One Step

Tom Wilson sat silently, his gaze fixed on his books, pausing only to occasionally turn the page or scribble some notes in his open notebook. Outside, he could hear the sound of guys tossing a football in the quadrangle. The noise didn't seem to be any bother to him. Neither did the sound of the opening door interrupt his studies. Only when his roommate cleared his throat, did Tom look up. "What's up, Bill?"

Bill glanced at him and shook his head. Bill cut an impressive figure - moderately tall, with a solid muscular build and rugged looks. With his close-cropped hair, he looked like a serious athlete or weight lifter. He didn't seem to fit the dorm image, especially since he was a sophomore. "I should ask you the same. What are you doing studying on a day like this? We're not going to have many more days like this before it gets cold."

Tom sighed. "You know that I have to keep my grades up if I want to keep my scholarship." While not the stereotypical 98 pound weakling, at 5' 8" and 150 pounds, Tom did not present the buff college jock look of his roommate. A mop of unkempt brown hair didn't help his appearance. He was also a freshman.

Bill tilted his head back and laughed aloud. "Why are you even bothering? After Friday night, you're going to be kicked out anyway."

Tom frowned. "Maybe not."

Bill shook his head. "Naive little country boy. You were screwing the Dean's daughter! His daughter! Of course he's going to kick you out." He shook his head. "You know, I do wonder about her taste in men. Then again, I heard she likes the bookish type."

Tom chafed at the implication that he was a nerd, while simultaneously shuddering at the memories of being caught. He and Jillian were really going at it in the back seat of her car when they'd been caught. No doubt, the story had made it back to the Dean. "She started it," Tom protested weakly. "Besides, she's over 18, and I didn't know she was the Dean's daughter."

Bill laughed. "Like that's going to matter. Dude, you're dead meat. You'll be lucky if she doesn't press rape charges."

Tom paled. "She wouldn't, would she?"

Bill shook his head, roaring with laughter. "Nah! She didn't with the last two guys. Look, you didn't know, but she's a rather 'friendly' girl, and that pisses off the Dean. Since she's over 18, there's not a lot he can do, except to make your life a living hell until you drop out."

Tom gulped; the last thing he needed was to have trouble. At that moment, the phone rang. Tom stared at it for a moment, before glancing nervously at Bill.

Bill shrugged. "You'd better answer it."

"Hello," Tom answered meekly into the phone. "Speaking." He listened, his face turning pale as he did so. After a few seconds, he hung up.

"Well?" Bill's curiosity echoed in his simple question.

"That was my department chair," Tom answered, his voice shaking.

"On Sunday?"

"Yup."

"Bad news?"

Tom swallowed hard. "Yup. They took away my scholarship."

Bill whistled. "Wow. The Dean got to them pretty quick. Did they give an excuse? I mean, your grades are pretty good."

Tom shook his head, still in shock. "They said they found an irregularity in my scholarship application, and they had to end the scholarship to make sure there wasn't any fraud." Tom dropped his head into his hands. "Well, I guess that's it. After this semester, I can't afford to stay in school."

Bill frowned. "What about work-study, or a student loan?"

Tom sighed. "I guess I can try," he said weakly, not sounding in the least bit positive.

Tom slunk into the dorm room and flopped down on his bed. His heavy sigh let Bill know that he didn't have good news.

"Well?" Bill asked anyway.

Tom shook his head. "No joy."

"Bad?"

"Worse," Tom answered morosely. "I got rejected by the Financial Aid Office."

"What do you mean, rejected?" Bill frowned. "They don't reject anybody."

"Except when the Dean tells them to, apparently," Tom answered bitterly. "They somehow 'lost' my financial aid records, so there's no way to get aid. When I asked about re-applying, they told me that the deadline was past, and there wasn't any more money anyway." Tom sighed again. "The Dean got to them."

"So?" Bill tried to sound hopeful.

"So when this semester is over, I go back home." Tom sighed yet again. "I'm out of options."

Bill frowned, and turned back to his computer. A few keystrokes later, his printer buzzed and a paper spat out. He handed it to Tom.

"What's this?" Tom asked as he glanced at the paper. "What the hell is this? 'Pro-Life Adoption Facilitator' - what the hell is that?"

Bill shrugged. "I don't know. I just saw it when I was reading the campus daily e-paper this afternoon, and figured it might help you."

"Thanks." Tom sat up, staring at the paper. "Yeah, but.... Hey! This job pays pretty well. Very well. But they don't quite say what it's for."

Bill shrugged. "You find anything else for jobs?"

Tom sighed. "No. Maybe I should check into it." He paused as he read more. "Pro-life. Hmm, some of these groups are kind of pushy, aren't they? You suppose it's some bunch of paid protesters or something? That'd be all I need - more trouble."

Bill glanced over Tom's shoulder. "Nah. With the law these days, there's not a lot of protesting, and not much trouble a guy could get into."

Tom shook his head slowly. "I don't know. It sounds too good to be true, and I really can't afford any more trouble."

Bill glanced at his roommate. For some reason, he liked this kid, even though they were totally different. "How long ago did your dad die in the mine?" he asked softly.

Tom swallowed hard and closed his eyes, fighting back the sudden surge of tears. Bill had just played dirty with him - reminding him of what his future would be if he dropped out of college - a dangerous, dirty life as a hard-rock coal miner, until he died in the mine or of black

lung disease. He dropped his head. He knew that he was running out of options, and very quickly.

Tom felt out of place as he sat in the office, waiting for his interview. The phone interview had been rather curious - a lot of questions about his personal life and views on abortion. Then a very long on-line 'test' for compatibility with the job, followed by an extremely detailed physical exam that left him scratching his head. Now, as he sat in the office, he was left wondering exactly what the job was.

It seemed that he was the only male in the facility. There were three secretaries working behind their desks, and they were very pleasant to him - all smiles and happiness. Two of them were obviously pregnant, and Tom wondered about the third. He glanced at the magazines, and turned away again. Nothing at all for men - no hot-rod or sports magazines, just women's magazines about health and beauty and pregnancy. For some reason, this sent a shiver down Tom's spine.

As he watched, trying not to fidget, a door opened and a woman stepped out. The woman looked to be in her mid-30s, and was very definitely pregnant - like she was going to give birth any time. "Mr. Wilson?"

Tom practically leaped to his feet. "Yes, ma'am," he answered crisply.

The woman smiled, almost chuckling. "Hi, I'm Rachel McKnight. We don't go on formalities around here, so please call me Rachel. If you would follow me, please." She led him into her office, and gestured to a chair as she shut the door. Tom waited, looking straight ahead, as she eased herself into the chair behind her desk. In front of her, a folder was open. A thick folder. 'His folder?' he wondered, which caused him to swallow hard; this was very strange, almost conspiratorial.

"How much do you know about our operation?" she asked pleasantly. She seemed quite warm and friendly, and apart from being pregnant, was moderately attractive. Her clothing was stylish, unlike Tom's second-hand rumpled outfit, and she had her hair done neatly and professionally.

Tom shook his head. "I assume the job is some kind of clerical staff."

Rachel laughed. "Oh, no! Not quite."

Tom frowned, puzzled. "So what is an 'adoption facilitator'?"

Rachel smiled. "Women who do what I'm doing. Making it possible for babies that would otherwise be aborted to be delivered and adopted by a loving family." She saw the confused look on Tom's face. "What do you know about the Morris-Henderson process, and the Morris Foundation?"

Tom frowned at her seemingly confusing turn of the conversation. "Doesn't that have something to do with organ transplant? And the Foundation - I think it's a big pro-life charity."

Rachel nodded approvingly. "Very good. You're right on both counts." She glanced at the file. "Aren't you at all curious about the pre-interview test you took?"

Tom shrugged. "I figured it was standard."

Rachel laughed again. "Hardly. And the physical and psych evaluation didn't cause you any alarm?"

Tom frowned. This wasn't quite like he'd expected. "It did seem kind of strange. In a double-O-seven kind of way, I mean," he said sheepishly. "But I didn't figure it was my place to ask if I was applying for the job. I figured you had a good reason - like maybe screening out people who'd try to sabotage what you're doing."

Rachel smiled. "A little bit, but not completely. We had to make sure you were physically and psychologically compatible with the job requirements. Also, we had to make sure you had no chemical dependencies or serious medical issues."

Tom frowned again. "Ma'am, I just came here for a job interview. You make it sound like I'm applying to be a spy or something."

"Or something. Have you heard of the names Brian Morris or Charlie Henderson?"

Tom shook his head. "Nope. Remember, I'm just a simple country-boy from backwoods West Virginia."

Rachel glanced at the file. "No, you're not. You have a very strong aptitude in math, and you're a remarkable history buff. Maybe science wasn't your strongest point, but you still got very respectable grades."

Tom fidgeted in his chair, suddenly very uncomfortable. "Ma'am, this is making me nervous."

Rachel smiled again. "Sorry, but we have to be very sure of our candidates."

"And the job is..."

"To help a baby go from pre-born and unwanted to someone's living, loved child."

Tom frowned. "Huh? How?"

"By providing a home for the baby to grow to birth."

"But... pre-born is ... during pregnancy!"

Rachel smiled. "I thought science wasn't your strong suit."

"But ... how?"

Rachel's gaze narrowed as she focused on Tom. "Those few men who work for us are given the means to carry a baby to term."

Tom's eyes widened. "You mean, like turn me into a girl? So I can deliver a baby?"

Rachel bit her lower lip; this part was always tricky to explain. "Our mission is to save babies who would be aborted. To do that, our foundation helps have an unwanted baby transplanted from the mother who doesn't want it to a volunteer - employee - who will carry it to term so the baby can be adopted into a loving home."

"Yeah, I got that part," Tom interrupted impatiently. "And?"

"We strongly prefer women to volunteer. In fact, if we had enough women volunteers, we'd never do the more ... extreme ... procedure with men."

Tom's eyes narrowed a bit. "But..."

Rachel smiled sadly. "We've got pretty thorough statistics on how many babies we can save, and that lets us know how many volunteers we need. You see, it takes a month or two for a woman to be prepared - ready to carry a baby. The average for an abortion rescue is five and a half months of development. Then, after the baby is born, we have to wait at least two months before the volunteer would be ready to carry another child - if she so desired. It takes a while for her hormones to get back to normal after pregnancy, you see."

"I'm still waiting to see what that has to do with me."

"There just aren't enough women who want to help, who believe strongly enough that they'll ... put their wombs where their mouths are," Rachel explained, a tiny tinge of bitterness in her voice. "Even at the salary we pay."

Tom nodded slowly, not sure if he completely understood. "So you find guys who need money..."

"Oh, no!" Rachel countered quickly and vehemently. "This is more than just a job. We can't take just anyone."

"So you get suckers like me who need money and are compatible with your psych tests, is that it?" Tom sounded angry.

Rachel closed her eyes and sighed. She wondered, from time to time, about the accuracy of the psych tests - like now. "We try to carefully screen applicants, so we can find those who are open-minded, have a ... view of life that is amenable to this type of ... noble sacrifice." She was afraid that she'd lost him. She knew that her speech sounded a little too preachy.

Tom surprised her. "So what would be involved? For me, I mean? How does the process work?" he asked quietly, his voice even, even a bit inquisitive.

"We use your genetic material to build cloned organs. Female organs. It's not easy - we have to make your donor cells into XX instead of XY."

"How does that work?" Tom interrupted. "I don't know a lot about the process."

Rachel smiled. "Curious?"

Tom nodded. "Yeah, a bit."

"Well, I'll try to explain, but bear in mind that I'm no bioengineer, so this is going to be kind of high-level. When they tried to explain it to me, my head almost exploded," she added with a wink. "If you want a more technical description, we can get one of the doctors to explain it in as much detail as you want."

Tom's eyes widened, but he shook his head. "No, I'll be okay with a summary."

"The cell sample is genetically manipulated to make it female - two X chromosomes. It's also made 'young' again, a stem cell. While that's happening, other scientists create a scaffold, if you will - a porous framework of biologically compatible material. The cells are introduced to the scaffold, with some proprietary chemical treatment, and they attach and grow into the desired organ."

Tom frowned as he pondered the information. "But ... the organs need blood vessels and such."

Rachel nodded. "Ah, you see, you did learn something in science. The new organ develops just like it would if it were growing in a fetus, including vascularization. An artificial heart supplies blood to the new organ."

"So - you make my cells into blood cells too?"

"Yes. One big benefit of the process is that we can 'grow' an inexhaustible supply of blood. You did notice that the need for blood donors has really dropped, right? It's because we can supply blood from cell samples. It's a lot safer for recipients, too." Rachel seemed proud of the spinoff technology.

"Oh. That sounds ... complicated. And time consuming."

Rachel shrugged. "You'd be surprised how fast the organs grow, when we use the accelerated methods. Drs. Henderson and Morris are geniuses. In fact, they assembled probably the brightest and most innovative bioengineering team in the world, bar none. Every time they hit a roadblock, they invented new procedure or process around it. Once we have the organs grown, they are implanted. Even with the fast-healing processes and drugs that our founders developed, you'd be on complete bed-rest for a few weeks."

Tom frowned. "That could play hell with classes, studying, and tests."

Rachel nodded. "But your college allows tele-study. You're not the first student from there to volunteer, and we've had no problems helping arrange tele-study for them. After the bed-rest, we'd have to wait a few months to ensure that the ... female organs ..."

"_My_ female organs?" Tom interjected.

Rachel flinched. "Uh, yes," she answered carefully, watching to gauge his reaction. "We have to make sure they're working properly - that the hormone levels are correct for supporting pregnancy."

Tom nodded. "And afterwards? I mean, how long?"

"Average is four months between first surgery and implant, and then six months to delivery. After that, a month and a half to two months to stabilize post-partum, and then you'd be able to be ... restored."

"A year," Tom said softly, mostly to himself. He closed his eyes and tilted his head down; he drew a couple of slow deliberate breaths to focus his thoughts, and then he looked up again. "So you make me completely a girl? All the parts?"

Rachel tried to smile reassuringly. "Not completely, no. Just enough internal parts to host and deliver the baby and to keep the hormone balance for the pregnancy. That allows you to have a fetus transplanted to your womb, where it can grow until delivery. But otherwise, you're completely genetically male."

Tom's eyes widened as he considered her words. "What organs? I mean, what makes the hormones? And, um, delivery - that's a" He was clearly embarrassed.

Rachel smiled to herself. She knew what he was thinking. "It's a vagina, also known by a lot of slang terms." He was clearly thinking - like every male employee - about what having a vagina meant. Could he have sex as a woman? "The hormones come from ovaries. So you'd have essentially the core female reproductive system - ovaries, fallopian tubes, a uterus, and a vagina."

Tom gulped. "And ... um...." He was too embarrassed to say what he was thinking.

Rachel smiled at his embarrassment. "It can stay, if you like. Of course, there are some side-effects from the hormones that are necessary for pregnancy."

"Like..."

"Well," Rachel was a bit hesitant, "if you keep your male organs - which you can - there is a risk of sterility, and possibly impotence. Those types of problems would be corrected post-pregnancy, when you have the reverse operation. And whatever you choose, there will be development of secondary sexual characteristics with the hormones. It is a necessary part of pregnancy, since nursing is the natural way to feed a baby."

"I know that means breast development," Tom said, frowning. "So what you're saying is that you're going to chop off my thing, implant girl parts, make me grow boobs, and then make me pregnant? That's about what you're saying, isn't it?" He stood, shaking his head. "I think I've heard about enough." He turned to leave.

Rachel looked at him without emotion. "Why did you come here?"

Tom stopped mid-stride. "What?" he asked softly.

"Why did you come here?"

Tom sank back into his chair, his face drained of color. "You know why," he said softly.

Rachel tilted her head slightly. "No. Please tell me."

Tom closed his eyes a moment to compose himself. "I need the money. I lost my scholarship, and I'm going to be kicked out of school. If that happens, I don't have any options except to go back to West Virginia, where I came from, and work in the mine - like my dad."

"Where your dad died in the mine." Rachel added softly. She did know why he was so desperate to stay in school, her little lie to the contrary. The "Health Status of Parents" had been a section in the paperwork, and his motives hadn't been hidden from the very detailed psych profile.

Tom nodded, his head lowered so she wouldn't see the emotional strain as he fought the tears trying to leak from his eyes.

"Lots of guys do this," Rachel offered. "It's not hard work, and we take excellent care of our employees. We offer a very decent salary, all paid by the Morris Foundation. All health care is provided. We give you a clothing and food allowance. We have a private gym and spa, with doctors on staff. We have to keep our little mothers healthy, you know," she added with a wink.

"Are any of you, I mean, you and the staff ... you know? Like me?" Tom asked awkwardly.

Rachel smiled, but shook her head. "I'm not allowed to say. Privacy, you know. If anyone is a convert, then it's up to that person to tell - if they want to. But we do have a support group for men who volunteer, and you'd be welcome to visit to ask any questions you might have. In fact, we encourage our prospective male candidates to speak with a male volunteer - to get more comfortable with the whole process."

She pushed some information across the table to Tom. "Lots of men have done this. A surprisingly large number. Many male students from your university do this. Many leave their organs alone, but some change completely for the duration of the pregnancy, and then change back afterwards." She paused to let the words sink in. "We have to be careful choosing them. That's why we do the tests. Read this, and please think about it. Seriously. Then call back if you're still interested."

Rachel glanced at the calendar. "It's Thursday. Can you call back with an answer on Monday?"

Tom sat in his room, still feeling half-dazed. Though the information sheets were on the desk in front of him, he wasn't really seeing them.

"Are you okay?" Bill asked. "How did the interview go?"

Tom shook his head. "I'm not sure." He stared out the window for a moment. "You ever hear of the Morris-Henderson process?"

"Nope. So what's the job? Data entry or clerical or something like that?"

"Something like that," Tom lied.

"Are you going to go for it?"

Tom sighed. "Do I have any other options? I can't go back, not to the mines. And the economy isn't very good right now, so there aren't many other jobs."

He rose suddenly and strode from the room. He'd always found that the night air seemed to clear his mind, and right now, his mind needed clearing.

As Tom walked through the Student Center, he looked around, and noticed all the girls. Not like before, when he saw the cute ones and thought about them sexually, but now he noticed them as people, as fellow students. And they seemed so normal. Differently shaped, but just people, all studying, talking, doing normal things.

Tom wondered why he'd never seen them this way before. He wondered if it really made such a difference, and whether it was enough of a difference to keep him from the job.

As he walked back to the dorm, still lost in thought, he saw a couple coming toward him. The girl had her arms wrapped around one of the guy's arms, her head leaning against his shoulder. She was holding him tightly, lovingly. Tom felt an involuntary shudder. There was a difference. No matter how normal it seemed, the difference was there. He wondered if it was enough to really matter. Or if he could afford to dwell on the difference.

Tom sat nervously in the office. The three secretaries were working, and there were a handful of clients, all female, and he knew that all were occasionally glancing his way. He felt like he was on display.

The office door opened, and Rachel came out. Out of courtesy, he rose as she stepped toward him. "Have you decided?" she asked hesitantly.

Tom swallowed hard, glancing around the office at all the pregnant bellies. He looked back at Rachel. "Yes," he answered nervously. "I'll do it."

The secretary closest to him squealed with delight and jumped up to hug him. "Welcome to the family," she said warmly as she wrapped her arms as far around him as her pregnancy would allow. "I'm Suzie. You'll get to know us all, and we'll help you in any way we can."

Rachel waited for Suzie's enthusiastic welcome to end, and then she grasped Tom's hand. "You won't regret this. I promise that this will be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life." She led him to a different door than her office, a door to a small medical clinic.

Tom felt nervous as he looked around - there were several examining rooms and a lab; the nurses looked up as he came in, and smiled warmly. Several of them also all looked pregnant, like the girls in the outer office. "So now what? Alien ray machines and probes? Tissue samples?" Tom asked cautiously.

"Not quite," Rachel laughed as she led him into one of the exam rooms. Tom shuddered when he saw the stirrups on the table. He knew they were for gynecological exams, and they gave a hint as to the consequences of his decision. Rachel gestured for him to sit. A doctor came in right behind her.

"Tom, this is Doctor Martelli. She'll be examining you and answering any questions you might have." Rachel gave him a smile and ducked back out the door.

Tom tried to smile, and failed. Dr. Martelli was pregnant. He let his gaze dwell on her round belly long enough that she noticed.

"Yes, just about all of us around here are pregnant," she laughed in a soothing contralto voice.

Dr. Martelli appeared to be in her early thirties, with straight brown hair that just touched her shoulders. Her eyes sparkled with an almost infectious joy. Despite being pregnant, or perhaps because of it, Tom thought that she seemed quite sexy for a doctor, especially her voice. Rather, he would have, except he was quite nervous about what he'd just agreed to. "I see, ma'am," he answered cautiously.

The doctor laughed. "Didn't Rachel tell you that we're not very formal around here? It's like family, and family doesn't go by ma'am, or Ms. Rawlins. We operate on a first-name basis." She extended her hand. "I'm Tina."

Tom took her hand and weakly shook it. "I'm Tom." Then he felt foolish and blushed as he realized that she was carrying his folder. "Uh, you knew that, didn't you."

Tina laughed. "Nervous?"

Tom nodded. "Yup."

"Don't be. Now I'd like you to take off your clothes for a quick exam." She watched Tom's expression. "All of them." She reached under the table and handed him a folded gown. "If you just slip this on, I'll be back in a moment." She ducked out the door.

Tom swallowed hard; he'd never had a full physical by a female doctor, and the thought made him uneasy. That, and the prospect of soon being fitted with a womb. He changed into the gown, and found that it was a bit short and didn't close well in the back. He sat on the examining table and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. Dr. Martelli came right back in. "Okay, can you lie down please?"

"Yes, ma'am," Tom said as he tried to keep the gown across his private parts while lying down.

"Ah, ah, ah!" Dr. Martelli clucked at him. "First name basis, remember? Family?"

"Sorry," Tom said sheepishly. "Ma taught me to call all my elders ma'am and sir, and especially important people like doctors. Habit I guess."

Tina smiled; she already liked this polite young man. "Okay, how about if you call me Dr. Tina? Is that okay? Close enough to first name, but it might satisfy your need for some formality."

Tom swallowed hard, and nodded. "Okay," he answered. "ma'a....." He caught himself. "Dr. Tina."

"There. That wasn't so hard, was it?" She began to gently probe Tom's abdomen. "Okay, now I have to examine your genitals," she warned.

Tom blushed as he pulled the gown up and exposed himself to the doctor. He fought to keep his mind in control during her exam; getting aroused would just be too damned embarrassing. Finally, he felt her pull the gown back down.

"You can sit up," she said simply. As Tom sat up, Dr. Tina turned her attention to her computer. As Tom glanced over her shoulder, he realized that she was looking at the ultrasound image that had been done in his 'pre-screening physical'. "You're in very good shape physically. This should be an easy implant." She paused a bit. "We'll have to watch the hips; you probably aren't going to have a large birth canal."

"Do you like being pregnant?" Tom asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Dr. Tina turned, a little surprised by his question. "Yes," she answered quickly. "Yes, I do." She smiled. "Many women like the feeling of being pregnant, and of participating in new life." She got a wistful expression. "I can't explain it, but it feels ... like being part of creation."

"How about labor and delivery?"

"I'll be honest. Pregnancy is not a walk in the park. There are physical challenges, and the hormones make a woman a bit ... emotional at times. And labor can be difficult. In my case, it's wasn't easy, but I found it very rewarding. Most of our employees do." She shrugged. "Some women have it easier than others."

Tom thought for a moment. "So, um, when are you going to get the sample?"

"Sample?" Dr. Tina sounded confused.

"Yeah," Tom said. "Don't you have to take a genetic sample so you can, um, grow the ... um ... parts?"

Dr. Tina laughed. "We did that when we did the pre-screening bloodwork. Your parts are already being grown. In fact, they're almost ready for transplant." She winked. "And we call them a uterus, ovaries, and vagina."

Tom's eyes widened. "But ... you didn't know if I'd say yes," he protested. "Wasn't that kind of a gamble?"

Dr. Tina laughed again. "Maybe, but your psychological profile said it was highly probable that you'd accept. Besides," she added, "if you had said no, we could use the organs for transplant, but with the down-side of anti-rejection drugs." She gave him a quick wink. "You see, it wasn't much of a gamble at all."

The Dean scowled as he looked at the report. There was something going on, and he intended to find out what it was. He studied the report for a few more seconds, before he dropped the paper and snatched up the phone. His fingers raced over the number for the student health clinic, and he impatiently drummed his fingers until the other party answered.

"This is Dean Larson. I need to speak to the director." He waited impatiently. "Of course now! Why do you think I called in person?" He waited more, all the while growing more restless and angry. "Fred? Yeah, it's me. Say, I've got a kid who's been doing tele-study."

"Yes, I know it's standard. But not for kids living in the dorms!" He sighed as he waited for the response from the phone.

"His application said it was for medical reasons," the Dean answered impatiently.

"I know it's highly irregular," the Dean snapped in reply to whatever the health director had told him. "And since it's claimed to be for medical reasons, I called you. What do you know about it?"

"Thomas J. Wilson." His face reddened. "Yes, that Thomas Wilson!"

He shook his head, a gesture unseen by the party on the other end of the phone. "Find out what's going on."

"I don't know - make something up!" He clenched his jaw once or twice, trying to control his impatience and anger. "Like we need to make sure there's nothing that's a hazard to the rest of the dorm or something."

"I don't care!" the Dean snapped impatiently. "Make something up, and make it stick!"

The Dean's eyes widened at the question asked by the other party. "The doctor? Doctor T. Martelli."

"No? Then who the hell does this Doctor Martelli work for?" The Dean's mood was not improving by the conversation.

"Find out! I want to know what the hell's going on here!" He slammed down the phone, angrier than when he'd first dialed the clinic's number. He took a couple of deep breaths, sinking his face into his hands, his elbows propped on his desk. "God dammit, Jillian!" he cursed, shaking his head. "I promised your mother that I'd take good care of you. You're not making it easy for me, are you?"

Tom was sitting on his bed, propped up, and doing his homework, when Bill came in. "How are you doing?" Bill asked as he slung his backpack onto his bed.

Tom cracked a tiny smile. "Okay, I guess."

Bill frowned. "You guess? Emergency appendectomy, and you _guess_ you're okay?"

Tom shrugged. "I guess I'm a quick healer."

"Five days in the hospital isn't exactly quick healing," Bill observed. "And you just got released from three weeks mandatory bed-rest." He saw Tom's homework. "It's going to take you a while to catch up, you know."

Tom nodded. "I know. That's why I've got to keep at it."

"You're missing some good parties."

Tom nodded again. "Can't. Not until I'm completely healed." He couldn't tell Bill that he was now under contract, and that alcohol was now a forbidden substance. The same went with tobacco and all drugs that weren't prescribed by Dr. Tina or her associates. He knew that Bill wouldn't understand.

Inside him, the transplanted female parts were healing and growing. He had a couple of months to go for his new hormones to adjust, and then he'd have _another_ surgery to transplant the baby. There was no way Bill - or any of the guys on the floor, for that matter - would understand.

"Oh, by the way," Bill added as he sat down at his desk, "while you were napping earlier today, you got a call from Student Health."

Tom frowned. "What do they want?"

Bill shrugged. "I don't know. Probably a follow-up to make sure you're able to go back to classes." He frowned. "You look like you've lost some weight, too, and the quacks probably want to know why."

Tom shook his head. "Probably more harassment from the Dean." Inwardly, he shuddered. He had a very bad feeling that this wasn't going to turn out very well.

"Maybe, but you better get over there before they close."

Tom sighed. "Yeah, I guess." He levered himself to his feet, grabbed a jacket, and strode purposefully out the door. As soon as he was sure no-one could listen, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. "Hi." He paused while the other party answered. "Hi, Suzie. This is Tom Wilson. Is Rachel there?" He paused again. "I need to talk to her. Or Dr. Tina." Another pause. "No, there's nothing wrong, but the campus health services director ordered me to come in for a physical." He paused again. "Thanks. Please have her call me as soon as possible. I have a really bad feeling about this." He hung up the phone, let out a heavy sigh. He knew that he could only stall for so long; he was going to have to go to student health clinic. He just hoped that Rachel or Dr. Tina called back quickly.

Tom stood nervously in the Dean's office, with the student health director beside him. The Dean was looking at a folder, his eyes narrow and focused. "What the hell is this?" he demanded as he looked up at the health director, ignoring Tom.

The director also ignored Tom. "He has hermaphroditic genitalia," he said slowly.

"I can read that," the Dean roared. "What the hell does that mean?"

"He has both male and female genitals."

"What?" the Dean roared. He glared at Tom, before he looked at the report. "How the hell didn't you notice this before?" He was a shade of purple from his rage, a color that Tom had never seen in a person before.

The director shrugged. "We don't do a physical exam of every incoming freshman. It wasn't in his medical records, so we didn't know."

"How the hell did he get into the boys' dorm? Do you know what kind of ... monkey-business ... we could have going on there?"

Tom felt his courage rise - a tiny bit. "You can't discriminate against me," he said defensively. "It's the law."

"And we can't have a girl in the boys' dorm, either!" the Dean roared back. "_That_ I can legally do!"

"Then you could move me to the girls' dorm," Tom said.

The Dean turned a deeper shade of purple. "No!" he roared. "Not while you've got male parts, too! I can't put a hermaph... whatever in my dorms! Not if you have mixed parts!"

He glanced at the director. "You can go." He steamed and stewed, his eyes narrow slits and his breathing harsh and angry, while the director left.

When the door had clicked shut, he glared at Tom. "You may have found money for next semester's tuition somehow, but you can't live in my dorms. Not being a ... half freak! And without a waiver, a freshman can't live off campus!" His eyes narrowed to mere slits. "You might as well pack your bags, Mr. Wilson," he hissed. "You're through here!"

As he meekly retreated, Tom wondered if his mixed-sex state was what had tipped the Dean to irrationality. Maybe he thought his daughter was into kinky sex, like Tom apparently was now outfitted for. Whatever it was, Tom didn't want to stick around to find out any more.

As he walked slowly back toward his dorm, Tom realized, slowly, that his options had narrowed. He didn't have any choice; if he was going to fulfill his contract, he had to carry the baby. But his current mixed-sex state was now known to the administration, and they were going to use it to get him out of the dorms. The only way to stay in the dorms, and consequently stay in school, was to remove the excuse. Tom gulped as he realized that he had to fully commit to being a woman. His thing had to go. He would be completely, fully, one hundred percent female.

The thin sheet barely kept Tom warm as he lay on the gurney. Beneath that, his flimsy gown added little to his comfort. He wondered why hospitals and clinics always seemed to be so cold. Out of boredom, he scanned the hallway. This wasn't an average hospital. It was a private Morris Foundation hospital, and he guessed that most of the patients were 'employees' of the foundation - like he was. That meant that surgeries were either changing parts or transplanting babies. Changing sex as an assembly-line procedure. The thought didn't comfort him.

Suzie, the secretary from the pro-life office, stood beside the gurney, holding his hand. "It'll be okay," she said reassuringly.

Tom felt like crying. "I feel like I'm out of control," he said softly. "I feel like I'm trapped."

"Shhh," Suzie hushed. "It'll be okay. You're doing the right thing, in a lot of ways."

Tom shook his head. "You don't know what it's like."

Suzie smiled and clutched his hand tighter. "You'd be surprised."

"But ... I'm now part woman. With a ... vagina. And my chest is getting sensitive and my nipples starting to swell, which means I'm growing boobs, like Dr. Tina said I would. And now, thanks to the sonofabitch dean, I'm about to get what little remains of my manhood cut off so I'm completely a woman."

Suzie patted his hand. "Having mixed parts didn't work for me, either."

Tom's eyes widened. "You mean...?"

Suzie grinned. "Yup. I had my surgery about 3 years ago."

"But ... didn't you miss it? Being a guy, I mean? Why didn't you change back?" Tom suddenly had a million questions.

Suzie gave his hand a squeeze. "Dr. Tina is here to take you to the operating room." She bent over and gave him a peck on his cheek. "Trust me, this is the best decision you'll make. We can talk more after your surgery. Like I said, we're family, and we're here for you."

Tom shook his head, trying to comprehend what was happening. "What's next? Makeovers and shopping trips?" He felt like crying, and all because the Dean's daughter had been overly frisky.

Chapter 2 - Moving Day

Tom was pulling the last of his clothes out of his dresser when Bill came in. He flinched visibly, his expression uneasy.

"Moving out?" Bill frowned. "You're ... okay, aren't you? I mean, two emergency surgeries, and you haven't had any recovery time from the last one."

Tom nodded. "I have to go. Housing director's orders."

"Why? Did the Dean make him kick you out?"

Tom shook his head. He had hoped to be gone before Bill got back. "Nope. Policy."

"Huh?" Bill slouched down on his bed. "I don't get it."

"Policy. No mixed quarters," Tom said again.

"You're not making any sense," Bill complained.

Tom sighed. He knew this was going to be difficult. "Have you ever heard of the Morris-Henderson process?"

Furrows appeared in Bill's forehead as he tried to comprehend the sudden change in direction of the conversation. "No. What the hell are you talking about?"

"Morris-Henderson invented a process to make cloned organs," Tom explained.

"And that applies, how? What the hell does that have to do with moving out and your job with the pro-life group?"

Tom dropped his gaze, feeling exposed and awkward. "The job isn't clerical. It's to rent out my body for 9 months."

"Huh?" Bill sounded like a broken record.

"I've got cloned organs so I can be a host for an unwanted, to-be-aborted baby."

Bill's confusion turned to surprise, and then almost instantly to shock. "I don't get it. You're not making any sense."

Tom sighed. "I can't go home. I can't go to the mine. It's not a life; it's a death sentence. And I had to get a job."

"So, where are you going?" Bill asked awkwardly, not certain exactly what Tom was trying to say.

"Avery Hall," Tom said sheepishly.

"The girls' dorm?" Bill's eyes widened. "Then ... you got You're ..."

Tom smiled thinly, still avoiding Bill's gaze. "You're not so dense."

"That means..."

Tom nodded. "To carry a baby to term, I have to have female parts. That violates the policy of no co-ed dorms, which in turn means I have to move to Avery Hall."

"You've let them turn you into a chick?" Bill stammered.

"Only for the duration of the pregnancy," Tom countered quickly.

Bill frowned, and then his expression turned to anger. "Get out of here, you queer!" he hissed. "Get out of my room." He turned his back on Tom.

Tom was startled by Bill's rage. He sighed. "I didn't think you'd understand," he said softly. "I'm not queer, just desperate to not have to live and die in a coal mine."

"Desperate enough to be turned into a girl," Bill snarled. "Desperate enough to be a lab-rat for experiments to make you pregnant? And that's not queer?" Bill got up and stormed to the door. "I don't want you here when I get back," he hissed.

Tom stood in the hallway surrounded by his belongings, aware that girls were staring openly at him. He double-checked the number, and then knocked on the door.

The door opened, and a girl peeked out. "Hi. You must be ..."

Tom nodded and tried to smile. "Yup." He did a quick assessment of the girl. She was tall - almost as tall as he, and relatively thin. Not supermodel skinny, but definitely not plump. She had the right female curves, but in modest proportions in a way that her tank top and shorts weren't sexy.

Tom had a quick thought - maybe she was sexy, but his new mixed-up hormones were already interfering with his definitions of sexy. She had her long brunette hair in a simple ponytail, and she didn't look to be wearing any makeup. No piercings and no visible tattoos; she didn't appear to be a punk girl, either. Tom wondered if he'd gotten lucky and now had an average, nice girl for his new roommate.

The girl shook her head. "You don't look like a girl."

Tom felt a shiver. "I've got all the parts."

The girl smiled. "So I've heard."

Tom frowned. This was not going as well as he had hoped. "You want me to prove it?" he asked, a bit defiantly.

The girl laughed. "Not necessary." She stood aside, opening the door, so Tom could come in.

"Are you okay with this?" Tom asked quietly, still standing in the hallway. "I don't want to make you feel awkward or anything."

The girl grinned mischievously. "If you've got a pussy, you're as much a girl as I am."

Tom's was taken aback at her blunt words. "Uh, I guess that's the case now."

The girl gestured into the room. "Come on in. Let me help you with your stuff." As Tom stepped through the door, his arms full, she called out behind her, "I've got the bed on the right."

Tom set his stuff down on the left bed and glanced around the room. Lacy curtains hung in place of the standard plain white dorm curtains. The bedding was lacy, again, a feminine

touch. Fortunately for Tom, his new roommate didn't feel the need for 'boy star' posters on the walls. He felt a shudder again, as his mind recoiled at the enormity of what he'd done.

"By the way, I'm Katie. Katie Snyder."

Tom turned and extended his hand. "Tom. Tom Wilson."

Katie laughed. "That won't do," she clucked. "It's going to be kind of awkward having a Tom in a women's dorm."

Tom's eyes widened. "I didn't think of that."

Katie tilted her head back and laughed. "And I bet there are a lot more things you hadn't thought of."

Tom closed his eyes for a brief moment, to clear his thoughts. "Are you sure you're okay with this? I mean, this could be kind of awkward - for both of us."

Katie pushed Tom down on the bed, and plopped down beside him, half-turned so she was facing him. "Look, I said I was okay, and I'm okay." She laughed. "We had a floor meeting. Our RA explained the situation." She shrugged. "A lot of girls freaked, though."

Tom's eyes widened. He realized that his social situation could be extremely precarious, or even hostile. "What about you?"

Katie smiled. "My motto is, 'live and let live'." She stood abruptly, and strode back to the hall. "Let's get you moved in and unpacked, okay?"

She carried in a box of clothing and set it on the bed. Immediately, she tore into it, and when she came to Tom's underwear, she laughingly tossed it in the trash. "That won't do," she explained simply. "We'll have to do something about that."

Tom's eyes widened. "But ..."

Katie shook her head, smiling. "You're a girl. You've got a slit, and if I'm not mistaken, I see the beginning stages of hormone-induced secondary sex characteristic mammary growth." She touched the tiny rounded cones under Tom's t-shirt, causing him to flinch. "Pretty soon, those will grow into full-fledged boobs." She grinned as he glanced nervously at his budding breasts. "Pretty quickly, too, I'd guess. So you're a girl, and you need to start thinking and acting and dressing like a girl." Her expression turned serious. "Unless you want to stick out and be a social pariah."

Tom winced. "No," he quickly stated. "It's just that, well, I didn't think I'd be changing so much."

"Well, if you dress like a guy, you'll call extra attention to yourself, especially living in a girls' dorm." She smiled. "Although, it's going to be hard not to call extra attention to yourself

until you get more girly-looking." She looked up and down Tom's frame. "But even with a decent hairstyle, you're going to look a bit butch."

Tom sat down on the bed. "Dr. Tina said I'd be losing muscle mass, since I don't have testosterone in my system. I think that's already happening, to be honest. And Dr. Tina said I'd look more feminine rather quickly."

Katie's eyes widened. "And that doesn't bother you? I mean, you said it like you were ordering a burger, not like it was a change to your body."

Tom shrugged. "At this point, what other choice do I have?"

"Well, we'll get you looking more like a girl."

"How?" he asked in a voice that was halfway a plea for help and halfway a lament at what he'd gotten himself into.

"Hair, for one. You've got a guy's haircut. And your clothes." Katie looked thoughtful for a moment. "Say, I don't suppose that place gives you any kind of clothing allowance, do they? I'd think that they would, since maternity clothes could get pricey later on."

Tom paled. "Yeah, I got a pretty good allowance for clothes. But what do you mean 'hair'? Like in, hair stylist?"

Katie laughed. "Another thing you hadn't thought of, right?" She glanced at Tom's things. "Let's get your stuff put away, and then we can make plans. K?"

Tom nodded. "Okay." Working together, they got Tom's clothing hung up and stashed in his dresser and closet, with many clucks of disapproval from Katie about his clothes. The rest of his meager possessions took only minutes to put up.

"So, tell me about yourself," Katie prodded as she sat back on her bed. "What's your major? Where are you from? Big family? What are your likes and dislikes? All of it."

Tom bit his lip and glanced at the ceiling for a second. "I don't have a major - yet. I've been thinking about engineering."

"Geek. I can deal with that if I have to," Katie pronounced her judgment with a simple shrug. "Upside potential - if I need help with math and science, maybe you can save my butt."

"I'm from a small mining town in West Virginia," Tom continued.

There was pain in his voice and in his expression; Katie noticed and decided to skip it - for now. "Do you like to party?"

Tom shook his head. "Nope. It's in my contract. Once I get the baby, I can't have any alcohol. I guess I never was a rowdy one, anyway. Plus, I need to keep my grades up, so I'm not going to party a lot."

"Suits me," Katie announced. "I'm not a party animal, either, but I do go to a party every once in a while. If I do, I might ask you along, so you can be my designated driver in case I have a few." She looked at Tom's figure. "I thought you already _had_ the baby implanted!"

Tom shook his head slowly. "Nope. Not yet. First, I have to let my new parts 'settle in'. My body has to get used to the new hormones. _Then_ I'll go on a hormone dose to prepare ... my ... uterus, and I'll have the baby transplanted." Tom felt awkward describing what was going to happen to _his_ body.

Katie nodded. "Interesting." She paused while a thought coalesced in her mind. "You know, as your parts 'adjust' to the hormones, you'll probably have a period or two - before the transplant, that is."

Tom nodded fearfully as he considered her words. "That's what Dr. Tina said."

"Nervous about that?"

Tom tried to smile. "I'm scared stiff about everything!"

Katie suppressed a laugh at the potential double-entendre in his choice of words. Right now, he probably wouldn't find it amusing. She crossed her legs on the bed and changed the subject. "How are you with social rejection?"

"Huh?"

Katie sighed. "You're going to be an outcast to your former male friends. They won't understand, and some of them might treat you like you're gay or something. And a lot of girls aren't going to like you. Not for a while. Some, not ever. You _do_ know that girls can be a _lot_ meaner than guys, right?"

Tom paused to consider her words for a moment, before he shrugged. "I guess I've learned to take whatever life dishes out. If they don't like me, there's not a lot I can do about it."

Katie's eyes widened at his philosophy. She wasn't sure how long he'd be able to live by that credo. "How about faith?"

Tom sighed. "Is this the inquisition?"

Katie laughed. "No, but I do want to get to know a little about my roommie. If you're up to all hours chanting and praying or doing some eastern yoga-Buddhist-incense thing, or start ranting that I'm condemned to hell because I swear once in a while, well, that might make things a little ... tense."

Tom laughed. "Yeah, I could see that." He shook his head. "No, I'm not an in-your-face Christian, but I did grow up in a very strong Baptist family."

"Oh," Katie said quietly. "Is that why you're doing this?"

Tom laughed. "No, not really. I mean, I believe in life and everything, but not enough to do this."

Katie frowned. "Then why?"

Tom shrugged. "I needed the money," he answered simply. He saw Katie's eyes widen. "It's complicated. Let's just say that I lost my scholarship for getting caught ... um, fooling around ... with the Dean's daughter."

Katie's eyes widened momentarily, and then she laughed. "That was you?" She continued to laugh so hard that she had to wipe her eyes. "This is ... hilarious," she added, through her mirth.

"What?" Tom asked, suddenly defensive again.

Katie held out a hand in a "slow down" gesture as she fought her laughter. "It's just ... weird. Everyone knows that Jillian is a slut. But most guys who tangle with her end up out of school. Not moving into the girls' dorm!"

Tom tried to frown, but failed. The fact that his romantic encounter with the Dean's daughter, Jillian, had led to him changing completely into a girl was amusing - in a way. "Maybe you could say that she was so bad in bed, it made me change my sexuality!" Tom tried to joke.

Katie smiled. She got a sudden feeling, in his one attempt at humor, that he was an okay guy. Girl. Person. She realized that this was going to take getting used to - for both of them. "How does your family feel about this?" she prodded.

Tom shook his head sadly. "I'm not sure. Ma ... she didn't say much. She knew that I was desperate to stay in school, and she knows why. My little sister thinks it's cool. She always complained that a brother was a pain. My older sister - I think she's having trouble."

"And your dad?"

Tom's eyes misted instantly. "My dad ... died in the mine. A long time ago." He looked down, silent and still, as old and painful memories

Katie moved to Tom's bed, sat beside him, and wrapped her arm around his shoulders. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Tom glanced up, seeing the compassion in her eyes, and he nodded slowly. "Yeah, I know. Wasn't your fault." He shook his head. "As long as it's been, I shouldn't cry like that."

"Big boys don't cry?" Katie asked. She shook her head slowly. "First, bottling up the pain doesn't help. Second, you're not a boy any more, and with all the hormones raging through your system, you're going to find yourself more emotional. A lot more emotional. So it's okay to cry."

"Are you the floor counselor, too?" Tom asked, trying to sound humorous, and failing.

Katie smiled. "I'm studying Psych. Third year."

"Oh."

"Besides, girls cry - for lots of reasons. Happiness, sadness - you name it, you'll find girls crying. And since you're a girl, it's officially all right for you to cry." She sat up. "Now there's one thing we have to do."

Tom straightened, frowning. "What's that?"

"Your name."

"Not that again," Tom complained, hoping to shunt that discussion aside.

"Look, if you're a girl, you can't have a boy's name. How am I going to treat you like a girl, help you learn to be a girl, share girl things with you, if you have a boy's name?" She had an expression of finality. "It just won't work."

"You're ... serious?"

"Uh huh. So what will it be?"

"Uh, I guess I hadn't thought of that," Tom admitted sheepishly. "I mean, it's hard enough to give up ... parts. And now my name, too? That's like - all of my identity!" he protested. He shook his head. "I ... can't. The name is too much."

Katie glanced at his chest, at the tiny cones starting to show through the knit T-shirt. "How big is your mom? Up top, I mean?"

"Huh?" Tom's eyes widened with surprise at the abrupt change of subject and at the bluntness of the question.

"Her boobs. How big? How big are your sisters?"

"Uh, about average, I think," he stammered. "I mean, c'mon. You don't really think about how big your mom's boobs are! I mean, that's kind of gross!"

Katie laughed. "Maybe not boys, but girls do notice, because their mom's size is a factor in what they are going to have. Just like I bet boys notice how big their dad's package is, so they kind of know how big they'll be." She grinned and leaned a bit closer, as if conspiratorially. "I bet you noticed your sisters developing. Probably teased them a lot, too!"

Tom dropped his head. "Yeah, I did," he admitted, feeling a bit guilty for just how much he'd tormented them.

"And?"

"Hard to tell with Sara. She's still growing. But Liz is done growing."

"How big?"

"Um, a little bigger than average, I guess."

Katie touched one of his developing cones. "So you're probably going to end up looking like your sister. Didn't the center explain it?"

Tom nodded slowly, his gaze directed mostly at the floor. "Probably. But I was thinking more about the money for school than some of the details."

"Once you start really sprouting boobs, which you will - and pretty soon, by the looks of it - it'll be really hard to use a boy's name." Katie smiled. "Besides, think of it as a new start." She thought for a moment. "I can't think of a lot of names that start with T. Tanya? Toni? Tracy? Tammy? Tina? Trixie? Tabitha? Tess?"

She was watching Tom's expression as she called the names. He wasn't reacting. "Teri?" She saw his eyes perk up - slightly. "You like that?"

Tom thought for a moment. "Teri isn't bad, I guess." He laughed uneasily. "One of the girls at the center suggested Teri, too."

"Well, you'll need to think about it. Having a girl's name will help you be accepted - by those who will accept you." She shook her head. "Can't help the snobs and bitches who will never like you."

"I don't like the idea, but I promise to think about it."

"Oh, and when your boobs are growing," Katie started.

"Yeah?"

"Your hips and rear are probably going to get rounder and more womanly." She sat back on her bed. "Now, can I see?"

"What?" Tom's eyes were wide in shock.

Katie smiled. "I'm curious. I've never seen a Morris-Henderson before. We talked about it in one class last semester - a tiny bit." She saw his rising level of suspicion and shock. "And I'm not a lesbian, so you don't have to worry about me trying to sneak peeks to get my thrills or trying to seduce you. Although, right now, I wonder if you're still into girls." She had a thoughtful look, as if she was considering a psych problem. "Never mind. I'm just curious."

"No!" Tom said strongly. "That's ... it's" He was lost for words. "No."

Katie shrugged. "Okay. But you do realize that we'll _all_ get to see you in the showers. Eventually."

Tom shuddered. He hadn't considered that some of the girls would be curious. Or that they might want to play 'compare body parts' with him, since he was kind of an 'artificial girl'. Or that the communal showers and bathrooms would expose him to all the girls in the floor. A few weeks ago, he would have loved to be in the showers in the girls' dorm. Now, he was dreading the thought. He realized that this was going to take a _lot_ of getting used to.

"You're going to have to come out sooner or later," Katie chided, her arms crossed as she leaned against the tile-covered wall of the bathroom.

"This is so embarrassing," Tom's voice called from one of the stalls. "Tell me when they're gone."

"We're not leaving until we get to meet the new _girl_," a petite girl beside Katie sang out sweetly.

"Yeah. Since you're going to be part of our floor, and we'll be seeing a _lot_ of each other, we kind of figured that introductions were in order," another girl added with a smile.

"Dammit, Katie," Tom sounded distraught, "how many are out there? This is _humiliating_!"

"Yeah, we're so mean," the petite girl said with a grin. A few chuckles rippled through the group of five girls waiting.

There was a brief rustling of clothes, and then the stall door opened and Tom stepped out. His pants and underwear were down around his ankles, displaying his female lower anatomy. Likewise, he was holding his T-shirt up to show his enlarged nipples and the tiny mounds beneath. "See?" he complained, sounding near tears, "I've got all the parts, okay?"

A couple of girls stared openly at Tom's anatomy. "Wow! You _do_ have a pussy!" one girl said, her mouth agape.

Tom stood, pouting and fighting back tears. His pubic hair hadn't grown back, so his new vagina was totally exposed to the girls and their wide-eyed stares. Slowly, he pulled his T-shirt back down over his tits, and then he bent down and pulled his underwear and pants back over his hips. He straightened, glared at the girls, and stomped to the sink to wash his hands. Without looking at them, his steps stiff with anger and embarrassment, he stomped out of the bathroom, down the hall, and back to his room. The slam of the door punctuated his feelings about the girls' little prank.

A few moments later, the door opened and Katie peeked in. She saw Tom lying on his bed, face down, and from tiny spasms in his shoulders, she realized that he was crying. "Tom?" she called softly.

"Go away!" his muffled voice answered.

"Tom," Katie pleaded as she slid onto her bed, "please."

"I trusted you!" Tom wailed into his pillow.

"I couldn't stop them," Katie replied, her voice full of remorse. "Put yourself in their shoes - there's a new person in the dorm who used to be a guy..."

"I am in their shoes," Tom glanced up and snarled. "You and your friends should put yourselves in my shoes!" His eyes were reddened and puffy from crying, and now anger mixed in the displayed emotions. "Up until a while ago, I was a guy! Then I got my ... thing ... cut off, and now I'm a girl! How do you think I feel? Isn't that enough humiliation without that little stunt?"

Katie recoiled as if struck. She - and the other girls - obviously hadn't considered what this meant to Tom. "I ... hadn't thought of that," she admitted sheepishly, her head lowered with shame. "I'm ... sorry."

Tom buried his face in his pillow again, and his sobbing resumed. After several awkward seconds, Katie rose and padded back to the door.

Tom lay on his bed in solitude, crying and feeling sorry for himself. He hated this! He was trapped and helpless! Then these girls decided to embarrass him to top it off. He wondered why he'd done this, to allow himself to be transformed. It couldn't be worth it, he thought to himself. Nothing could be worth this.

After nearly half an hour, the door opened again, and Katie peeked in. She saw Tom lying on the bed, still, virtually unmoved from when she'd left. "Tom?" she asked softly. There was no reply; Tom was probably asleep. Katie padded into the room and lightly tapped his shoulder. "Tom?" she repeated.

Tom stirred and rolled his head toward her. "Oh," he said once he'd focused on her face and recognized her. The simple word carried the sound of contempt.

Katie glanced back at the door and nodded; a silent procession of girls came into the room and wordlessly sat - on Katie's bed, at the foot of Tom's bed, on their chairs. Seven girls, plus Katie, and all wearing robes.

Tom glanced around the room, confused and still angry. "What do you want now?" he asked bitterly.

Katie sat down on her bed. "We want to apologize. We're sorry. We shouldn't have done that." With that, the girls all stood, and then dropped their robes.

Tom's eyes widened. As the robes slipped off, he realized that they were all nude. Totally, completely naked. He looked back at the floor out of embarrassment and a sense of decency and chivalry.

One girl, standing beside Tom's desk, cleared her throat. "Hi," she said meekly, her voice trembling. "I'm Melody. I'm sorry."

Katie saw Tom's averted gaze. "Look at us," she said softly. "We know we embarrassed you; we're putting ourselves in the same spot so you know we're really sorry."

Tom tried to focus on Melody's face, but failed. She was average height, and average build. Tom couldn't help but stare - for a moment - at the neat little triangular patch of sandy-blond hair in her crotch before his gaze wandered up. Melody had a heart tattoo on her hip, and perky breasts capped with large - and erect - brown nipples. Her face had a girl-next-door cuteness, with a dainty little nose and light freckles. Silver-blue eyes drew attention like magnets; her hair was the same sandy-blond, worn in a simple shoulder-length cut.

The next girl cleared her throat. "I'm Kim. I'm sorry, too." She sounded like she was going to die of embarrassment. Kim was taller - perhaps five foot nine - and more athletically built. Brunette, with her long hair in a simple ponytail, she was less curvy, and her breasts were a bit smaller but much perkier. She was well tanned, and with her good muscle tone and lack of visible fat, Tom thought immediately of the beach volleyball stereotype.

"Hi," the next girl sounded a little less embarrassed. "I'm Linda, and I'm sorry." Linda was about Melody's height, but much curvier. She wasn't fat, but her hips were rounder, and her breasts much larger, to the point of sagging significantly. A renaissance figure, Tom noted. Her black hair was styled in a simple flip.

"Hi, I'm ...," the girl turned to Katie. "This is embarrassing," she complained.

"You can do this," Katie encouraged her. "Go on."

"I'm Ashley." Ashley sounded like she was ready to die of embarrassment. She was looking at the floor, her cheeks red. "I'm sorry," she stammered. Ashley was a wisp of a girl, not more than five feet two and maybe a hundred ten pounds dripping wet. Her hair was long, brown, and straight, and her figure was still developing. Of all the girls, she was the one who was closest to Tom in breast size.

The next girl stepped forward proudly, her shoulders back and her ample breasts thrust forward. "I'm Christina," she announced. "I'm sorry." She stood, on display, as if she was used to being nude in public. Her hair was wavy auburn, and with her big brown eyes and shapely figure, Tom knew that she was used to having guys at her beck and call. There was just that air of confidence and control about her.

"I'm Erica," the next girl announced. "It's nice to meet you." Tom saw her eyeing him, and she wondered if Erica might not bat for the other team, and as such, be checking him out for a completely different reason. Erica was taller than Linda, but with much larger - and saggy - breasts. Tom had difficulty tearing his eyes from her very inviting bosom. Even in this informal setting, Erica was wearing makeup, and her layered wavy strawberry-blond hair was impeccably styled, with wisps of seemingly unruly hair designed to convey the message that she was a bit 'naughty'.

"I'm Dianne," the next girl announced simply. "I'm sorry. That was ... rude. Can you forgive me?" she asked simply. Her voice was a soft sultry contralto, and she had girl-next-door looks and figure. Her green eyes were soft and pleading, and her long curly red hair made her look stereotypically Irish. She also sounded the most sincere of all the girls.

Tom glanced around the room, settling his gaze for a few moments on his roommate.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I ... betrayed your trust. I" She broke off, her voice cracking and her gaze dropping to the floor.

Tom looked at her as he stepped forward and gently lifted her chin, so that she was looking at him. "I know," he said simply. "I'm ... touched - that you would all do this as a way of apologizing." He felt tears welling up in his eyes for reasons he didn't understand. "Damned hormones," he swore.

Katie gave him a hug. "Thank you," she replied, "for forgiving me. Us."

Tom stepped back, and a grin crept on his face. "You know," he said, "something isn't quite right here." As the girls pondered, he pulled off his T-shirt and slid off his pants until he, too, was nude. "Do I fit in better?" he asked with a grin.

"Almost," Erica laughed, as she glanced down at her erect nipples. "Only you're not as cold as we are." She thrust her chest forward again, as if to poke her chilly nipples toward Tom to emphasize her point.

Katie laughed, picked up her robe, and pulled it on. The other girls did likewise, while Tom pulled his clothing back on.

As he sat back down, Tom looked thoughtful. "You know, a few weeks ago, I'd have given anything for a show like you just gave me."

Linda and Melody feigned pouts. "You mean that we don't excite you?"

Tom reacted like he'd been slapped. He realized that the girls _hadn't_ excited him. He hadn't felt sexual excitement for several weeks.

Katie noticed. "Are you okay?"

Tom shook his head, his mouth hanging open. Slowly, he sank onto his bed. "Uh, no," he said softly. "I ... I don't think so."

"What's wrong?" Katie asked, sitting beside him.

Tom shook his head. "That's just it. I should have been horny as hell from seeing a bunch of naked girls up close. But ... I didn't feel ... anything." He was ashen, with tears starting to form in the corners of his eyes. He dropped his head, staring at the floor between his feet. "I'm not ... a guy."

Katie glanced around at the other girls, gesturing with a nod that it was time for them to leave. When the door shut, she wrapped her arm around Tom's shoulder. "It's going to take time," she said softly. "You're grieving."

Tom shook his head, sobbing again. "I'm scared," he said softly. "I ... can't get excited. Not by you girls. What's next? Getting wet and horny by seeing guys?" He started bawling.

Chapter 3 - Trouble in Paradise

Even though it wasn't chilly, Tom wore a light jacket as he strode across campus. The loose outer garment helped hide the swelling of his breasts. He stared down at the sidewalk as he walked quickly back toward his dorm. While no one had bothered him - yet, he didn't want to spend any more time in public than he had to. So far, he hadn't been harassed, but he felt unusually self-conscious.

Two girls fell in step beside him, one on each side. Their appearance was a surprise to Tom; he would have seen them approaching had he been looking. He glanced nervously at the two; their clothing and mannerisms made him think that they were from the Beta Tau Delta sorority. He felt a shudder course down his spine.

"Hi, _Tom_," one of the girls sang out sweetly to him. "Or have you changed your name, too?"

The other girl laughed. "We really should take you out shopping and get you glammed up a bit! That outfit is just too unattractive!"

"Yeah. Something with a scoop neck and a pushup bra!" The girl made a very obvious glance at Tom's chest as she spoke.

"And a short tight skirt to show off your legs and ass!"

Tom tried to walk faster, but he realized that three guys were moving to intercept them. He shuddered. One of the guys was his ex-roommate, Bill. Flanked by the two sorority girls, Tom stopped, his way now blocked.

"Hey, Tom," one of the guys said, "I hear you decided you'd rather be a girl!"

"Damned ugly girl, if you ask me," another one said. The girls laughed at that.

"Excuse me," Tom said in a trembling voice, "I need to get to my dorm." He stepped to one side, hoping to move around his antagonists.

The guys and girls moved to block his path. "Aw, do you need to go so soon?" one of the girls asked. "Don't you want to stay and share some girl talk?"

"Or meet some real manly guys?" the other one mocked.

"Fuckin' queer!" one of the guys sneered.

"Just leave me alone," Tom pleaded. "I didn't do anything to you."

"What are you going to do, sissy? Cry like a girl?" Bill taunted.

The girls laughed. "_She_ probably will cry!" one said.

"Yeah. Girls are supposed to be _so_ emotional!" another guy chimed in with a laugh.

Tom tried to sidestep the group again, only to be blocked once more.

"Are you really a girl - where it counts?" one of the girls asked with a laugh.

"He's a damned faggot!" Bill snarled. "Letting himself be turned into a girl!"

"Fuckin' tranny!" another guy added. He pawed at Tom's chest. "Hey!" he said as Tom tried to block his move. "I just want to see if you've got some real tits!"

One of the girls pulled Tom's jacket down off his shoulders. "_She's_ not wearing a bra!" she hooted as she ran her hand over the back of his shirt.

"Still waiting for the titty-fairy to visit?" the other girl added.

Tom was fighting back tears. "Just leave me alone," he pleaded again as he tried to back away from the group.

"If you're really a girl, maybe you should prove it!" the first girl said. "Maybe you can get one of these manly men to pop your cherry!"

The group laughed at Tom's expense. "Not me!" Bill said. "I go for attractive women, attractive _real_ women."

"Yeah. Who'd be willing to screw such an ugly broad?"

The third guy laughed. "There isn't enough beer in the house for that!"

Bill roared with laughter. "Maybe a case would do it, and a sack over her head!"

"Hey, if you're really a girl, why don't you show us?" one of the guys taunted.

"Yeah," the second girl chimed in. "We're all adults. We've all seen a naked girl before!"

"Yeah. Show us you're really a girl!"

"Unless you're just a queer who likes hanging out with girls in the girls' dorm!" Bill added.

"Hey, I know what she needs!" one of the girls said with a wicked grin. She dug into her purse and pulled out a small bottle.

As she uncapped it, the guys started grinning, and two of them grabbed Tom, holding him firmly. The girl spritzed some perfume on Tom's neck, below his ears; then she pulled his shirt out and sprayed more down his chest, all to the delight and amusement of the others.

The second girl grinned. "Something's still missing," she said, before she, too, dug into her purse. She pulled out a tube, and as soon as the guys saw what it was, the third guy grasped Tom's head to hold him still.

With much laughter, the girl smeared some lipstick on Tom. "Better," she said, all the while laughing. "But still not very attractive."

The boys relaxed their grip as they laughed, and Tom twisted sharply, pulling himself free from the guys. Without wasting a moment, he quickly darted between the girls to freedom. Tears started to flow freely as he ran from the group. Behind him, they continued to laugh and taunt him as he fled.

With a last glance over his shoulder, Tom swiped his ID card in the lock, opened the door, and ducked into Avery Hall. As the door shut, sealing out his tormenters, Tom leaned back against the wall, shaking. He wiped his sleeve across his face in a futile attempt to dry off the tears.

After a few minutes, once the tears had mostly stopped, he raised himself upright and climbed up the stairs. He glanced nervously down the hall on the second floor. As he started down the hall, he felt a pressure in his bladder, and he shuddered involuntarily. He walked nervously into the bathroom.

As he stepped in, a girl looked up from the sink. It was Shelly Martin, one of the less friendly residents. She snorted derisively at him. "Why can't you use the other bathroom?" she asked angrily.

The tears flowed anew at her affront. "I live here, too," he answered, his voice trembling. "I'm a ... girl," he said through sobbing.

"You're a freak!" Shelly snarled. "It's bad enough that you're living in our dorm. Can't you use the other bathroom?" She shut off the water faucet, dried her hands, and stomped out. The expression on her face was one of pure hatred.

Tom was shaking as he slipped into the stall, sobbing. He hadn't signed up for this type of treatment. He just wanted to stay in college.

The backpack landed on the bed with a resounding thud. Tom let out a heavy sigh as he flopped down on the bed and leaned back on his pillow.

Katie, seated at her desk with her attention focused on her textbook and notebook, glanced his way. "Tough day?" she asked.

Tom sighed again. "You could say that." He stared blankly at the ceiling. "My former roommate has been spreading nasty stories about me."

"Oh?" Katie's attention shifted to Tom.

"Yeah." Tom sighed yet again. "I got called a queer, faggot, tranny, and more. A couple of the guys were grabbing at my chest," he glanced briefly at the tiny cones showing through his T-shirt. "And a couple of girls from the Beta Tau Delta sorority were asking when I was going to develop enough to wear a bra." He recounted all the details of the encounter.

"Stuck-up sorority cunts," Katie cursed under her breath. "They're worse than the boys."

Tom wiped at the tears welling up in the corners of his eyes. "But they're right," he said, trying but failing to keep emotion from his voice.

Katie winced at his response. She watched him for a moment, unsure of how to respond.

Tom pulled his legs up on the bed, curling up into a ball with his back toward Katie. "What the hell was I thinking?" he asked bitterly. "I turned myself into a freak!"

"You did what you had to do," Katie tried to reassure him.

"There had to be another way!" Tom retorted. "I didn't have let them make me a woman!"

Katie slid her chair back, padded to Tom's bed, and sat beside him. She rubbed her hand on his back reassuringly. "You're not a freak," she said. "You're doing a very noble thing, and helping yourself stay in school in the process."

"One of the girls told me I should 'break in' my new parts!" Tom wailed. "She said I should go ahead and get laid right there, and the guys laughed!" Tom was sobbing, and tears were flowing down his cheeks. "And the guys ... the guys said they'd n-n-need a lot of beer and a-a-a sack!" He dabbed at his eyes, his body shaking. "And the whole t-t-time they were laughing at m-m-me!"

As she thought she detected some odor, Katie sniffed. It smelled like ... perfume?

Tom noticed her expression. "I tried to wash it off."

"What?" Katie already knew the answer.

"The perfume they sprayed on me," Tom sobbed. "And they held me and put on lipstick!"

Katie stiffened, her features clouding with anger. On the one hand, she had expected that such taunts would happen - eventually. "Didn't the center give you some help, some idea of what you were getting into?"

Tom nodded. "Yeah. I had to go to some classes on what was involved, what kind of problems I might encounter, what kinds of legal and psychological help they offered - you know, that sort of thing."

"But?"

Tom sighed. "I guess I figured this wouldn't happen to me," he confessed. "I figured they were trying to scare me, to make sure I would go through with it. You know, the shock treatment."

Katie nodded slowly. "Did they have any kind of one-on-one counseling? Any group sessions before you made up your mind?"

"Yeah. I ... turned them down. I made up some excuses not to go."

Katie frowned. "Why? Didn't you know that it was for your own good? Or was it some macho bullshit that you thought you didn't need any counseling?"

Tom didn't answer; he just dropped his head in silent admission that Katie was right.

Katie wanted to scream. Tom was a good person, and what he'd encountered was so wrong. If only he'd have taken the pre-counseling seriously. They could have helped him. And she was shocked; with the 'live and let live' attitude toward sexuality that was so common these days, it was hard to understand the blatant bias and bigotry of the encounter. "Did you call security?"

Tom shook his head. "Why? You really think the Dean would let them do anything in my case?"

Katie swore under her breath. This was so wrong; in any other event, this would be considered serious sexual harassment. But Tom was probably right; the Dean would see that it was swept under the rug. And Tom probably didn't want any confrontations that would result from him trying to file charges with the campus police. "Does the center have counseling?" she finally asked.

Tom paused. "What?"

"Do they have counseling?" Katie repeated. "Surely they know that this can be very difficult for a man."

Tom rolled his head to glance toward Katie. "Yeah, Rachel told me that they had counseling if I needed it."

Katie winced inwardly at his reaction. Anytime she said, "Surely...", Tom responded with the 'Airplane' movie line, "...and don't call me Shirley." He didn't this time. She was afraid that this incident, together with the snubbing he was receiving from the likes of Shelly, was really getting to him, maybe starting to drive him into serious depression.

After waiting for a moment to see if Tom was going to say more, she pulled out her cell phone. "What's the number?" she asked.

"What?" Tom was confused by her question.

"The number for the center."

"Oh." Tom thought for a moment. "I don't know. It's on my cell phone."

Katie held out her hand toward Tom; he stared at it blankly for a moment. He quickly realized what she wanted, and he handed his phone to Katie.

Katie quickly searched Tom's phone list, and then dialed. "Hello. Can I please speak with Rachel?" she asked while eyeing Tom. "It's about my roommate - Tom Wilson."

Tom's eyes narrowed as Katie spoke. It was obvious to Katie that he really didn't like the idea of counseling.

"Hi. I'm Katie, Tom's roommate. I understand you guys provide counseling?" She paused a moment. "Yeah, I think so. He had a pretty rough day. In fact, it's been kind of tough on him since he moved."

Tom scowled and held out his hand for his phone. He felt like she was railroading him into counseling.

Katie smiled sweetly. "I'm studying psych, so I've been learning about counseling. And about people who are in denial about needing some counseling." She spoke into the phone with confidence and concern.

Tom grabbed at the phone, and Katie let him take it. "Hi, ... uh ... Rachel? Sorry to be wasting your time. My roommate is overreacting a bit."

Katie watched as Tom listened to Rachel speaking. He seemed to visibly deflate, his stern defiance melting away. "Okay. All right." He hung up the phone.

"Well?"

Tom sighed. "She said I need to come in as soon as possible. More specifically, she said today. She reminded me that my contract specifies necessary medical care, and that includes mental health and counseling."

Katie tried to keep from an "I told you so" expression, but she failed. "I'll drive."

Tom glanced around the office. "No couch?" he asked sarcastically.

Rachel shook her head, trying to maintain her smile. "You're stuck on a bad stereotype." She gestured toward a couple of stuffed chairs and a sofa in one corner of her office, a less formal sitting area. "Sit down, make yourself comfortable, and we'll talk."

Tom eased himself into the chair, still feeling cautious. "Talk? Like what? You want to know why I hate my mother, or junk like that?"

Rachel sighed. "You're going to be difficult, aren't you?" She sounded impatient.

Tom's defiant stare faded almost immediately. "Sorry," he said, looking as sheepish as he sounded. "It's just ... well, I don't know what to do."

Rachel smiled to herself. "This is a lot tougher than you thought, and you're confused, and possibly frightened, and maybe hurt by some of the things being said about you."

Tom's eyes widened as his jaw dropped. "How ..." he started to say, "how did you know?" he finally stammered.

Rachel forced herself to not grin. "I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Technically, I'm Doctor Rachel McKnight. I'm a licensed psychologist. It's my job to know. And since I've been doing this for a few years, I've seen a lot of different reactions in a lot of different patients."

"Oh," Tom answered simply.

"And you were probably thinking that the problems you've encountered are unique to you, haven't been felt by others, and no one else would understand, right?"

Tom nodded, even more surprised. "That kind of sums it up. But...?"

Rachel allowed a small smile. "Like I said, I'm a trained counselor. I've heard a lot more than you would imagine." She sat back and picked up a pad of paper. "So where do you want to start?"

Tom realized that his muscles were tense. He leaned back, forcing himself to relax, as he took a couple of deep breaths. "I don't know. Maybe it starts with how I feel kind of trapped," he began cautiously.

Rachel scribbled some notes. "Trapped, how?"

Tom sighed. "You know - I lost my scholarship, and I would've had to drop out of college."

"And you're afraid of working in the mines, and probably dying like your father."

Tom nodded.

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid, especially when it's about life-and-death situations, and losing someone you loved," Rachel offered. "And then you got trapped by the dean, and you feel like you were forced to become completely a woman, right?"

Tom nodded again. "Yeah, that's about it."

"Is it about not being in control?"

Tom paused, his head half-cocked as he pondered her words, and he nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's part of it."

"But that's not all, is it?"

Tom shook his head. "I ... had a really bad day," he said softly.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

Tom sighed, before he gave Rachel a quick summary of the taunting by the other students, and the nasty attitude from some of the girls in the dorm.

Rachel listened, taking notes as Tom spoke. When he was finished, she looked at the pad, tapping her pen as she thought. "How do you feel about yourself?"

"Huh?"

"You've told me how others are reacting to you. But how do you feel about yourself?"

Tom started to speak, but he closed his mouth and thought for a bit. "I don't know," he finally admitted softly.

Rachel nodded to herself. "How do you feel about women? In general, I mean. Do you see women as strong, or weak; as being in control, or being controlled?"

Tom thought for a moment. "I really hadn't thought about it. I mean, my mom is pretty strong. I guess."

"You guess?"

Tom dropped his head. "Well, she didn't handle losing Dad well. She fell apart."

"So you see that as weak, and not being in control?"

Tom nodded. "Maybe, I guess." He wrinkled his brow in confusion. "What does this have to do with me?"

"If you see women as weak, then being one might make you think of yourself as weak, as opposed to your previous self-image as a strong young man," Rachel explained. "It could be confusing, even psychologically disorienting. The same would be true with seeing women as being in control."

"Oh." Tom pondered her words. "I guess that makes sense."

"How did you handle your dad's death?"

Tom started at the question. "Uh," he began slowly, almost like he was afraid to answer, "I guess not too well." He dropped his gaze to the floor, fighting back tears at the painful memories. "Not well at all."

Rachel nodded knowingly. "And does that make you weak?"

Tom looked up suddenly at her, surprise on his features. "What?"

"Does that make you weak?"

"Uh, not really, I guess."

"So was it really weakness on your mother's part, when she fell apart after losing her husband, her life-companion?"

Tom started to answer, but a slow realization dawned in his eyes. "Maybe not," he answered hesitantly. "So she's maybe not as ... weak ... as I thought?"

Rachel smiled. "Losing a spouse is one of the most devastating things for a person. Even the strongest person can be knocked for a loop. No, it's not weakness to be lost or to cry or to be distressed at a time like that."

Tom thought for a moment. "So ... my mom is a lot stronger than I thought?"

"Which means...?" Rachel led his train of thought.

"Maybe, just because they're more emotional, women aren't as weak as I might have thought?" Tom asked meekly.

"And?"

Tom bit his lip as he thought. "I guess I shouldn't feel weak and not in control when ... they taunt me and stuff."

"How do you feel about what you're doing, about the fact that you're going to be carrying a baby? Does that scare you?"

Tom nodded. "Yes, a lot."

Rachel nodded slightly. "But you're going through with it?"

Tom nodded again. "I have to."

"Why?"

"What?" Tom sounded confused.

"Why do you have to go through with it?"

Tom frowned. "Because I signed a contract. I gave my word. I have to go through with it."

"Even if it means having to deal with a lot of harassment and taunting?"

Tom bit his lip. "Yup." He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. "I gave my word. It's my honor. I can't back out, or I'd be a liar."

Rachel smiled to herself. She knew Tom's psych profile; she knew that he would see this through to the end come hell or high water. "So what do you do?"

Tom's head spun to look directly at her. "I'm not sure I understand."

"What do you do? How are you going to handle this? How are you going to go forward?"

Tom dropped his head, his eyes closing again as he sighed. Slowly, his head shook. "I don't know," he finally answered, sounding very small and uncertain. "I don't know."

Rachel waited for him to look at her again. "To start with, if you want, I can have our legal department contact with the university. If they allow such harassment again, they will be hit with a major lawsuit, along with a lot of bad publicity. I'm sure that will get their attention."

She saw the impact of her words as Tom absorbed them. She could see that he realized he had a strong ally that was willing to help him. It seemed that a burden was lifted from his shoulders.

Tom shook his head. "Uh, I'd rather not," he answered slowly. "I ... don't want to make any more waves."

"I think I understand," Rachel said. "But if it gets worse, you know you can rely on us for help." She continued. "And I want to see you in here - formally - at least three times a week, until you get a better handle on how you feel about yourself. Your self-confidence, or lack of it, is the key to how you deal with this entire set of changes."

Tom listened, and he nodded slowly. "Okay," he said softly.

"Third," Rachel continued, "on Thursday nights, we have a support group for our patients. I want you to attend a session or two and see if it helps. There are a few men in it who are pregnant, some who are preparing - like you, a few who are post-partum, and we usually have one or two who have fully transitioned for their term of service."

"Fully women?"

Rachel nodded. "It may help you to meet them, so you don't feel like you're alone with these challenges. Some of our other staff may be able to help you cope, too."

"It's not so bad," Katie tried to sound reassuring and soothing.

"It's awful!" Tom angrily replied. "I hate this!" He sat on his bed, leaning against the wall with his knees drawn up to his chest.

"Periods are natural. Didn't the doctor tell you about this?"

Tom frowned. "Yes. But she didn't say I'd feel cramped or bloated or sore!"

"Some girls have it easier than others. I've heard that a lot of how you deal with it is attitude."

"Yeah? Well I've got a real pissy attitude about it then!" Tom retorted harshly. "It's ... gross!"

A knock sounded, and the door opened before either could answer. It was Linda who stuck her head in. "What's up?"

Katie shrugged. "Not a lot. Tom's just sitting here feeling sorry for herself."

Tom frowned at Katie. "No, I'm not!" he snapped.

"Oh," Linda said slowly, nodding. "That time of month, huh?"

"Piss off!" Tom snarled. "Why are you guys picking on me?"

Katie sighed and sat down next to Tom. "We're not picking on you," she said in a soothing tone. "We've all been through it. It's part of life. It's just ... new to you, I guess."

Linda sat down, too. "Maybe we were being insensitive," she admitted. "But ... well, it's kind of human nature." She thought for a moment. "Have you had your wisdom teeth out?"

Tom's eyes widened. "What the hell do my wisdom teeth have to do with me feeling sore and bloated and cramped?"

Katie picked up where Linda was going. "Have you ever heard anyone describe getting their wisdom teeth out as 'no big deal'? I bet you haven't. It's always a horror story."

"Yeah. Like it's kind of a ... duty ... to scare people about it. And most of the time, it turns out to be 'no big deal'."

Katie nodded. "I guess we're doing the same thing with your period. We made a pretty big deal about it with horror stories, and maybe we got you into a self-fulfilling thing."

Tom thought, his eyes narrowed with anger. He closed them and took a couple of deep breaths. "Maybe you're right," he said after a pause. "Maybe if I didn't have such a bad attitude, it wouldn't seem so bad."

Linda nodded. "That, and take a Midol or something."

Tom sighed. "Maybe a nice hot shower would help my back." He glanced nervously at Linda and Katie, as if he was nervous by their presence, and he peeled off his sweatshirt and scooted to the edge of the bed to stand.

A knock sounded and the door opened again. Melody and Ashley barged in. "Hi, guys. What's up?" Melody asked in a chipper voice.

Tom pulled his sweatshirt in front of his chest to cover his growing tits. He sighed when the girls laughed. He shook his head as he dropped the sweatshirt. "Embarrassed, I guess," he admitted as he blushed.

"Are your boobs bigger?" Linda asked. "Damn, girl, they're just growing and growing. When are they going to stop?"

Tom blushed even more scarlet. "It's not my fault," he retorted. "I wish they would stop."

Katie grinned. "You know what this means?"

Tom groaned. "I don't need a bra," he protested, already knowing what the girls were going to suggest - again.

"Yes, you do," the girls answered in unison.

Tom shook his head, already knowing what they were thinking. "And you want to take me shopping, I suppose?"

The girls nodded their agreement. "Yup."

Tom sighed and shook his head. "Aren't you guys ever going to stop nagging me about shopping and buying clothes?"

"Nope."

He stood, and, after glancing nervously at the gathered girls, unfastened his pants, slid them past his hips and stepped out of them. "I'm going to take my shower," he announced. He noticed Katie and the other girls staring at him. "What?"

"Your panties - they're kind of ... sexy!" Melody declared. "You've been shopping without us!"

Tom blushed again. "No," he answered quickly. Too quickly to be believed, he realized. "Well, yes." He grabbed his robe and slipped it on. "I ... made a mess of one pair, and, well, I was already near the mall, and, well..."

Katie smiled. "You're learning," she said approvingly.

Tom scowled at the girls before grabbing his towel and toiletries bag and starting out the door. He stopped and stepped back to his dresser, where he recovered a new pair of panties, and he pulled out a fresh tampon.

He felt embarrassed as he stomped down to the shower. He wasn't really a girl, and it wasn't natural for him to have periods, nor to be shopping for sexy panties. And yet, he was, and all these girls knew it. It seemed too damned wrong! The problem was that, with his current condition, it wasn't wrong.

Tom hung his towel and robe outside the shower, took his "essentials," and stepped into the shower. Like in many dorms, it was a communal shower, with six shower heads in one large tiled room. Taking a shower was a social and communal experience, as Tom had learned but still hadn't gotten used to.

Shelly Martin was already in the shower. As Tom stepped in, Shelly turned, saw Tom, and gave an audible snort of disapproval. She quickly finished rinsing her hair, turned off the water, grabbed her towel, and began to wrap her hair. With a look of disdain, she stepped outside the shower and began to dry the rest of her body with a second towel.

Tom ignored her display of contempt and turned on his own shower. He gingerly tested the temperature with his hand before backing into the warm spray. He'd learned early that his nipples were very sensitive, and that the shower spray could actually hurt. The warm water pulsed into his lower back. His eyes drifted shut, and he let the spray wash his cares away.

For a few glorious moments, his cares vanished. His feeling of cramping and the soreness in his back disappeared. The snobbish attitude of Shelly vanished. His strange state of being a woman and living in Avery Hall floated away. It was just Tom and the warm jet of water massaging his back. He wished that the shower could just go on and on.

"Hi."

Tom's reverie was broken; his eyes snapped open as he turned his head toward the voice. "Oh, hi Dianne," he answered when he recognized the red-haired beauty.

Dianne stepped to a shower head and turned it on. "Looks like you were lost in thought," she said pleasantly. Her attitude was a nice change from Shelly.

"Oh, yeah," Tom answered. "It feels good on my back. I guess I kind of lost track of things."

Dianne smiled as she stepped into her own shower. "I figured you were here."

"How?"

"Shelly came stomping out of the bathroom, pissed."

Tom shook his head sadly. "I know she doesn't like me, but how is her being pissed any different from normal?"

Dianne laughed. "Yeah, she is a bitch." She glanced at the shower entrance, and then back at Tom. "Did you notice anything about her?" she asked in a hushed tone.

Tom thought for a moment. "Like what?"

Dianne glanced again. "Did you notice that she's not a natural blonde?"

Tom frowned, pondering her words. "How ... how can you tell?"

Dianne grinned. "I think you know."

Tom blushed almost immediately. "I ... hadn't noticed," he said quickly. "I mean, it's not like I'm exactly used to ... seeing ... being with ... naked girls."

"Well, I think you're doing okay. I mean," she continued, "I can't imagine how I'd feel if it were me." She looked down at his body. "You've got a much hairier body than she does," she said, trying not to embarrass him. "On your legs, I mean."

Tom nodded. "Yeah, I know. Katie has been nagging me about shaving."

"It's not every day we see a guy shaving in the girls' dorm."

Tom shook his head. "Nah, not my face," he explained quickly. "Dr. Tina gave me something called 'Beard Stop' for that. She and Rachel thought that my shaving my face would be ... awkward."

"Well, duh!" Dianne added, perhaps a little too quickly and eagerly. "So, what Oh!"

Tom had lifted his arm, showing his hairy armpit. "Yeah. That's what Katie said, too."

Dianne frowned. "Well, unless you're going for the European natural look, I have to agree with Katie." She wrinkled her nose. "It's kind of gross."

"Not you, too!" Tom complained. "You're all ganging up on me."

Dianne tried to look innocent. "Please. Would you do it for me?" She batted her eyes in an exaggerated way.

Tom laughed, at the same time he cringed inwardly. Seeing a lovely naked girl bat her eyes while saying "please" really got him. After an awkward moment, he sighed. "I don't know how," he explained. "To shave my armpits, I mean."

Dianne smiled sweetly. "I'll teach you." She pulled a razor from her shower kit. "And your legs?" she added.

Tom closed his eyes and shook his head. Despite having girl equipment, he was still a sucker for pretty eyes, he realized. "Oh, all right."

Dianne proceeded to show Tom by shaving his left armpit and one leg. As she shaved inside his thigh, Tom felt a strange tingling; he immediately attributed it to nerves. He noted that Dianne seemed to be taking her time in that area.

"Um," Tom said hesitantly, "is ...?" He didn't know quite what to say.

Dianne glanced up at him and smiled. "You don't want me to nick you down there, do you?" she asked with a wink.

Tom grimaced. "Uh, I guess not." He realized that her touch was making him very uncomfortable - in a way he'd never quite felt. If he hadn't known better, he'd have sworn that he was getting aroused - in a girl way.

As soon as she finished, Dianne handed him the razor. "Just like that," she said with a smile.

Tom frowned. "You're going to make me solo ... right now?"

"No time like the present."

Tom sighed, but set about shaving his other side, just as Dianne had shown him. He found it was much tougher than she'd made it look. "This is harder than shaving my face," he complained.

Dianne just smiled. "Guys have no idea of how much work we go through to look nice." She looked at Tom's results. "Not bad - for a first try."

"Thanks," Tom sighed. "There's so much to get used to." He closed his eyes for a brief moment. "Like now."

Dianne nodded sympathetically. "It's just one of those things, I guess." She looked at Tom, studying him. "Sore back?" she asked.

Tom nodded. "Sore back, feeling bloated, some cramping. Yeah."

"Your period?"

Tom nodded again as he sighed. "Yeah. My first one. Not a lot of fun."

"I understand," she said. "For me, it gets sore right here," she demonstrated by pressing lightly in the small of Tom's back.

Tom sighed. "Yeah. That's one spot."

Dianne lightly pushed Tom until the shower was spraying directly on his back. "How's that feel?" she asked as she raised the temperature of the spray.

Tom his back relax under the stream of warm water. "Oh, yeah," he sighed, letting his eyes drift half shut. "That feels good."

Dianne was smiling at him. "Just relax and enjoy that." She stepped back to her own shower and quickly rinsed.

Tom started, confused. He shook his head. "Uh ... "

Dianne shut off her shower and glanced over her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Tom started to speak, but he shut his mouth. Finally, he spoke. "I thought" He stopped; what he was thinking sounded ridiculous to him.

A tiny frown flitted across Dianne's features, and then her eyes widened. "Did you think ... that I was ...?" Her jaw dropped open.

Tom looked down at the floor, suddenly feeling ashamed. "I ... I don't know," he mumbled. "It's just ... I mean ... you were ..."

Dianne laughed, which made Tom blush with shame. "You thought I was coming on to you?"

Tom nodded mutely. He expected that Dianne would laugh, and then tell all the other girls, and his life would go from difficult to impossible.

She surprised him. "I guess that's kind of ... sweet," she managed to say. "I mean, you were a guy, and you probably still think of us girls the way a guy would." She shrugged. "I guess taking a shower with a naked girl is a little confusing."

Tom nodded. "That, and being taught how to shave, and all the other things.. Yeah."

Dianne paused, as if thinking, and then she nodded. "I can see that." She thought another moment. "Were you ... hoping that I'd make a pass at you?" she asked carefully.

Tom bit his lip and pondered her question. "I don't know, maybe. I mean, you're very pretty, and, well, it's hard not to think of you in a sexy way."

He shook his head sadly. "I've changed so much, and to now wonder if I still like girls, but as a girl?" He shuddered anew. "Every new feeling I get in this body scares the hell out of me. What if I really liked it? Would that make me want to stay a girl?" He turned away. "I've lost so much of my identity, and I feel like I'm lost sometimes."

Dianne stepped back and turned off her shower. "I'm sorry," she said as she stepped toward the doorway. "I didn't mean to mislead you."

Tom turned to face her. "I'm sorry, too," he said, his voice choking with emotion. "I guess I messed this up, didn't I?"

Dianne smiled. "Maybe not. We're still getting to know each other," she explained. She smiled again. "Friends?"

Tom returned the smile. "Yeah, I like the way that sounds. Friends."

Chapter 4 - Going all the Way

A heavy sigh echoed through the small office, as Tom's shoulders sank under the weight of Rachel's words.

Dr. Tina nodded slowly when Tom glanced her way, confirming the bad news. "Two more months," he said softly to himself, shaking his head slowly. After a long silence, during which Tom stared at his feet, he looked back to Rachel. "Okay," he said simply, his voice heavy with resignation.

"Your hormone levels are just not right," Dr. Tina explained quickly. "It would make this a very high risk pregnancy. And you don't want that, do you?"

Tom shook his head. "Nope."

Dr. Tina glanced at Rachel briefly before she rose and padded over to the door. "If you need me..." she offered before she slipped out, closing the door behind her, leaving Tom alone with Rachel.

Rachel stared at Tom, trying hard to read his emotional state. "You want to talk about it?" she offered.

Tom shook his head. "You know," he began hesitantly, "I almost expected this." He looked at her, shaking his head as he smiled ironically.

"What do you mean, you expected it?"

Tom sighed again. "Things didn't ... feel right," he said simply. "I can't explain it, but it just didn't feel right."

Rachel smiled. "Some would call that woman's intuition." She saw the sudden shocked expression on Tom, and hurried to add, "I'd call it being in tune with your body." She

smiled. "All of this is new, so you're a _lot_ more sensitive to changes than, say, a natural girl your age. You notice things that other girls take for granted. So it's not unusual. In fact, I hear it a lot."

Tom stared at her, wide-eyed, for the briefest of moments, before a faint smile emerged. "Yeah, I suppose you do."

"How does this change your plans?" Rachel prompted.

"Plans?" Tom asked, momentarily confused.

"Christmas vacation plans."

"Oh, those." Tom shook his head. "I hadn't thought about it."

"Well, since you won't be confined to bed-rest or minimal activities, you'll be able to travel - like maybe going home?"

Tom's eyes widened as he shook his head vigorously. "No," he said emphatically. "I ... can't." His eyes were almost fearful at the prospect.

"Can't?" Rachel asked, her eyebrows rose. She'd noticed Tom's reaction. It was her job to observe things like that. "Are you afraid of how your family will react?"

Tom nodded, his eyes downcast. "I just ... can't."

Rachel nodded her understanding. "We've talked about this before you were accepted," she reminded him. "We spent a _lot_ of time talking about what this would mean to your family, your friends, to everyone you know. And if I remember correctly, you said all those interviews and discussions were silly."

Tom's head snapped up, his eyes fixed on Rachel as his mouth dropped open in surprise. After a moment, the corners of his mouth curled up slightly and he gave a half-hearted guffaw. "Yeah, that sounds like something I'd say." He looked at Rachel for several silent seconds. He nodded slightly as he dropped his gaze. "I don't know."

"Well, if you don't want to go home, you've got friends in the dorm; maybe ..." She let the thought hang.

Tom nodded. "Maybe."

Tom glanced up from his books as the door opened. "Hi, Katie," he called as she came through the door. Then Christina and Melody followed her in. Tom frowned as he realized that Katie was up to something. "What's going on?"

Katie glanced at the other girls, stepped to Tom, and closed his book. "We were talking, and it was unanimous."

"What was unanimous?" Tom asked warily.

"This isn't working," Melody explained as if it were obvious.

Tom's eyes widened. "What do you mean, not working? Are you telling me that I'm not ..."

Katie cut off his words. "You're too ... masculine. Your appearance and mannerisms just don't go with our floor. It's too disruptive."

Christina, nodded. "We decided that we need to do something about your appearance so you fit in better."

Tom realized what she was saying, and his eyes widened with alarm. "You mean...?"

"Makeover!" the girls answered gleefully, almost in perfect union. They pulled him to his feet, and then hustled him out the door and to the parking lot. Even his protests were faint in comparison to the enthusiastic banter of the girls.

In short order, the four of them were at the mall.

"I can't do this," Tom complained as he was led inside. "I look like a freak!"

Katie nodded, still clutching his arm so he couldn't escape. "Yes, but we're going to fix that."

"I don't want to fix anything," Tom whined.

"Too bad," Christina said simply. With that, they arrived at a hair salon. They led him to the counter.

The girl behind the counter was visibly puzzled as she looked over Tom. "Can I help you," she asked cautiously.

Tom started to open his mouth, but Melody stepped forward. "_She_ needs to get her hair styled. Something nice and pretty."

"And _very_ feminine," Katie added.

"And low maintenance," Christina chimed in.

Tom glared at her, but the girls just laughed.

The stylist was nonplussed. "Any ideas of what you want?" she asked.

Tom glanced at Katie, Christina, and Melody, and then shook his head. "No," he said softly.

Katie pulled her cell phone out and worked the controls as the stylist watched the screen. "We were thinking something like this."

Tom realized that she was showing a picture. He suddenly realized why the girls had taken his picture a few days prior. They'd probably done some on-line virtual makeover to get ideas.

The stylist looked at the camera, and then at Tom. "Hmmm," she said, but she was wrinkling her nose.

"Or this. Or this. Or maybe even this one."

The stylist looked at Tom again. "Back up one." She alternated her gaze between Tom and the picture. "That one might work," she mused.

Tom stepped toward the camera to see what the girls were planning for him, but they quickly blocked him. He felt helpless.

"Just work your magic, and make her pretty," Katie answered with a sweet smile.

Tom glared at her again. He leaned close to Katie's ear. "She probably thinks I'm gay," he whispered.

Katie just smiled. "I doubt it," she whispered back. "She already checked out your budding boobs, so she probably thinks you're either a late bloomer or transitioning."

Tom's eyes widened in horror at the thought. "That's supposed to help me?" he mouthed as the stylist led him toward the back.

Christina giggled as Tom was led away. "Are we being a bit too mean?" she asked, still chuckling.

Katie smiled. "No." She sat down and picked up a magazine to pass the time.

Quite a bit later, Tom walked back to the counter.

Katie's eyes widened. "You look ... great!" she exclaimed.

"That's so cute!" Christina added enthusiastically.

Tom wasn't convinced. He looked near tears. "Happy?" he asked Katie, sounding slightly bitter.

"It's a start," she said as she quickly paid for his styling.

"What do you mean, it's a start?" Tom whined.

Melody smiled. "We have a few stops yet to go," she said simply.

The next stop, to Tom's horror, was the manicurist's chair in the salon. As the girls watched, encouraged, and giggled, Tom's nails were manicured and short false nails were glued on and painted. When the manicurist finished, Tom's nails were about three eighths of an inch longer than when he'd started. And that had been a battle; the girls wanted a half inch or longer, and he wanted none. They finally conceded at three eighths.

Next, the girls got his ears pierced, and with more of his allowance, they bought large feminine gold hoop earrings to wear when the piercings healed.

The department store makeup section followed; Tom's eyebrows were painfully thinned. When Tom complained, the girls reminded him that they would not tolerate a bushy unibrow on their floor. After all, their floor had standards and pride. And again, the pictures on Katie's cell phone were a guide to the sales associate. Tom got a lesson in makeup, and, to his dismay, the girls got him a good supply of foundation, blush, eye shadows and liners, and even lipstick and lip-gloss. Once the sales lady finished, she turned him toward the mirror.

Tom gasped. He didn't recognize himself. "Holy crap!" he exclaimed. "Is that ... me?"

Katie grinned. "All you," she answered.

Indeed, Tom looked nothing like the person who'd walked into the mall a couple of hours earlier. The blush accented his cheeks, making them seem higher. The lipstick and liner made his lips appear fuller and more sensuous. The same was true of his eyes. Strategic use of eye shadow and liner made them appear big and soft and feminine, and - as much as he hated to admit it - sexy. With the short sassy haircut, he was completely transformed - and very feminine.

"Now for the clothes," Melody announced.

Tom's head spun to her, his mouth agape. "Aren't we done?" he complained.

"Nope," Christina answered. "Your clothes don't work. Time for some new ones."

Tom frowned. "Okay," he relented, knowing that the girls were going to get him new clothes whether he liked it or not. "Maybe we can get me a couple of shirts and pants."

"Something like that," Katie said sweetly. Tom shuddered involuntarily; he knew from her tone of voice that it was going to be nothing like that.

First on the tour of torture was the lingerie department of a department store. When Tom complained, they suggested that they could shop for underwear at Victoria's Secret instead. Tom decided to shut up to minimize his embarrassment.

Katie and the girls helped him pick out various bras and panties to try; he was still resisting wearing a bra, and wanted plain panties, while the girls were pushing for something a lot more feminine. Once they knew his size, the girls picked out his panties suiting their taste, not his. His opinion, obviously, didn't matter.

When it came time to try on a bra, Tom felt humiliated when Katie came with him into the changing room. So far, he'd been very shy about any of the girls seeing him naked, especially after the mix-up with Diane and the snobbish attitude of Shelly. He'd taken his showers very early in the morning or very late at night, and he changed clothes only when Katie wasn't in the room. When she was in the room and changing clothes, he always turned away. He still didn't feel like he was a girl, and that it was okay to disrobe around other girls, or see them partially nude.

Now, he was trapped in a changing booth with her. He hesitated, embarrassed, but Katie would not be dissuaded. Reluctantly, he turned his back and pulled off his T-shirt.

Katie spun him around until he was face-to-face with her. "We're both girls," she said insistently but softly. "It's okay."

Tom felt like crying - again. "But ... this is ... I mean ..." he was near incoherence.

Katie shook her head. "Get over it." She shifted her tone so she sounded encouraging. "Now try this on." She handed him one of the bras she was holding.

"I don't need a bra," he complained with a pout.

Katie fought to stifle a chuckle; Tom had no idea of just how sexy the pouty look was on him. "Yes, you do," she replied quickly. "So ..."

"I know. Get over it." Tom pouted for a moment, before he realized that this was a losing battle. He'd felt more sway and jiggle on his chest as his breasts continued to grow. He glanced down, as if to see what his growing breasts were going to give him some sign. They did - by their mere presence. He had to accept the fact that he was a girl, too - for now. With a sigh of defeat, he took the bra and began to clumsily put it on.

Katie watched the spectacle, amused, for a minute or so. Then she shook her head. "No, no, no," she said as she shook her head. "Like this." She took the bra and demonstrated. "Didn't you ever watch your sisters getting dressed and undressed?"

Tom's blush gave away his secret. Like most adolescent boys with sisters, he'd had opportunity to spy on them getting dressed. "But I didn't exactly take notes," he complained.

"Okay. There are two schools of thought for putting on a bra. Some say to hook the band, pull it up until the cups are on your boobs, and slip your arms into the straps. Others say the right way is to put your arms through the straps bend forward and let your boobs fall into the cups, and then fasten the strap in back." She shook her head. "I go with the first; I'm not big enough that my cup fit is a problem, and it's easier. Just do like I did."

Tom followed her example, and soon was wearing the lacy bra. He glanced down at it uneasily. "It makes my boobs look bigger," he wailed.

Katie smiled. "It's padded, so it helps you look bigger. Now, turn around." She examined how the strap fitted, and how the cups fit his small-but-growing breasts. "You're just a bit bigger than an A-cup now, so a little padding won't hurt." She smiled at him. "But given how fast you're growing, you'll outgrow this in no time. You probably only want to get a couple for now."

She unhooked the bra and slid it off Tom's shoulders. "Try this one now."

If Tom thought that selecting panties was a chore, picking bras was a life sentence to hard labor. Katie made him try on at least thirty different bras in a dizzying variety of styles and colors. She finally asked him what he thought.

"I would have bought the first one. It fit," he complained.

Katie's eyes widened. "Are you out of your mind? You can't pick clothes without trying different styles and colors and brands!"

"But it fit," Tom rebutted.

Katie rolled her eyes. "You have a lot to learn about shopping," she sighed.

She shook her head for a moment. "Okay, you cannot wear a dark bra under light tops. With a plunging neckline, you probably want a demi-bra so the cups don't show. If ..."

She saw that Tom wasn't paying attention. "Forget it! Dress like a cave-girl if you want!" She turned in indignation.

"Wait," Tom pleaded softly. "I ... I need your help."

Katie turned back to him. "Okay," she relented. "I know this is hard for you, but if you want to fit in, you're going to have to learn more about fashion and style. And it all starts with the underwear."

Tom nodded slowly. "I'll try," he promised. "Just don't go so fast! I feel like I'm drinking from a fire hose."

Katie nodded slowly. "Actually," she admitted sheepishly, "that was kind of my plan. A little 'shock therapy' to push you away from your old habits."

Tom frowned, but then his expression lightened and he nodded slowly. "It's working," he admitted. Then he looked at the bras Katie was holding. "How about ... this one, and ... this one?"

Katie smiled. "Okay. Those are a good start. You know, you'll probably be getting new bras in a couple of weeks."

Next came pants. Tom was dismayed by the jeans: "They're so ... tight!" He glanced at his rear. "This pair makes my butt look ... round!"

Katie nodded with a grin. "Your butt is round. You're developing a nice round girl-butt, so these jeans are just perfect! And they flatten your tummy a bit. They're just right!"

Tom pouted - again. "I want to hide my butt, not call attention to it!"

Katie shrugged. "If you want to fit in, it's better to emphasize your female parts rather than hide them."

Despite his remaining - but dwindling - male ego, Tom knew that Katie had a point. He decided not to fight. "But there aren't any pockets!"

Christina's answer was simple, if somewhat disheartening to Tom. "We'll get to purses in a bit."

Melody insisted that Tom get a couple of skirts, and he was past objecting. He knew that it wouldn't have done any good, anyway. He ended up with a tight moderately short denim skirt and a more modest knee-length A-line skirt. Melody wasn't happy, but Katie decided that two were better than none, and they moved to tops.

Tom had never considered the vast array of choices that women faced when shopping for blouses and tops. When he suggested a simple white blouse, he found that he had to consider fabric, neckline, lace and ruffles versus embroidered designs, and much more. He took the coward's way out and simply let the girls decide.

Next were shoes. The girls let Tom get a pair of tennis shoes - as long as they were woman's style and colors. In exchange, he let them pick out a couple of pairs of pumps. If it hadn't already been late in autumn, he knew they'd have gotten him sandals as well.

As Christina had promised, they had to stop for a purse. Tom felt exhausted, but the girls seemed to draw energy from their shopping expedition. He was too glad to go to the counter to pay.

The second point of Tom's female education came when he got to the register. He was grateful to have the clothing allowance; as it was, he put a large dent in two months' worth of his funding. As a final symbol of his change, the girls made him change into one of his new outfits before they left the store. He walked out of the mall looking much more a woman than he'd entered. As they walked through the mall on their way out, Tom felt conspicuous. He knew that every guy was looking at him, and probably laughing at how gay he looked. By the time they got to the car, he was in tears.

"Okay, it probably was a bit much," Katie admitted.

Tom sat on his bed, emotionally exhausted and staring at his feet, shod as they were with his new pumps. "Uh huh," he muttered. The remaining packages from the shopping trip were strewn on his bed.

"Was the trip worth it?" Katie asked simply.

Tom glanced up, surprised by her question. "What?" he stammered.

"The shopping spree. Was it worth it?"

Tom opened his mouth to answer, but he shut it again. "I don't know," he answered slowly.

Katie smiled, and reached out her hand. Puzzled, Tom reached up and took her hand, and she pulled him to his feet. "Let's take a look at the result, okay?"

Katie led Tom down the hall to the bathroom, where there was a large, full-length mirror on one wall. "Take a look," she offered.

Tom looked at the mirror, and his mouth dropped open. "Wow!" he said softly. "Is that me?"

Katie smiled and nodded. "That's the new you."

"I don't look like a guy," Tom said softly.

"No," Katie answered. "You're going to fit in a lot better - both here and in public."

"When we were walking out of the mall," Tom admitted softly, "I thought every guy was looking at me because I looked gay or something. But..."

Katie smiled. "But what?"

Tom stared at himself, his eyes still wide. With his new look, the wide-eyed stare fit into the appearance of a sweet innocent girl, an attractive girl. "If" He found it difficult to continue.

Katie knew exactly what he was thinking. "If you'd have seen a girl looking like you walking through a mall, you'd have been staring too, right? Because that girl was sexy and attractive, right?"

Tom nodded mutely, entranced by his own appearance. The face staring back at him from the mirror was good-looking in a girl-next-door way. He looked - sweet and innocent and, he almost hated to admit it, sexy.

The changes didn't stop at his neck. As Katie had pointed out often, the loss of testosterone was causing him to slowly lose muscle mass, and Dr. Tina's diet was doing wonders for his figure. His waist was trimmer; he hadn't had much fat to begin with, and it was gone, having moved to his rounder hips and chest. While he still looked a little 'butch', his general body shape was a lot more feminine than masculine. He was wearing a white blouse with a pleated front, tucked into his hip-hugging blue jeans. Katie had him keep the top two buttons unbuttoned; with the curves suggested by his growing bosom beneath the padded bra, it had a certain inviting allure, a magnet to male eyes into the promised cleavage.

"I ... I almost don't believe it," he whispered.

Katie led Tom away from the mirror. "Now how do you feel?" she asked as they strode back down the hall.

Tom shook his head. "I'm kind of overwhelmed," he admitted softly. "It's like ... I'm a different person."

Katie nodded as she opened the door to their room. "That's the point."

Tom stepped in, and he saw a group of the girls waiting. They looked him over critically, and appreciatively. "Wow!" "Look at you!" "That looks cute!" "Your hair is darling!" "You look fabulous!"

Tom stood in shock, hardly believing the way the girls were talking about him. He felt like he fit in finally.

Katie broke the spell. "Okay, girls, there's one last thing to do."

Tom spun toward her, surprised. "But ..."

Katie shook her head to silence him. "What did you all decide?" she asked the girls.

One of the girls stood. "We took a vote."

Katie smiled. "And?" She glanced at Tom, noticing his confusion.

The girl smiled. "The winner is ... Tommi Sue!"

The girls cheered, and Katie smiled. Tom's mouth dropped open. "What ..?" he started to say.

Katie grasped his shoulders, gave him a quick peck on both cheeks, and hugged him tightly. "Welcome, Tommi," she said solemnly.

Tom shook his head. "But ..."

The girls were lining up to repeat Katie's gesture of welcome, as if it were a formal ceremony or christening. One after another, they hugged and kissed him, welcoming him as Tommi Sue. He felt the world spinning around him.

Finally, the girls were done, and Tom turned to Katie. "What's going on?" he stammered. "Why ... why are you calling me Tommi Sue?"

Katie just smiled. "It's your christening. Today is your re-birthday. You changed your hair, your clothes, and your looks - so we thought it was time to change your name, too!" She saw Tom's stare of disbelief. "You wouldn't change your name, and we simply couldn't have a "Tom" on our floor, so we took a vote."

One of the girls piped up. "Yeah. Shelly wanted to call you Gertrude."

"She's a bitch, anyway," another girl piped in.

"What ... were some of the other choices?" Tom asked hesitantly, almost as if he didn't want to know.

"Candy, Teri, Liz, Jen," one girl volunteered.

"And Anne and Yvonne," another added.

Tom sighed, closing his eyes for a brief moment. He was overwhelmed. Katie was right - today felt like a total rebirth. He might as well get used to the change. He was ... he corrected himself mentally ... she was Tommi Sue. She was among her new friends. She felt accepted. Tears started to seep from her eyes. "Thank you," she said softly as she wrapped her arms around Katie.

Tommi knew that the girls had deliberately chosen a name that was feminine, but close enough to Tom that she wouldn't feel overwhelmed. They cared about her. They were her friends. She was Tommi Sue, a girl in a girls' dorm.

Chapter 5 - Discoveries and Revelations

When Suzie didn't look up from her computer, Tommi Sue cleared her throat to announce her presence.

Suzie looked up suddenly at the noise; for a moment, she was confused, but then her face brightened. "Tom? Wow! Look at you! I almost didn't recognize you!" She practically leaped to her feet and gave Tommi a warm embrace

Tommi enjoyed Suzie's welcoming hug. "The girls in my dorm decided to give me a makeover," she explained, blushing moderately.

"And they did a fabulous job!" Suzie exclaimed. "You look ... amazing!"

"And they gave me a new name, too. Tommi Sue." Tommi seemed simultaneously a bit proud and a bit embarrassed. "It's a lot more work to do my hair and makeup," she complained weakly. "So I'm not sure it's worth it." She decided to change the subject. "Is Rachel in? She's expecting me."

"Trust me - the way you look, it is worth it." Suzie smiled. "She's expecting you. Let's go back." She stood to escort Tommi back to Rachel's office.

Tommi was surprised when Suzie escorted her back. Normally, Tommi would just walk to the back offices on by herself. She was even more surprised when Suzie sat down in Rachel's office with Tommi.

"You're looking very nice today," Rachel started cautiously. "I see you've ... changed ... from the last time you were here."

Tommi nodded. "Suzie asked the same thing. The girls in the dorm decided to give me a total makeover to help me adjust."

Rachel was obviously trying to control her reactions, but she failed and winced visibly. "A little extreme, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that," Tommi agreed half-heartedly. From her tone, she was conflicted about how she was reacting to the significant change.

"And what do you think of it?" Her words were cautious and very deliberate.

Tommi stared at the wall behind Rachel for a few moments, collecting her thoughts. "I ... I don't know," she answered finally. "I mean, it wasn't my choice, was it? But it helps."

"It helps?" Rachel asked, surprised. "How?"

Tommi nodded. "It's hard to describe. I guess because I feel invisible on campus now."

"Invisible?"

Tommi wrinkled her nose, realizing that her choice of words was wrong. "I mean, not invisible. But not a freak. It's like ... I'm normal. I don't feel like people are staring at me now. I'm just another girl."

Rachel's eyebrow rose. "Okay, I think that makes sense. But is it what you wanted?"

Tommi's eyes widened. "What I wanted?"

"Yes," Rachel echoed. "You said the girls did this. But is it what you wanted?"

Tommi thought for a moment. "I don't know," she answered candidly. "I'm not sure I would have done this, but it does help, so I really don't know."

"How do you feel about how you look? About how guys - and other girls - react to you?"

"I don't know," Tommi admitted slowly. "For the most part, it's a lot better. I mean, how people react to me. The girls are a lot friendlier - mostly."

"Mostly?" Rachel asked, surprised at his observation.

"Some of them are probably just jealous," Suzie interjected. "I mean, you are cute."

Rachel gave her a quick dirty look, silently chiding her for the comment.

Tommi laughed. "That's exactly what Katie said."

"And the guys?"

Tommi frowned. "I'm not sure. Mostly, I'm just another girl. But I'm getting some ... attention from some guys."

"What sort of attention?" Rachel was getting genuinely curious; she'd noted that Tommi was a very observant client.

"Some guys ... make comments. Not very polite comments," Tommi said, her nose wrinkling with disgust.

"But you were a guy. You know how some guys act."

Tommi laughed. "Yeah. Like assholes." She sighed. "It's a lot different when you're on the receiving end." She shook her head. "And then there are a couple who seem ... interested in me, as a girl." She dropped her eyes. "One guy is ... so damned polite and nice. The assholes - I can deal with. But I ... don't understand how to deal with the polite nice guys."

Suzie raised an eyebrow. "You're surprised at that?"

Tommi closed her eyes for a moment and sighed heavily. "Yeah, I guess so. I know how guys can be so smooth, faking sincerity, because they're just after a little piece. I ...I can't figure out which is which. And I didn't expect it. I mean, I'm not really a girl. Or, I am now, but I wasn't. I guess I sort of am. A girl, I mean. But" She shook her head. "It's confusing. And I don't know how to deal with it. Guys, I mean. Maybe it's because I kind of think of myself as still a guy. But not completely." She looked at Rachel, her eyes full of confusion. "Does that make any sense?"

Rachel nodded. "You'd be surprised at how common that is. Right, Suzie?"

"You know?"

Suzie smiled and nodded. "I used to be like you. I told you before your surgery, but you might not remember because you were pretty full of drugs. Before I did my first surrogacy, I was a boy."

"But" Tommi felt confused. "You're so feminine! So ... graceful, so poised." She shook her head. "I don't get it. How did you adjust?"

"Thanks. But I don't really know how to explain how I adjusted. I just did. It seemed so ... natural. It just happened." Suzie glanced uneasily at Rachel, and looked back at Tommi. "There's more. I'm ... engaged." She watched Tommi's eyes widen. "And my current

pregnancy - it's not a surrogacy."

"You mean..." Tommi stammered the start of her question.

Suzie nodded. "Phil and I are expecting our very own baby. And we're very happy. And I love being a woman. I could never go back."

"But ... your fiancé ... does he know?"

"Of course he knows, silly," Suzie answered as if Tommi's question was the most absurd thing she'd ever heard. "And it doesn't make any difference to him. I'm a complete woman, physically and mentally, and legally, and I love him."

Tommi gawked at Suzie for several seconds, before she managed to close her mouth, which had dropped open in shock. "How ... how easy was it? I mean, learning to be a girl?"

Suzie smiled. "You mean, getting rid of the old boy habits, and acting and walking and talking and thinking completely like a girl?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. If I'm going to be a girl - until this is over - then I guess I should look and act and talk like a girl - so I don't seem so out of place."

Rachel permitted herself a small smile. "Well, based on what your friends in the dorm have done, I'd say you've got the 'look' part down pretty well."

Tommi blushed and looked down, embarrassed. "Thanks. I think."

"A lot of it is your mindset," Rachel continued. "If you think of yourself as a girl, and are confident in yourself, that's how people will react to you."

Suzie nodded her agreement. "And the clinic has classes that can help with mannerisms." She glanced down at Tommi, noting that she was wearing a skirt and had crossed her ankles and had her feet to one side of the chair - a very dignified and modest - and ladylike - posture. "But I can see that your friends are helping out."

Tommi glanced down as she blushed again. "Yeah, they keep reminding me when I do something that they consider improper."

Rachel glanced at Suzie, who nodded and rose. "I've got to get back to my desk," she excused herself.

After Suzie had gone, Rachel continued. "To be honest," she practically blurted, "when Katie told me what the girls had done, I was quite nervous. It usually takes guys a long time to decide to go completely female. It seemed like they were forcing the issue."

Tommi laughed, an unenthusiastic hollow sound. "It wouldn't have done any good. Maybe Katie wasn't in favor of it, but she couldn't stop the other girls. Just like she couldn't stop them in the shower when I first moved in." She tilted her head back and stared wistfully at

the ceiling. "God, that seems so long ago."

Rachel stared at Tommi for a few seconds, her eye narrowed and her expression unreadable. "To be blunt," she finally said, "I'm worried that you went too far too fast." She sighed. "I know your friends are trying to be helpful, and they seem to be very accepting. The real question is, how do you feel about yourself, and about the changes?"

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know," she finally said softly. "I'm not really sure who I am or what I am."

Rachel watched as Tommi fought her inner emotions, trying to keep the tears and turmoil from showing. "That scares you?"

Tommi stared, wide-eyed, at Rachel for a second. "No shit. Wouldn't it scare you?" She saw Rachel start at her blunt words. "Sorry."

Rachel smiled knowingly. "I'm not offended," she said. "And actually, I'd have been more concerned if you tried to cover up how you feel. Suzie scares you, doesn't she?"

Tommi nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"Because...?"

"Because - she's so damned sweet and likeable and nice ... and what if I end up like her? What if I turn into a girl? What if I forget what it's like to be a guy?" She shook her head, and Rachel saw tears starting to form in the corners of her eyes. "Sometimes - I lay awake in bed and try to remember doing 'guy' things - and I can't! I feel like I'm turning into Suzie, that I'm starting to think and act like a girl too much, and I won't be able to remember being me, being Tom." She wiped at the tears.

Rachel saw the inner turmoil surfacing. "That's why I was afraid that your friends are pushing things too fast."

Tommi wiped again at the tears that wouldn't stop. "I feel like ... I'm four, and I'm on the roller coaster again."

Rachel's brow furrowed. "Roller coaster?"

Tommi nodded. "A long time ago, just after I turned four, we - my family and I - went to the county fair. There was a roller coaster, and Dad made me go. I didn't want to, but he said roller coasters were fun, and I'd have a great time." She paused, her eyes shut as she fought an obviously painful memory. "I hated it. I was scared and getting bumped around, and I couldn't make it stop." She shook her head. "And my older sister laughed at me for being scared, and Dad told me to 'man up' and quit crying."

Rachel's eyes widened at the revelation. "And this whole thing - you're not in control, and you're getting tossed around - emotionally, at least - and you can't stop it?"

Tommi dabbed at her eyes again. "No. And all I'm doing is ruining my makeup." She realized what she'd said, and she recoiled. "And even that's wrong! I shouldn't care about my makeup! I shouldn't be wearing a skirt. I shouldn't have boobs! But I do, and they're growing, and I can't stop any of this." She paused again to wipe at the stream of tears. "Katie says it's just my hormones making me all emotional."

Rachel realized that Tommi was on the edge, emotionally. Rachel had to watch her words very carefully. "What do you think?"

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know," she answered. "I mean - I've got boobs! And they're very tender and sensitive, and ... I feel like I'm getting used to having them! That's not how a guy feels, is it?"

"No." Rachel knew there was something more in his words. "But ..." she prompted.

"But ... I ... kind of ... like them," Tommi admitted, red-faced. "They're kind of ... nice ... to touch." She looked down, feeling humiliated. "Sometimes, I find myself comparing them to other girls, and they're so small that I wish they were bigger. And then I hate myself for wishing that."

"I thought you said you'd lost all your 'guy' thoughts," Rachel interjected, trying to take away some of the somber tones. "Wishing you boobs were bigger sounds like a typical competitive male thing, if you ask me."

Tommi's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Yeah, I suppose it does," she admitted with a slight giggle.

Rachel smiled. "The fact that you're worried is actually healthy. You haven't lost yourself. You're struggling with who you are - which is pretty normal for your age. You just added one new wrinkle to the identity crisis." She leaned back, and Tommi got the impression that the meeting was over.

"Dr. Tina is expecting you for a checkup, and if you're late, she'll definitely let me know." She tried to smile. "I think you're going to be okay, but if you want to talk more after meeting with her, come back."

Tommi stood, knowing that she'd been dismissed. After all, Rachel had a lot of other clients to deal with. Much as she wanted, much as it made her feel good, she knew she couldn't monopolize Rachel's valuable time. "Okay. But I think I'm done talking for the day."

Rachel wondered briefly if she'd been too abrupt in ending the 'session'. "See you on Wednesday?"

Tommi paused at the door. "Sure."

"And I want you to start going to the group sessions. Thursday night. I've been strongly suggesting, but you haven't taken the hint. So consider this an order."

Tommi swallowed. Group sessions - that could be emotionally tough. "Yes, ma'am." She ducked out the door before Rachel could chide her for the formality.

As the door closed, Rachel stared at the door for several seconds, before she looked at Tommi's folder. She shook her head slowly as she contemplated the day's session. She was certain that the girls were pushing Tom too fast. Tommi Sue, she corrected herself. And yet - there was something about her reactions, something that didn't fit the pattern of rebellious rejection of who and what she was becoming. She wondered - was Tommi going to make it? Maybe there was something that, for Tommi, made this an escape from past demons. She shook her head again - there was a lot more to Tommi than the tests and background investigations had shown. Much more - enough that Rachel was highly concerned.

She pushed the intercom button. "Suzie, send her in, please."

Tommi stopped at the nurse's station. "Hi, Deb," she said to get the nurse's attention.

Deb turned, and then did a double-take. "Tom?"

Tommi nodded. "Actually, the girls decided I should be Tommi Sue, since I don't look much like Tom anymore."

"Wow! Look at you! You're really cute!"

Tommi chuckled. Deb was a very warm, sweet, motherly woman who, given the number of visits he had, was quickly becoming a friend. "I get that a lot. Actually, the girls did this for me."

Deb smiled and gave Tommi a quick sisterly hug. "Dr. Tina is waiting. I think she's a bit mad that you're late."

Tommi grimaced. "Rachel kept me a little long," she explained.

"That's what usually happens. Let's get your vitals, and then Dr. Tina will be with you." Quickly and professionally, Deb took Tommi's temp, blood pressure, and other standard vital signs. Next, Deb got her weight. The final 'vitals' were not standard medical; Deb measured Tommi's chest, waist, and hips. Her eyebrows raised when she noted Tommi's chest measurement. "Are you wearing a padded bra?"

Tommi blushed. "Yeah. The girls thought I should have more curves."

"You know the drill," Deb clucked disapprovingly. "Off with it."

Tommi unbuttoned and removed her polo shirt, and then removed her bra so the nurse could get a true measurement. The lessons in putting on and removing bras came in handy.

Deb noted Tommi's bare chest. "You're still growing. Are your nipples still sensitive?" she asked professionally.

Tommi nodded as Deb took the measurement. She felt embarrassed as her nipples reacted to the cool air by getting hard.

"I know Dr. Tina will want to examine your chest, so leave your bra off for now. But unless you like being cold, you may want to pull on your shirt." Deb smiled, before she ducked out the door.

Tommi had barely pulled her shirt on when Dr. Tina came into the exam room. "How are you doing today?" she asked pleasantly, barely noticing Tommi as she studied the chart.

Tommi shrugged. "Okay, I guess. But I'm really getting tired of my nipples being sore."

Dr. Tina looked up, and smiled as she noted Tommi's new look. "I know I've told you it's normal, but that probably doesn't help. Let's take a look."

"So, aren't you going to say something about how I look? Everyone else has."

Dr. Tina smiled pleasantly. "I figured if you wanted to say something, you would. As I'm sure Rachel has."

Tommi pulled her shirt back off. In a quick but thorough exam, Dr. Tina inspected Tommi's breasts, including palpating the growing mounds. "Okay, they're developing normally," she announced. "Your milk ducts are developing nicely, which is why they feel a little hard and lumpy. Eventually, you'll develop what's called a fat pad over the ducts, and they'll be less sensitive and smoother."

"But my nipples seem so ... big," Tommi complained. "And they're always ... hard. Noticeable. If you know what I mean."

Dr. Tina smiled. "Part of it is sensitivity, part of it is the fact that they are bigger." She took a small ruler from the pocket of her lab coat. "Hmm," she muttered to herself as she measured Tommi's nipple. Sliding the ruler back into her pocket, she picked up the chart and made some notes. "Another two millimeters. Your areolae are 28 millimeters, and you're a little bigger than an A-cup."

Tommi looked stricken. "Yeah," she complained, "they're huge."

"Actually," Dr. Tina rebutted, "they're not very large. Not compared to a lot of late-teen girls and young women." She winked. "But they'll get there."

"How ... how big? Will they get, I mean?"

Dr. Tina shrugged. "It's hard to say. A lot of it is genetics. And they tend to grow in

preparation for lactation - both the breast size and the areolas. The average female areola is just over 1 inch, so yours will be larger than average. As far as breast size, you got a bit of a late start in developing, so that will reduce their growth a little bit. Based on your family genetics, I expect you'll be a full C or even a D-cup by the time you're done, or maybe a bit larger. "

Tommi's eyes widened. "That's _huge_!"

"Not really. But since you're not used to the idea, it'll _seem_ bigger than they really are."

Tommi nodded. "Maybe. But some of the girls think I need to be bigger. They say that my ... boobs ... don't look very big."

Dr. Tina laughed. "Well, they're right. Since you started out with a male physique, your rib cage - your chest measurement - is a few inches bigger than a natural girl would have, which is why you have a 40 inch band measurement in your bra. Most natural girls your height would be around 34 to 36. And the bigger the band, the smaller the breasts look."

"But they still seem big."

"Because you aren't used to them. Just for your peace of mind, it may help you to know that there are a lot of men with a condition called gynecomastia who have B-cup breasts, but because of their large ribcage, they merely look like they're a bit flabby. With your large ribcage, you'll probably look smaller than a lot of girls your height and weight, even if you have bigger breasts."

"Okay," Tommi answered hesitantly. "I'll take your word for it."

"Any other significant symptoms? Any complaints or things you've noticed?"

Tommi nodded. "I think I'm losing muscles." She flexed her arm. "See?"

Dr. Tina made a note. "Not uncommon. Without testosterone, you're undergoing a large number of physiological changes. Loss of muscle mass is one. Over a few months, your general physique will look more feminine, less muscular. You may notice that your body hair, like on your arms and legs, will get lighter and more sparse. Your body will 'rearrange' fat, which means you'll get a rounder, more feminine-appearing ... um ... derrière. You may not notice, but others will notice that your body odor, when you sweat, is a lot less musky. And I can see that your skin is a lot smoother." She looked at Tommi to see if she was taking in the information. "These are all effects of a lack of testosterone."

Tommi sighed. "So I'm less manly, and when I get done and change back, I'll have a less manly body?"

Dr. Tina shook her head. "All of these symptoms, except for breast development, are reversible when the testosterone is restored. Breast growth is irreversible - which is why they are surgically removed - when it's time."

Tommi sighed with relief. The feminization of his body was reversible, and surgery would remove the 'irreversible' boob growth.

"Anything else?"

Tommi sighed. "I'm losing weight."

"Yes, I saw. It's another four pounds since last time. That's, what, fifteen pounds in the last month? But again, that isn't a surprise. There's loss of muscle mass, but you're also losing the little bit of belly fat you had." She smiled broadly. "You know how many women would give their right arm to be flattening their tummies like you are?"

Tommi wrinkled his nose in distaste. "I don't really want to get a thinner waist and flat tummy," she complained. "It's just ... happening."

Dr. Tina gave Tommi a reassuring look. "One of the aspects of our protocol is accelerated healing, which means that your body is using a lot of energy to grow and adjust and mature, and very rapidly. During this time, it's not possible for you to eat enough to 'fuel' the changes, so your body is scavenging anything it can - and that means body fat. And that leads to a thinner waist and flat tummy." She gave Tommi a wink. "If we ever got this approved as a diet aid, we'd basically control the economy." She glanced back at the chart. "I'm willing to bet that your appetite isn't quite what it used to be."

Tommi nodded. "That's an understatement. I'm just not very hungry - not since the operation."

"Another normal - and temporary - side-effect of accelerated healing. In a few weeks, your appetite will return, and with it, the ability to pack on fat. If you know what I mean." She gave Tommi a warning look.

Tommi gulped. "So - if I want to stay cute, I'm going to have to watch what I eat."

"And make liberal use of our gym to get a good amount of exercise." She looked at Tommi's chart again. "Now if you're out of questions, I'd like to do some blood work to check your hormone levels. And your last period was ... hmmm, almost four weeks. So you're due?"

Tommi nodded, her expression unhappy. "Yeah. I'm due any time. Not that I'm looking forward to it."

Dr. Tina laughed. "Well, when we get your hormones all stable, we'll fix it so you won't have to worry about that for several months."

Tommi laughed sardonically. "Yeah. Instead, I'll blow up like a beach ball."

"Well, that's part of the bargain."

Feeling apprehensive, Katie followed Suzie back into the offices at Tommi's clinic. She didn't understand why she was here - only that Rachel had called specifically for her, and had ordered her to an appointment. Katie knew it was right around the time of Tommi's appointment, but Rachel had been very strict that Katie was not to let Tommi know that she was at the clinic as well.

Suzie turned a corner, and then knocked on a door - a door bearing the label 'Dr. Rachel McKnight, PhD, MSW'. Katie couldn't help but gulp; she knew Dr. Rachel bore heavyweight credentials in psychology that made her own junior-level classes seem insignificant.

"Come in," sounded mutely through the door.

Suzie opened the door, standing to one side so that Katie could enter. Katie gulped - This was a one-on-one with Tommi's head psychologist. She stepped behind a chair and waited, while Suzie closed the door behind herself, leaving Katie alone with Rachel.

As Katie watched, nervous, Rachel continued to type notes into her computer at a rapid pace. She obviously had some thoughts that she didn't want to elude her. To distract herself, Katie looked around the office. It was small -not a showplace, by any means, and the walls were peculiarly absent the diplomas and physiology 'gifts' left by pharmaceutical reps.

"Have a seat," Rachel said in a simple command.

Obligingly, Katie sat down across the desk from Rachel. "Why do I know this is about Tommi's makeover?" she asked before Rachel could speak.

Rachel started, and then she smiled slightly. "Pretty direct and to the point," she observed. "I see why Tom ... er, Tommi ... likes you as a roommate. You two are very much alike."

Katie shrugged. "It's pretty obvious. I know you've been concerned about how Tommi is adapting. The makeover was kind of extreme," she admitted. "And your message sounded a lot more like an order than a polite invitation."

Rachel laughed. "I guess Tommi is rubbing off on me, too. I guess I need more practice on diplomacy and subtlety."

"So?" Katie asked directly.

Rachel sighed. "You're studying psychology, aren't you?"

"Yes," Katie answered hesitantly. "Junior year."

"So you know that a person's psyche can be ... fragile."

Katie took a quick breath. "Look, um ... Doctor McKnight" She was clearly struggling with how formal or informal she should be with Rachel.

"Rachel. I don't stand on formality."

"Uh, okay," Katie answered hesitantly.

Rachel wrinkled her brow. "You're not too comfortable with that?"

Katie winced. "Not really. You've got your PhD," she noted, "and I'm just a student. It just doesn't seem right."

"Okay. It's up to you." She leaned back and took a deep breath. "Why? Why did you give Tom ... Tommi ... such an extreme makeover? You know this whole process is very stressful for her."

Katie nodded. "Yeah, I know. We talk a lot."

"And?"

Katie shrugged again. "It wasn't really my idea. Some of the girls thought it would help. You know - a break with the past, fresh start. Something so she'd fit in."

Rachel shook her head. "That kind of ... stunt ... would have driven several of my clients off the end. It was one hell of a risk." She frowned. "It's not a risk I can condone."

Katie nodded. "I understand. We ... the girls and I ... talked about it for a long time." She sighed. "Tommi has been having a lot of problems. Square peg, round hole. You know the drill. So we figured it would help her fit in so she wouldn't feel so ... awkward."

"Okay, I can understand your thinking. But it seems like you were bullying her."

"Or you could interpret it as applying some tough love," Katie replied defensively. "There is a difference."

Rachel started again in surprise at Katie's logic. Then she laughed lightly. "Touche."

Katie continued quickly, so she could get her entire explanation completed before Rachel interrupted again. "She's our friend. We love her. We just wanted to help her adjust, to feel like she belonged." She shook her head sadly. "You don't see her every day, see the pain, the uncertainty, the loneliness." Her voice cracked slightly. "We had to do something."

Rachel noted the passion in Katie's voice. She understood that Katie was acting out of concern for Tommi. "Okay," she admitted after a few seconds. "It's pretty obvious that you were only trying to help." She smiled. "Tommi is lucky to have a friend like you. Friends like your group, I mean," she corrected herself. "Not all my clients have people watching out for them." She sat back, shaking her head slightly. "But I still don't approve of the way you did what you did."

"I understand," Katie replied meekly, not sure if she was completely out of the doghouse.

"Next time you get an idea like this," Rachel added sternly, "come in and talk it over with me first." She smiled at the stunned expression on Katie's face. "I'll help make sure your plan isn't too ... extreme."

Tommi walked into her room, expecting to flop on her bed. She was physically and emotionally drained; late night studying, running around campus to classes, and a long difficult session with Rachel had spent her energy reserves. But instead of an empty room, she found the girls sitting around, on her bed and Katie's, on the floor, and on their chairs. They seemed pleasantly surprised when she entered. "Oh, sorry to interrupt," she apologized quickly.

"We're just talking," Melody explained in her usual cheery voice. She saw the fatigue on Tommi's features. "Rough day at the clinic? Do you need to lie down?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. It was a long day."

Melody, Erica, and Christina scampered off Tommi's bed. Mel and Erica sat down on the floor, while Christina sat on Tommi's desk. Tommi tossed her purse on the bed, kicked off her shoes, and then stretched out luxuriously on her bed. "Ah," she purred. "This feels sooooo good."

"So how did it go?" Katie asked.

Tommi thought she noted something odd in Katie's voice. She filed it away for future contemplation, mostly because she was too tired. Instead, she sighed. "Rachel is a little concerned about me," she said simply. "She thinks you guys went too far and too fast."

"She said that?"

Tommi shook her head. Her hair was growing slowly, but it was long enough that some wisps danced around her eyes. It was disconcerting, a little, but she was slowly getting used to it, and other aspects of being a girl. "Not in so many words. But from her questions, I could tell she was nervous. Maybe she thinks I'll be overwhelmed by all the changes."

Christina's eyes widened, and then she slid down onto the bed and gave Tommi an awkward hug. "We'll never let that happen," she retorted. "You're too special to us to let you."

Tommi found her hug warm and reassuring, and from the way Christina's breasts were pressed into her, strangely exciting. She twisted a bit and wrapped her arms around Christina. "Thanks." For the briefest of moments, Tommi got the impression that Christina wanted very much to kiss Tommi. Trying not to make the move too awkward or sudden, Tommi eased out of the embrace and slumped on her back.

Christina slid down the bed a bit, sitting on the edge, and conspicuously still close to Tommi.

"So I got orders to go to group sessions," Tommi began.

Katie got a Cheshire Cat grin. "Told you so," she said proudly to Erica, who promptly stuck her tongue out at Katie.

"And I got some new meds."

Katie's eyes narrowed with sudden concern. "Are you okay?" She was very concerned about her friend's health.

Tommi nodded quickly to reassure her friends and roommate. "Oh, yeah, I'm okay. But Dr. Tina said I'm adjusting too slowly, so she gave me some hormones and other stuff to help my body adjust more quickly."

The girls' seemed relieved. "So that's not bad," Erica noted hesitantly.

Tommi shrugged. "Mostly no."

"Mostly?" Katie asked.

"Yeah. Dr. Tina upped the dose on the accelerated healing meds. She said one side effect is that my boobs will be growing a little faster. It's part of my body maturing."

"Can she get some for Ashley?" Melody asked with a laugh. "If you grow too fast, you'll be bigger than her pretty soon."

Tommi felt the self-pity and fatigue flow from her; the girls had that effect. It was one of the big morale-boosters she had. She sat up and arched her back, playfully making her breasts jut forward. "Aren't they already?" she asked with a laugh.

The pleasant early autumn air from a few weeks ago was gone; an unseasonably early cold front had blasted through, and in its place was genuine cold. Tommi took comfort in the long coat, and not for just the warmth. Her developing female figure was disguised neatly by the coat, including especially her seemingly perpetually erect nipples. And for some reason, the chill in the air seemed to be a great distraction from the ache in her back and the unease and bloating.

As Tommi rounded the corner of the Liberal Arts building, she caught a gust of cold breeze square in her face, and she shivered. Perhaps some chill was distracting, but this was downright unpleasant. She dropped her face, hoping her collar and hair would help shield her bare skin from the icy wind.

As she came around the corner, her gaze on the sidewalk, her peripheral vision caught a glimpse of an approaching person, and she stopped short, awkwardly, nearly tripping. She looked up, startled, to see who she'd nearly run into.

The gaze that met her was as icy as the wind. "Hi," the girl said in a coldly calculating voice,

"Tommi."

"Hi, Stephanie." Tommi was less than pleased to nearly bump into Stephanie Harmon, one of the Beta Tau girls who'd so mercilessly tormented her a few weeks ago.

"You should watch where you're walking," Stephanie snarled. "Girls don't run around trying to knock over other people." Turning her nose up slightly, she stomped off.

Tommi stood for a few moments, watching her go. Inwardly, she wondered about Stephanie. She certainly was never going to be in Stephanie's circle of friends, but couldn't Stephanie - and the other Beta Taus - display the same civility toward Tommi as they did toward other people? What had she done to Stephanie to merit such scorn?

Shaking her head sadly, she dropped her gaze again, as much now to protect herself from the icy wind as to hide her face from others. One dose of emotional abuse was more than her daily dose. Then again, she thought, at least Stephanie hadn't physically assaulted her, or called her names. Rudeness from the Beta Tau girls, she realized slowly, was a vast improvement.

Katie looked up as the door shut behind Tommi. "How was the test?"

Tommi sighed. "Okay, I guess." She dropped her book bag on her bed and pulled off her coat.

Katie sat back from her own studies. "Okay? You guess?" She sighed. "Spill it."

Tommi tossed her coat on the bed. "Stephanie Harmon."

Katie frowned. "You bumped into her again?"

Tommi nodded as she slumped onto her bed. "Yeah."

"What did she do this time?"

"Nothing, really. She was just unusually rude."

"In other words," Katie interjected, "normal behavior for a sorority snob."

Tommi sighed as she dabbed at a tear in her eye. "Why does it seem like they're especially rude to me? What did I ever do to them?"

"And on top of everything else, you're feeling overwhelmed, right?"

Tommi nodded slowly. "You pretty much got it."

Katie stared at her for a moment. "Have you noticed that sometimes, you're very self-

confident, and other times, everything upsets you?"

Tommi considered her words. "I hadn't thought of that. I do know that some days, everything is easy, and others, everything sucks."

Katie bit her lip; she'd noticed a pattern, but broaching the subject, especially when Tommi was having a down day' and after Katie herself had been so totally chastised by Rachel about the makeover issue, could be sensitive. "Have you considered if there's a common theme, a set of thoughts, that triggers a bad day?"

"Nope." Tommi sat up, looking at Katie. She knew that Katie had a specific line of thought, but she also knew that the way Katie was addressing it, it was probably going to be a rough one - for her. "Okay, what are you thinking?"

"Getting that transparent, hmm?" Katie asked, trying to interject some humor. "Okay, I've noticed that whenever we have an evening or morning discussion about your home life, you have a pretty rough next day, especially when we talk about your dad."

Tommi snapped forward to the edge of her bed, feet on the floor and her muscles tensing, as she prepared to rebut Katie's words. An irrational anger was ready to fight physically if necessary. Katie saw the involuntary reaction and knew she'd hit a raw nerve.

And as fast as Tommi had reacted, she sank back on her bed, her mouth hanging open in shock, as the stark reality of Katie's thoughts penetrated her initial 'fight or flight' reaction. "Oh, my God!" she said softly, repeating the words with wide eyes as she realized just how she'd reacted. "Oh, my God!"

Katie slid onto the side of Tommi's bed, sitting close to her roommate and friend. She saw Tommi mouthing the words over and over, her eyes wide as if in shock. "Tommi?"

Tommi looked up, her eyes filled with fear of a reality that she'd never seen. "My dad!" she said softly. "He ... he never accepted me!" She dabbed her eyes. "He hated me! Because I wasn't like him!" She collapsed against Katie, tears flowing as she began to bawl uncontrollably.

Katie wrapped her arms around her roommate. "It's okay, Tommi," she cooed softly. "It's okay." For a long time, Katie held Tommi and let her cry.

Finally, Tommi sat back, her eyes red from tears. "He hated me."

Katie shook her head as she wiped a stream of tears from Tommi's cheek. "No, I doubt that he really hated you. But you couldn't live up to what he wanted, so maybe he never quite figured out how to accept you, to encourage you."

Tommi shook her head. "He was a mountain of a man, and proud of his strength and manliness. I never lived up to what he wanted in a son."

Katie knew how Tommi had described her dad. Six-feet one, two hundred pounds of solid

drill-handling muscle, he was a hyper-macho working man. Tommi had grown up literally in his shadow. Smaller than most boys, Tommi was never destined to match her dad's physical stature. While her dad loved the mine and the hard work, indeed, he seemed to revel in the roughest, hardest days, Tommi, as a boy, was small. Several times, lying awake late at night, Tom had overheard his parents talking; dad was confused about how to deal with a boy who would never be a star high-school fullback, a boy who had no interest in manual labor, a wisp who was tormented and beaten by the school bullies without fighting back. And in his own rough way of expressing himself, he'd said things about Tom that had left deep emotional wounds. Tommi, when she was a boy, had never felt able to meet her dad's expectations, nor earn his respect.

Long into the night, Katie and Tommi talked about her dad, about his ways of dealing with Tommi, and the sense of unmet dreams for a strong, manly son. Most of the time, Tommi was crying on Katie's shoulder as story after bitter painful story came spilling forth. Katie knew she had a test to study for, but she knew that, even more, Tommi needed this emotional catharsis.

About two-thirty in the morning, Katie noticed that Tommi's sobbing on her shoulder had stopped. Tommi's breathing was slow and regular. Carefully, Katie eased Tommi off her shoulder, and saw that she was asleep. With the tenderness of a mother laying her newborn in the crib, Katie eased Tommi onto her pillow and swung Tommi's legs up onto the bed. For a moment, she considered trying to change Tommi into her PJ's, but then decided against it and just pulled a blanket across the sleeping figure.

"I hope I got enough studying done," Katie said to herself as she tucked Tommi in bed, "because I know you needed this emotional release."

Tommi was sitting on her bed, her knees drawn up to her chin, lost in thought, when Katie came in. She hadn't changed clothes from the previous day.

"You okay?" Katie asked as she eyed her roommate.

Tommi looked up. "How was your test?"

"I think I did okay," Katie replied. "Now quit trying to change the subject. How are you doing?"

Tommi stared at her for a few seconds, her eyes seemingly vacant. Then a small spark lit. "I ... really needed that," she said simply. "You made me think about some things that I'd forgotten about, or tried to bury."

"And?"

Tommi got up and wrapped her arms around Katie. "Thank you. I needed it - a lot."

Katie returned the embrace, and then broke to set her books down on her desk. "Now what?"

Tommi shook her head uncertainly. "I don't know."

"How about if you start living up to your expectations and your goals instead of some unattainable ideals you thought would make your dad accept you?"

Tommi smiled thinly. "That sounds like a start." She shook her head. "But ... I don't know if I can. It seems so hard to ... let go."

"You might find that Tommi has a lot of self-confidence and some great expectations." Katie grasped Tommi's shoulders. "You need to remember that your dad loved you. But you confused him. From what you've said, he was a simple, stubborn man, and you confused him. He never could figure out how to deal with you. But that doesn't mean that he didn't love you."

Tommi nodded. "And I need to quit trying to please him, and please myself instead."

"Yup."

"That's not going to be easy. I've been fighting his ghost for a lot of years."

Katie nodded firmly. "But you've got a lot of friends who will help you in that fight. Just believe in what and who you are. Believe in your dreams and goals."

Tommi nodded. "Thanks."

Chapter 6 - Going Home

Katie turned in her chair, away from her books. "So, what are you going to do?" she asked Tommi.

Tommi pushed her open book away and leaned back, sighing. "I don't know." She sounded annoyed. "I don't think I can go."

Katie shook her head. "You don't get off quite so easily," she rebutted. "I know that you're free to travel, since your fetus transfer was postponed. So what are you going to do?"

Tommi closed her eyes momentarily, her jaw clenched. She hoped Katie didn't notice. "I think I'll just hang around here," she finally answered.

Katie wasn't going to accept her answer. "Uh, uh," she clucked. "Dorms close for the week between Christmas and New Year's for maintenance." She knew she'd called Tommi's bluff. "So what are your plans? You can come home with me," she answered perkily. "It'll be fun."

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know. I probably should go home," she answered hesitantly.

"But?" Katie accurately read Tommi's uncertainty.

"I don't know. Mom wasn't too comfortable with this whole thing, and I'm afraid it won't be pleasant."

"Okay, how about this? We'll both go to your home for Christmas, and then to my home for New Year's. Sound like a plan?"

"I don't know," Tommi answered again.

"Look," Katie continued, "if it's uncomfortable at your home, I'll be there for moral support. And we can always go to my place earlier if things are really bad."

Tommi winced. It was painfully obvious that Tommi didn't want to think about holiday travel. "Well," she stammered, "I'll think about it."

Katie knew she was wearing down Tommi's resistance. Without Tommi's knowledge, Katie had spent an afternoon talking with Rachel about holiday plans for Tommi. Rachel had been very relieved when Katie had her thoughts about accompanying Tommi through the holidays. "You better hurry up the thinking," Katie cautioned. "We get kicked out in a couple of days."

"Yeah, I know," Tommi acknowledged glumly. The calendar was forcing her decision, and she didn't like it.

"Good. We'll get the trip planned. I know Mom and Dad will love you." She spoke as though Tommi had accepted her plan. "Now get back to your books so you can pass your finals."

Tommi opened her mouth to speak, but then stopped. Katie had pulled up some chart on her laptop, a clear sign that she had finished the conversation, and left Tommi with no way to argue. Exasperated at Katie's plot, she turned back to her own books.

Cell phone in hand, Tommi nervously glanced down the hall in both directions. When she saw no-one, she slipped back into her room and closed the door. She sat on her bed, back against a pillow, and curled her legs up. Visibly steeling herself, she pressed a few buttons on her phone and put it to her ear.

"Hi, Sara?" she asked hesitantly. "Yeah, it's me. Is ... Mom ... around?" Her eyes widened for a moment. "Yeah, I'll talk to you more, but I need to talk to Mom." She rolled her eyes impatiently. "No, I really need to talk to Mom." Another pause. "How long 'til she's back?"

"No, I don't want to talk about who Liz is dating. I need to talk to Mom."

"Well, if you're going to be nosy, I was wondering if ... she had plans ... you know, for Christmas?"

"No, I'm not sure. I just ... well, my roommate and I were thinking ... maybe we can come home for Christmas."

"No, I haven't decided. I was just wondering if there were plans."

"Yeah, well, it'd be nice to see you, too."

"Um, has Mom said anything to you ... about me?"

"Yeah, I guess it does sound weird. But think about how it is for me!"

"When Mom gets home, tell her I called, and that I'm planning to come home for Christmas. And I'm bringing my roommate."

Tommi pressed another button, and then set her phone down. Her hands were shaking; she stared at them for several long moments before she leaned back, closed her eyes, and sighed heavily. "Well," she muttered to herself, "that didn't go as bad as I thought it would."

She sat, shaken and shaking, her head back and eyes closed, until she heard a key in the door. As the door opened, she slowly turned toward the door and opened her eyes. As she expected, Katie walked in, book bag slung over her shoulder, her face weary.

Katie slung her book bag on her bed. "Last time I have to go that class," Katie said. Her voice a mixture of relief and uncertainty. She slumped in her chair. "I see you're not studying. You think your Calc final is going to be easy?"

Tommi forced a slight smile. "I'm taking a break," she lied.

"Yeah, right." Katie noticed Tommi's cell phone on the bed. "So what are the plans?" she asked.

Tommi sighed. "Am I getting that transparent?"

"No, I'm just a good detective," Katie answered with a grin. "So - are we going to your home for Christmas?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. We're going home." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Are you sure you want to come with me? I mean, your family ..."

"...understands completely, and will be happy to see us after Christmas," Katie finished her sentence, though not quite in the way Tommi had started. "So get back to studying, and after your final, we can get packed and hit the road."

"Okay," Tommi reluctantly agreed. "But I've got an appointment at the clinic after my final, and then packing, and it's about a seven-hour drive."

Katie nodded. "Yup. We've got a long day tomorrow, so study and then get some sleep. I have a feeling we're going to need it."

Tommi nodded. "Yeah." She pried herself off her bed and sat down at her desk. As she opened her calculus book, she glanced at Katie. "Why do I have a bad feeling about all of this?" she asked rhetorically.

Katie smiled. "You just worry too much."

Tommi glanced at her watch - again - as she sat in the waiting room at the clinic. As she glanced around uneasily, she saw Suzie watching her. She looked away - too hastily, she realized - and picked up the first magazine she saw beside her.

"Rachel will be with you in a moment," Suzie called out pleasantly.

"What? Oh, yeah." Tommi was fighting to keep up the pretense of not being nervous about the time.

"Don't worry," Suzie said soothingly. "We know you've got a long drive today, so we'll get you in and out as quickly as we can."

"Okay," Tommi replied, sounding uneasy.

"And we always make sure we have staffing on the hotline," Suzie continued. "We all know that holidays can be ... difficult ... for our clients, especially the male clients."

Tommi's eyes widened at her explanation. "Is it that obvious?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes." A tiny flicker of past pain crossed Suzie's features. She quickly recomposed herself, but not before Tommi noticed. "Not all families are ... accepting. So we try to help any way we can," she continued quickly.

"Thanks. I'm nervous about the trip. Mom hasn't been ... open. She doesn't talk much when I call, and she hasn't called me. Not since ..."

Suzie nodded sympathetically. "We'll keep our fingers crossed that things go well. And we'll be here if you need us."

Tommi felt that the conversation was awkward, and that Suzie was struggling to be happy and supportive. Her sense of curiosity was piqued - there was something that Suzie wasn't talking about. Tommi wondered if it was something that would affect her as well.

Rachel picked that opportune moment to appear. "Ready?"

"Sure," Tommi answered as she stood. "The sooner we get done talking, the sooner Katie and I can hit the road."

Rachel led Tommi back to her office. "You'll need a quick medical before you go, too."

Tommi groaned aloud. "More poking and prodding?"

"Tina has to do something to keep busy," Rachel laughed. "Besides, we need to know when to schedule you for your transfer. That's the whole point of all of this, remember? So you can safely carry and deliver the baby."

Tommi shuddered involuntarily. "Yeah, I know."

"Are you excited about the holidays?" Rachel cut to the point.

"No."

"No?" Rachel seemed a bit surprised. "In what way?"

"Long trip. Mom. Not being sure if I'll be accepted." Tommi shrugged. "Normal stuff for a family holiday."

Rachel ignored Tommi's sarcasm. "You're going home first, and, after Christmas, you and Katie are going to her parents' place, right?" She shook her head. "That's a lot of driving. And with a front coming through, it could get a bit treacherous. I hope you'll be extra careful."

"Don't worry," Tommi said quickly. "I'll make sure I protect your investment." She saw Rachel flinch, and knew that she'd said the wrong thing.

"It's not an investment," Rachel countered firmly, her voice sounding both scolding and hurt. Her eyes were narrowed, her lips pursed, and her words were very curt. "You're a human being, just like the babies we save. I care about you, not just your uterus!"

Tommi flinched, feeling appropriately chastised. "Sorry," she said quickly. "I just" She shook her head, words failing her. She knew she'd really screwed up. "Sorry."

Rachel took a deep breath, and then forced a smile. "Me, too. I shouldn't be so sensitive. But ... it just cut the wrong way." She turned slightly, staring out the window. "We had some bad news at our staff telecon this morning." Sensing that Tommi might worry, she quickly added, "It's ... nothing you can do anything about."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Tommi asked innocently. She'd know how often talking to Rachel had helped her, and felt a need to reciprocate.

Rachel's eyebrows rose, and then she let out a small chuckle. "Are you trying to take my job?"

Tommi flinched again. This seemed to be her day for saying the wrong things. "Uh, I wasn't trying..."

Rachel shook her head, cutting off Tommi's protest. She closed her eyes for a moment, rubbing them, and as she opened them, Tommi could see that they were red. Tommi knew that Rachel didn't wear much makeup, but she noticed slight smudging in what little Rachel did wear. She realized that Rachel had been crying - a lot. She wondered if Suzie's attitude was also being affected by whatever had caused Rachel's tears.

Rachel stared at Tommi for a while, and then she sighed. "I don't have to, but I'm going to share something with you." She stared out the window again, visibly composing her thoughts. When she turned back to Tommi, Tommi saw that she seemed older - much older.

Rachel continued. "We had a client some time ago who was a little older than you. His ... her ... job moved to Miami, where her family lived. They couldn't accept what she was doing. They ... rejected her. They completely ostracized her." She turned back to the window and dabbed at her eyes. "She was found yesterday morning in her garage. She..." Rachel's voice cracked, "killed herself - and her baby."

Tommi felt her eyes tearing. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't know."

Rachel wiped her eyes and turned back to Tommi. "You aren't just a uterus to us. You're a human being, a person, a very special individual, with special gifts and talents. You are very, very important to us." She shook her head. "I hope you understand why I'm concerned about you going home."

Tommi sat, stunned, for a moment. "I've got Katie with me," she finally said, trying to reassure Rachel.

Rachel nodded. "I know. And if you didn't, I was ready to tell Dr. Tina to come up with some excuse to keep you from going home."

Tommi's mouth dropped open in surprise at Rachel's revelation. Slowly, she nodded. "I'll be careful. I promise."

"Good." Rachel wiped her eyes again. "Now you need to let Dr. Tina give you a quick checkup. It's a long drive. You're going to be driving for at least three hours in the dark, in a storm. So let's get you going as quickly as we can."

Tommi pulled the car door shut and started buckling herself in. "Let's go," she said to Katie.

"Everything okay?" Katie asked as she started the motor.

"Yeah," Tommi answered quickly.

"Spill it," Katie ordered as she glanced in the mirror and put the car in gear.

Tommi sighed. "One of these days, I'm going to get good enough to fool you."

"But not today," Katie replied with a chuckle.

"I'm off the meds," Tommi answered.

"Which means...?"

"My hormones are mostly balanced. My system is almost ready for ... the transfer - for getting the baby."

Katie stole a sideways glance at Tommi. "So?"

Tommi permitted herself a small wry smile, knowing that Katie wouldn't see it. "For one thing, it means that my boobs aren't going to be growing so fast, for one thing." She sighed. "But after we get back, I'll get scheduled for the fetal transfer procedure. And then I'll be tired, cranky, have a sore back, swollen breasts, and be moody for several months."

Katie snorted. "Great. As if you're not already enough of a pain. 'Oh, my back!' 'I _hate_ my body!' 'I hate periods!' 'My boobs are too big I hate the way they bounce!'"

Tommi slapped her arm. "I am _not_ that bad!" she complained. After seeing Katie's expression, she added, "Am I?"

Katie laughed. "Um, mostly no, or I wouldn't have put up with you."

Tommi smiled. "Well, I'm glad you do. Do you know, Rachel wasn't going to let me go on this trip without you?"

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She's very concerned about how my family has been treating me."

Katie stiffened, her eyes wide. She wondered, briefly, if this was the proper time to reveal her little secret. After a moment of internal debate, she decided. "I knew. Rachel called me to her office a few days ago to talk about our trip."

It was Tommi's turn to be surprised. "So she has you spying on me?" Her voice carried a sense of betrayal.

"No, nothing like that," Katie added quickly. "She just wanted to know if I was going with you, and to know what to watch for, and how to get in touch with her if you needed it."

"Oh." Tommi seemed to accept that the conversation had been innocent. Still, given the news she'd gotten that day, she couldn't help but wonder if Rachel wasn't taking extra precautions, and if so, how Katie fit in the picture.

"She did offer me a job," Katie added, "but not just to spy on you. She thought I might like to do my internship with the foundation."

"But..."

Katie laughed. "I hadn't thought about doing an internship there. But I did challenge her on whether the ability to 'spy on you' was a fringe benefit to her."

"I bet she denied it," Tommi laughed.

Katie got a wistful look. "Strangely, she didn't. She admitted that it would be useful." She glanced and saw Tommi's wide eyes. "Oh, not just you," she added quickly. "She's got a number of clients on campus, including some like you. She must have figured that being a student myself, I'd be a useful peer for her clients to talk to."

Tommi sat for a few moments, watching the cars and highway go by. "Somehow," she finally said, "I thought I was the only one. I felt like I was the only one."

"You sound disappointed."

Tommi laughed again. "Well, I thought I was ... unique. It's ..." She paused, a slight frown on her face, as she tried to find the right words. "I guess it's kind of a letdown to find out that you're not as special as you thought you were."

Katie nodded. "But I bet you're the only client who almost got kicked out of school for fooling around with the Dean's daughter."

Tommi groaned. "Don't remind me."

As the girls approached the car, walking from the building at a rest stop, Tommi was surprised when Katie moved toward the passenger side. "You okay?" she asked quickly.

Katie nodded. "Yeah, but I'm a bit tired. It's your turn to drive a bit." She saw Tommi hesitate. "If you're okay with that."

"I'm not great with a manual transmission," Tommi protested. "Ma never learned to drive a manual, so Dad bought cars with automatics so she could drive."

"You'll be fine," Katie reassured her. The car's alarm chirped as Katie pressed the remote button to unlock the car, and then she tossed the keys over the roof to Tommi. As she opened the door to climb in, Katie added, "I've never met a guy who didn't prefer a stick, and who didn't think he was the world's best driver."

Tommi slid into the seat, closed her door, and began to adjust the mirrors. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not a guy," she said dryly. "So that doesn't apply."

"Not now. I bet the driving bug is still strong in you, though." Katie smiled. "Most guys don't think girls know how to drive a manual. But my dad insisted on teaching me, and that included some professional performance driving lessons. Dad figured it might help me avoid accidents and bad weather conditions."

Tommi had felt her old male ego rising, challenged by the thought of driving a sports car, until Katie spoke. Now, she wasn't sure if she was as good as she'd imagined. She suddenly felt under a microscope; she really wasn't that experienced driving a car with a manual transmission, and Katie was. Despite her fears, she got the car started and moving smoothly. As Tommi stole a quick glance at Katie, she thought she saw Katie's 'professional face', observing her performance critically.

"Your dad really doesn't sound typical," Tommi finally broke the silence as the car pulled onto the interstate highway.

Katie smiled. "No, and sometimes Mom thought he wanted me to be a tomboy. He taught me how to work on my car, how to do household maintenance - all the things that you don't think girls are good at."

Tommi thought for a bit, a wistful look on her face. "Dad never taught my sisters any of those things," she said softly. "Sometimes, I didn't think he wanted to teach me, because he thought I wasn't man enough." Her lip was trembling as she spoke; the conversation was stirring unpleasant memories.

After a while, Tommi stole another glance in Katie's direction and saw that Katie appeared to be sleeping. She knew that Katie had been up very late studying for her last final. Tommi felt a swirl of emotions - nervousness about driving Katie's beloved Camaro, relief that Katie seemed to trust her enough to sleep while Tommi was driving, and concern about staying awake herself. She felt alone, and surprisingly to herself, quite vulnerable. She chalked that up to her hormones, but inwardly, wondered if it wasn't because she was a girl, and smaller and weaker, and thus truly less able to protect herself physically. Despite the heater blowing, keeping the outside chill at bay, Tommi felt a shiver run down her spine.

Presently, she put a CD into the changer. The music was far from what might have been expected from the stereo of a car with two college girls on a road trip. It was what Tommi called her "reflective" album, an odd assortment of mostly oldies that were less boisterous, with lyrics that tended toward introspection and reflection. Katie derided the collection as "depressing", but then always added that they were better than Tommi's other favorites - country music.

As the miles rolled by, and Katie slept, and Tommi listened to the tracks of her CD, she wondered why she was going home. She wondered what sort of reception awaited her. Would her mother finally accept her? Was it going to be an ugly scene? How would she deal with her old friends, especially her old girlfriends? Did she even want to try? The longer she drove, the more she questioned her decision to go home.

One of the things that was causing puzzlement was why, lately, she wasn't finding her country favorites quite as interesting. Perhaps it was because most of the songs she'd liked

before had a male-centric theme, or possibly her friends were slowly influencing her choice in music, or, worst of all, maybe her hormones were causing physiological changes in her brain that made the music less appealing. Whatever the reason, she found that as the weeks had passed, she'd listened less and less to country, and more and more to her reflective songs. That discovery added to her angst about the changes that were going farther and faster than she'd expected.

As the hours passed and daylight faded, Tommi found herself driving in a cold drizzle that matched her mood. She switched on the lights and the windshield wipers. The fading daylight was inadequately and incompletely replaced by twin cones of illumination from the car's headlights. Tiny glints sparkled as the light reflected and refracted from the tiny water droplets of the drizzle. It could have seemed forlorn, but the line of red taillights ahead of them, and the constant stream of oncoming headlights were comforting reminders that Tommi and Katie weren't alone.

"Are you doing okay driving?" Katie's voice surprised Tommi.

"Uh, yeah, I'm okay," Tommi answered quickly. "We found the weather."

Katie stretched, yawning as she did so. "Yeah, I see. Where are we?"

Tommi didn't have to think; she was getting close to home. "We're still on I-seventy-seven - about ten to fifteen miles from Beckley."

"Never heard of Beckley." Katie responded dryly.

Tommi laughed. "One of the bigger cities in these parts. I guess it's pretty small by Florida standards, though."

"How much further?"

"Depends," Tommi answered simply. "If the weather isn't too bad, we'll take highway ninety-four across." She bit her lip. "But I figure we'll have to go up to Charleston, and then down one-nineteen. It's about twenty miles further, but it's a better road and better driving. Look," she gestured toward the window. "There's a little bit of snow mixed in with the rain. By the time we get to the ninety-four junction, I bet we're in nothing but snow."

"I vote for the safer route." Katie stretched again. "Think we can stop somewhere?"

Tommi smiled. "I've been thinking the same for the past twenty minutes."

Katie scowled. "Why didn't you stop, then?"

"I didn't want to wake you. I know you've been pulling long nights studying, and you were sound asleep," Tommi answered with a shrug.

"Your suffering," Katie snorted. "Have you got any idea how far to the next stop?"

"We passed two rest stops while you were sleeping. Next one is at Beckley. And we won't have a lot of exits now; we're on the turnpike." Tommi glanced quickly at Katie, before turning her attention back to driving. "After we stop, I'd like to rest some - if you're okay driving."

Katie seemed surprised. "Yeah, I'm awake enough to drive. Why?"

Tommi nodded. "Since we're going through Charleston, I figured we'd fill up there, and then I can drive down one-nineteen - if you're okay with it."

"Sounds like a plan, especially since I don't know these parts."

"Well," Tommi said softly as she switched off the ignition, "we're home."

She'd parked the car on the street, not wanting to block the driveway in case her mom or older sister needed access. Tommi felt a shudder of dread. It wasn't the gloomy surroundings, or the chill of the night, nor the steady light snowfall. Rather, the fear of an unpleasant confrontation with her mother had been slowly rising, but she'd been able to ignore it and focus on driving. Now, however, she had no distractions and the fear rose up in her.

"Nervous?" Katie asked simply.

Tommi shivered. "That's an understatement." She shook her head. "You know how much I want to just leave and go to a motel?"

Katie clasped her hand. "It'll be okay. I'm here with you."

The two clambered out of the car and walked slowly up to the house. Tommi steeled herself, before she climbed up the steps onto the front porch and knocked on the dilapidated screen door.

The inner door opened a crack, and a freckle-faced girl of about seventeen peeked through. "Can I help you?" she asked softly.

Tommi glanced nervously at Katie, and then back at the door. "Hi, Sara. It's me. I'm home, like I said."

Sara's jaw dropped and her eyes widened in shock. She opened the door, allowing the light from inside to spill on Tommi. "Tom?" she asked, her mouth agape. "Oh, my God!" she cried. "I didn't recognize you!" She stared at Tommi's figure. "Oh, my God!" Then she launched herself at Tommi, wrapping her arms in a smothering bear hug of incredible warmth and affection. "Oh, my God!" she cried over and over. "It really is you! I didn't know what you'd look like!"

Tommi returned the embrace. "I've missed you," she said through tears as she hugged her little sister.

"Hey!" a gruff woman's voice shouted from inside, "I'm not payin' to heat the county!"

Tommi let go of Sara, and followed her inside, with Katie trailing closely. Katie shut the door behind her. She glanced around and gasped audibly.

In all her training in psychology and sociology, Katie had learned about poverty. She'd learned, in a book sense, about people who lived a meager existence, barely scraping by. But she'd always thought that the description of a ramshackle house with faded and peeling paint, and worn-out furniture and the occupants wearing nearly worn-out clothes was only a stereotype. Now she saw, for the first time, up close and personal, the truth behind the descriptions - and it wasn't far off. If anything, Katie thought, the descriptions and pictures didn't do justice to the plight of the poor. And Tommi's family was, indeed, poor.

In one corner of the room, a television blared. A worn-out sofa, covered with an old blanket, sat along another wall. Katie knew that under the blanket, the original upholstery was probably long worn through. The rug over the rustic and well-trod wooden floor was thin in spots, and stained with God only knew what. Family pictures, surrounded by faded frames, hung on all the walls, as if to defiantly say that despite the poverty, the family was important.

An older woman, overweight, wearing ill-fitting clothes, and with a smoldering cigarette dangling from her lips, appeared. She wore her graying hair loose, not that it was long enough to have been put into a bun or ponytail or anything else to control it. She looked over Katie quickly, before turning her attention to Tommi. Her critical eyes pored over him from head to toe and back. Wordlessly, she reached up and took a drag on her smoke, and exhaled slowly. "Tom," she said in a simple, yet curt, word of greeting.

Tommi gulped, and glanced nervously at Katie for reassurance. "Hi, Ma," she said, her voice echoing uncertainty. "I'd like you to meet Katie, my roommate."

Katie nodded graciously. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Wilson," she began. "And I appreciate your hospitality. You know, Tommi has told me so much about your family."

"Tommi, eh? Your given name ain't good enough for you?" Mrs. Wilson snorted as she glared at Tommi. "I suppose it fits to have a girl name now." She glanced at the two girls. "I suppose you're hungry after your drive?"

Tommi glanced nervously at Katie again. "I don't want to put you out, Ma," she said quickly. "I figured you'd had a busy day at work."

Mrs. Wilson snorted. "Yeah, like normal. Well, make yourselves at home. I don't know what we're going to do about beds, though. I gave your room to Liz when you went off to college." Her words dripped acid, as if Tommi's going to college had been a personal betrayal.

Tommi realized that she hadn't really considered that aspect of a visit. "Liz's room is way too small, and it wouldn't be right to kick her out," Tommi reasoned aloud. "I had the surgery,

Ma. I'm completely a woman. Katie and I can share Sara's room - if she doesn't mind." Tommi thought she saw a flash of crimson in his mom's face.

"We'll figure something out," she said, scowling. "I've got to get some laundry done before my shift tomorrow." She turned and plodded heavily into the back of the house.

Tommi turned back to Katie. "That went ... better than I'd expected. You want to run out to get something to eat?"

Katie nodded. "Yeah. That sounds good." She turned to Sara. "You want to come along?"

Sara practically leapt at the invitation. "Yeah!" She grasped Tommi's arm. "You can tell me all about what it's like at college."

The three girls sat in a corner booth at Subway, watching the customers coming and going as they slowly ate their sandwiches. "Interesting town," Katie observed as she witnessed the patrons.

Sara shrugged. "It's okay ... for a hick mining town," she replied sarcastically.

Tommi glared at her. "It's not that bad. I mean, it's not all about the mines."

Sara shook her head. "Yes it is, and you know it. If the mines quit, this place would dry up and blow away faster than tumbleweeds."

"How about we talk about something cheerier?" Katie decided the focus on the mine - the cause of the death of Tom's dad - wasn't too healthy. "Hey", she cautioned Tommi, "you need to watch how much you eat!"

Tommi paused at Katie's words, her sandwich halfway to her mouth, and slowly lowered it. "It's not bad enough that I have to listen to Dr. Tina and Rachel and Suzie. Now you're harassing me about my eating, too!"

Sara shook her head, obviously confused. "Is this some inside secret?"

Tommi shrugged. "After surgery, and while my hormones were getting back in balance, I was on some special medications. The result was I lost a lot of weight ..."

"Yeah, I noticed. I wish I had your figure!" Sara interrupted enviously.

Tommi ignored her comment. "...and I didn't have a lot of appetite. Now that I'm off the meds, my appetite is back, but everyone," she turned and glared at Katie, "and I mean everyone, is warning me that I'll get fat if I don't watch my diet."

Katie smiled sweetly. "I'm just trying to be helpful."

"And I know Dr. Tina and Rachel will be very unhappy if I put on a lot of pounds over the break."

"Who's that over there, the guy giving you the eye?" Katie had been glancing around, and she'd noticed a guy whose attention was focused on the trio.

Tommi started to look, but Sara hissed, "Don't look. If you stare at him, he'll think you're either a bitch or interested." She took a quick sip of her soda. "It's Dave McGregor."

Tommi's eyes widened. "Dave? Staring at me?" She felt a shiver run down her spine. "He was such a doofus! He was a total asshole!"

"He still is," Sara corrected.

Katie stared at her in surprise. "You know him?" She shook her head. "Of course, you know him. You grew up here!"

"He was in my class. He played football." Tommi forced herself to take a drink. "What's he doing these days?"

Sara shrugged. "Same as most of your classmates – the coal mines."

"Does everyone around here work in the mines?" Katie asked softly, surprised by the nonchalant way Sara and Tommi talked about the mines.

"Mostly," Tommi answered. "It's not as bad as some of the smaller towns; there are other places to work, but the mines pay the best."

"Yeah." Sara's eyes widened. "Oh, shit, he's coming over."

Indeed, Dave was strutting confidently toward the trio. "Hi, Sara," he said by way of introduction. "I don't see you out much." He struck what he considered a manly pose and smiled at the girls. "Especially with two very nice looking friends. I haven't seen you around, so you must be new to the area. I'm Dave. Dave McGregor, chairman of the hospitality committee. And you are..."

"...not interested," Katie answered, her icy voice belying her sweet smile. "Definitely not interested in washed-up high-school has-been jocks that never made it to college."

Tommi watched Dave visibly deflate, his ego struck by Katie's brutal riposte. "Besides," she added with an equally syrupy smile, "you might be very surprised if you knew more about us."

Dave stammered for a moment, trying to save face. His cronies were waiting at the table where he'd been moments ago. "Well," he sputtered, "my offer is always open." He turned to Sara. "If your loser of a brother ever shows up, tell him I said hi." He turned, puffed himself back up, and strode back to his friends.

Tommi knew that Dave was fabricating some lie as he walked away. She felt her blood pressure rise at Dave's words, but she controlled herself, taking some measure of comfort in the way Katie had slammed him. "What an asshole!" she hissed. "Always was, always will be."

Sara nodded her agreement. "Yeah, and you don't have to see him around the time."

Tommi sighed. So far, the town was just like when she'd left. It seemed ages ago. "Where's Liz? I didn't see her car at home."

"She's probably getting boffed by Jim again."

"Jim ... Thompson?" Tommi asked incredulously. "She's dating Jim Thompson?"

Sara snorted. "More than dating. I figure they've been having sex for at least the last five months."

Tommi shook her head, her mouth hanging open. "What could she possibly see in _that_ loser?"

Sara shrugged. "He was the starting linebacker in high school, and his daddy got him a good job at the mine, so he's got some money to throw around impressing Liz."

"But..."

Sara took another sip of her soda. "I figure they're made for each other. I mean, he's a first-class egotistical asshole, and she's a first-class bitch."

"Sara!"

"Well, she is!" Sara shot right back. "She's so bossy, always acting like _she's_ the mom, always playing the 'dad card'." She shook her head. "Maybe if she really is pregnant, she'll get married and get out of my hair."

Tommi's and Katie's mouths dropped simultaneously. "She's _what_?" Tommi asked, astonished.

Sara grinned wickedly. "I think she's pregnant." She leaned closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "I found a couple of home pregnancy test kits in the garbage a few weeks ago, _and_ been she's complaining about not feeling good at breakfast."

"That ... might be coincidence," Tommi said cautiously, not willing to believe Sara's rumor.

"And she hasn't used any tampons for the last two months." Her grin broadened. "I've counted."

Tommi shook her head in disbelief. "Say," she finally said, "if you're so good at spying and deductive reasoning, how often did you spy on me while I was home?"

Sara sat back, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "I'll never tell," she answered.

Tommi turned to Katie. "I'm starting to wonder if any of my secrets were ever safe with Sara around."

"Probably not," Katie confirmed. She glanced around the shop, and her eyes narrowed as she focused on another patron. "Who's that? She's been staring at us for quite a while."

Sara glanced. "Amanda."

"She's been staring at us for some time," Katie reported, trying to sound casual. "Specifically," she turned to Tommi, "at you." Her eyes narrowed. "Oh shit, she's coming over." She closed her eyes momentarily, shaking her head. "What is this, Grand Central Station?"

"Hi, Sara," Amanda called as she got close to the table.

"Hi, Amanda," Sara replied.

Tommi had started to answer as soon as she recognized the girl, but managed to stop herself at the last second. She realized that if she'd called Amanda by name, Amanda would start putting two and two together. Tommi swallowed as she realized that she wasn't ready for Amanda, or anyone else in town, for that matter, to know that she was Tom - or had been.

Amanda eyed Katie and Tommi, sizing them up as potential competition, and then turned back, to Sara. "Is your brother coming home? I really was hoping to see him." She was trying to disguise anticipation in her voice, but she failed, with the result that she sounded a bit possessive. Amanda was of average height, with long dark hair and brown eyes, and a slightly chubby build. Nature had also given her an amazingly large bosom, which, judging by her stance, she'd learned to use as a strategic asset.

Tommi almost choked at her words, and she saw Sara's eyes widen. Tommi gave her head a quick tiny shake, hoping Amanda wouldn't notice, but that Sara would.

"Er," Sara stammered for a moment, "I don't think so. He's really been busy at school. He's got a lot of changes to adjust to," she lied.

Katie suppressed a snicker at Sara's choice of words, while Tommi's eyes widened in surprise.

"Well, the next time you talk to him, give him my warmest regards," Amanda turned and sauntered off.

Tommi started to breathe a sigh of relief when she saw Amanda turn back toward them. More specifically, toward her. She stopped a couple of feet from Tommi, staring intently at her. "Are you related to Tom?" she asked in a tone that rang with certainty.

"Uh, distantly," Tommi answered uneasily.

Amanda shook her head. "You just look ... familiar. Very familiar." She stared for another moment. "I know you!" she finally declared. "I'm certain of it. I know we've met."

Tommi shook her head. "I don't think so," she answered nervously. "You must have me mistaken for someone else."

"No, I'm certain that we've met. I never forget a face," Amanda said emphatically. She turned to Sara. "Distant relative?" She didn't sound the slightest bit convinced.

"Uh," Sara glanced nervously at Tommi, which Tommi knew wasn't helping convince Amanda. "She's my second cousin, once removed, on my dad's side. You must have met her when her family came to visit when I was seven or eight." She glanced at Katie. "And this is her college roommate. They were ... uh ... passing through ... on their way home from college. And they stopped to visit, since we hadn't seen each other in so long."

Amanda frowned. "No," she answered. "I know I've met you before." She shook her head. "And I'll figure it out." She turned and left.

Katie watched her go, and then turned back to Tommi. "Who was that?" she asked softly.

"Amanda. Amanda Gottlieb." Tommi glanced at her hand, and saw it was shaking. "We ... dated - a long time ago."

Sara glanced to ensure that Amanda wasn't in earshot, and then shook her head. "You did a lot more than just date."

Tommi shook her head. "Since I know you were spying, and probably want to give Katie all the salacious details, maybe we should finish this discussion somewhere more private."

"Cozy house," Katie said sardonically as she let her head flop on the pillow. She, Tommi, and Sara were sharing Sara's room, which was the largest of the three bedrooms. Largest, of course, was a relative term. With the rollaway bed unfolded next to Sara's full-sized bed, there was barely room to stand.

"Yeah," Tommi noted in agreement. "It's a lot colder than I remember, too." She wasn't quite sure if she was referring to the temperature, or the frosty reception she'd gotten from her mother.

Katie interpreted Tommi's words to mean the icy cold attitude of her mother. "Give her time," Katie chastised Tommi. "Your mom has a lot of change to deal with. Just give her time."

Tommi sighed heavily. "I wish I could be as confident as you are."

"At least you didn't have to deal with Liz tonight," Sara piped in.

"Be quiet, runt," Tommi chastised Sara.

"Aren't you going to tell Katie all about Amanda?" Sara asked softly. "I'm sure she's still curious." She egged Katie on about the details Tommi had deferred to later.

"Yeah," Katie picked up on Sara's question. "Are you going to talk, or will I have Sara tell me the whole sordid story?" She grinned. "And I want details."

Tommi sighed. "No way I can get out of this?"

"Nope."

Tommi took a deep breath, her eyes momentarily closed. "Amanda was a grade below me. When I was a sophomore, she was just a freshman. Mind you, a very well-endowed, bubbly and outgoing freshman. I finally got up enough nerve to ask her out."

"So you dated her?"

Tommi winced. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Ahem," Sara cleared her throat, letting Tommi know that she would provide details if Tommi didn't.

"Okay, so we did more than date."

"She was the first girl you really fell for," Sara corrected.

"And my first ... um, you know," Tommi added; she was glad the room was dark, so the others couldn't see her blushing.

"So?"

"We both ... had our first experience in the back seat of the old Chevy after the homecoming dance," Tommi added.

"And you kept on dating - and boffing her," Sara added.

"How much did you know?" Tommi asked, exasperated. "It's like you knew every detail of my life." She sighed. "We dated for a couple of years. She got kind of possessive, especially when I said I was going to college."

"It sounded like you may have forgotten to tell her about breaking up," Katie observed dryly.

"I did tell her, but, well, she didn't take 'no' for an answer," Tommi explained.

"Why would she?" Sara quickly interjected. "You going to college got even more of her attention. Like most girls, she wants out. She doesn't want to be a miner's wife."

"Well, she's a smart girl," Tommi added. "Very smart."

"So why didn't you explain things to her?" Katie prodded.

"Yeah? Like how? Hi, Amanda, _I'm_ Tom. When I went to college, I got in some trouble for screwing the Dean's daughter, lost my scholarship, and, to stay in college, I had a sex change so I could be a paid surrogate mother." Tommi shook her head. "You know how _that_ would go over?"

"I'd imagine, in these parts, it wouldn't go over well," Katie replied.

The darkness hid the vigor of Tommi's nodded agreement. "Damned right. Everyone in town would know in a few minutes, and I'd probably be beaten half to death as a 'fag' or something."

Sara stifled a giggle. "It'd be fun to see the reaction on her face, though," she said, before quickly adding, "especially the part about screwing the Dean's daughter." She thought for a moment. "Was she worth it?"

"What?"

"Was she worth it? All these changes because you got caught."

Tommi started to reply, but she caught herself. She'd never _really_ considered that angle. "I don't know," she finally said. "But I know I'm doing something good. And despite how Ma and Liz have been, I'm glad I'm home. I feel like I understand you a bit better."

In response, Sara rolled slightly and wrapped her arms around Tommi. "I'm so glad you're home," she purred. "I really like having a big sister that's not a pain in the ass."

"I missed you, too," Tommi echoed. "But it's late, and I don't want Ma yelling at us."

Sara sighed. "Okay. See you in the morning." She flopped back over, settled under the covers, and nearly instantly fell asleep.

Tommi sat uncomfortably on the edge of her mom's bed. It wasn't so much that the bed was uncomfortable, but that she knew the conversation was going to be unpleasant. "Ma, I _had_ to do something!"

"Why?" her mom demanded. "Why did you have to mess yourself up ... like ... like _this_?"

"What else could I do?"

Mrs. Wilson scowled deeply. "You could have taken it like a man, and come home. Your dad would have!"

Tommi felt tears burst from her eyes at the accusation. "That's not fair, Ma!" she cried. "I'm not dad!"

Mrs. Wilson's scowl grew deeper, if that was possible. "Damned right, you're not!" she hissed. "Ron would have manned up instead of letting himself be turned into some kind of sissy freak!"

"So you'd prefer that I got a job in the mine?" Tommi snarled, even as tears started flowing at the bitter memory of her dad's death - in that hated mine.

"What's so bad about that? It was good enough for your dad!"

"You want me to die in the mine like dad, too?" Tommi protested.

"That's enough of that!" Mrs. Wilson snapped. From her mother's posture, Tommi was afraid that she was going to slap Tommi. "At least he wasn't a coward!" The older woman turned and stormed out of the room.

Tommi had her head buried in Katie's shoulder. "She called me a coward!" she sobbed. "I made a mess of this whole thing! I knew I should have never come home!"

Katie brushed locks of Tommi's hair from Tommi's eyes with one hand while holding her tightly with the other. "You had to try," she said soothingly.

"Rachel was right," Tommi cried. "This wasn't a good idea."

Katie shook her head. "You had to try. You had to have your answer."

"But ..."

The door slammed open. "What the hell is wrong with you?" the intruder demanded angrily. "What did you say to Ma?"

Tommi looked up, her tear-stained cheeks glistening in the light. She'd never seen her older sister so enraged. "She called me ..." she started.

"You compared yourself to Dad? How dare you insult his memory by changing yourself like ...," She gestured at Tommi, disgust on her face, "like this, and then coming here and rubbing it in Ma's face?"

Tommi felt herself stiffen. "You don't know what I've been through..." she started.

"What you've been through?" Liz screamed. "You selfish little shit!" Her fists balled up in her rage. "You don't give a damn what Ma's been through! You don't give a damn about

what all ... _this_ ... does to Ma! You don't care that she always saw a little bit of Dad in you, and then you even took _that_ away when you couldn't measure up to him!"

Tommi stood, her muscles tensing. "That's not fair!" Tommi snarled.

"Bullshit!" Liz yelled. "You never could measure up! Ma was right - you're nothing but a little coward!" She made a show of looking over Tommi from head to toe. "Maybe you're better this way. You were _never_ going to be even _half_ the man Dad was!"

Tommi took half a step toward her older sister, her fists balling in anger. "You bitch!" she hissed. "This is _none_ of your business, but you just _had_ to butt in!"

Liz stepped toward Tommi, her face crimson, her expression a mask of unadulterated rage. "Try me, you little sissy!" She raised a fist, ready to fight.

Katie leaped between the two girls, her back to Tommi, facing Liz. "This is between your mom and Tommi," she said evenly.

Liz sneered at her. "What are you going to do, try to stop me?" She glared at Tommi. "Can't even defend yourself, you little wimp!" She looked disdainfully at Katie.

Katie didn't move. "Try me," she said evenly. Her voice and expression were strangely calm, unnervingly so. What was more unnerving was that her stance was calculated, trained, ready to fight, as if she'd had professional training of some form.

Liz thought for a moment. Katie's action and deadly-calm demeanor, with her ready defensive stance, had really rattled her self-confidence. As soon as she'd recovered from the surprise, she sneered at Tommi again. "You even have to have your roommate defend you! What a wuss!" She turned and stormed out.

Tommi watched her go, and collapsed onto the sofa. For several moments, she shook, until her angst overcame her resistance and she started to bawl aloud.

Katie sat down beside Tommi and let her cry on Katie's shoulder.

After a bit, Tommi looked up. "We have to go."

Katie nodded. "I know. First thing in the morning, we'll pack up and leave."

"No!" Tommi insisted strongly. "We have to go _now_!" Tears were flowing down her cheeks.

Katie's eyes widened. "But ... it's very late."

"_Now_," Tommi repeated insistently.

Katie briefly pondered the ugly scene she'd witnessed, plus the scene with Mrs. Wilson that Tommi had described. She took a deep breath. "Okay."

The two roommates walked up to Sara's room, Tommi still crying. As Sara sat, staring in disbelief, the girls quickly gathered their things and shoved them unceremoniously into their suitcases.

"What's going on?" Sara asked finally, curiosity having gotten the better of her.

Tommi lowered her head, shaking it. "Didn't you hear Liz yelling at me?" she asked softly.

Sara nodded. "Yeah." Her eyes were sad. "So what are you doing? You're not ... leaving already, are you?"

Tommi simply nodded, still packing.

"But ... I don't want you to go!" Sara protested. She wiped at a tear. "For the first time in our lives, I feel close to you! I feel like I've got a sister who cares, not the wicked Cinderella stepsister!" She wiped at the tears again, which was clearly a losing battle.

Tommi sat down and gave her a hug. "I know," she said softly. "But Ma and Liz don't understand. They hate me for what I've done."

Sara nodded. "Liz is mostly jealous because you got out," she explained. "You found a way out of this life. She's not talented enough or smart enough. So she's jealous. This," she gestured at Tommi's body, "is her excuse to be abusive to you." She shook her head. "Ma wouldn't ever understand," she continued. "She just can't picture any son of his not wanting to be like Dad, so she probably feels like you betrayed him."

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, that's what she said, among other things."

Sara wrapped her arms around Tommi, burying her head in Tommi's shoulder. "I wish you didn't have to go."

Tommi nodded. "So do I," she said softly.

Sara watched the two finish packing. As they walked down the stairs, she ducked into the back of the house. "Tommi and Katie are leaving," she announced, before returning.

"Good!" Liz's voice called angrily from the back.

Tommi shook her head sadly as she stepped out the front door. With Katie and Sara on her heels, she walked to the car. As soon as Katie fingered the remote, Tommi opened the trunk and dumped her suitcase in. She paused and gave Sara another hug. "I'll keep in touch, runt," she said, fighting back tears.

Sara nodded, crying also. "You'd better." As Tommi crawled into the car, she added, "And I'm getting out of here, too. Just like you."

Tommi smiled at her younger sister. "I know you will." With a thunk, the door slammed shut, punctuating the ordeal that her attempt at visiting home had been.

Chapter 7 - Vacation Part 2

For what seemed like the thousandth time, Katie glanced at Tommi seated in the passenger seat, as they drove through the night. While Katie felt exhausted, she'd decided against letting Tommi drive; the confrontation with her mother and with Liz had left Tommi an emotional wreck. Katie didn't think Tommi was in any shape to drive, especially in the near-blizzard that surrounded them.

For the first twenty minutes of their drive, Tommi had alternated between outright bawling and subdued sobbing. She'd been quiet since then, and at first, Katie thought that Tommi had fallen asleep. Katie had hoped that Tommi had gone to sleep. Instead, she'd become zombie-like, sitting silently, expressionless, and unmoving.

"How much further?" Katie decided to break the uncomfortable silence.

Tommi turned toward her, and for a second, her eyes seemed vacant, uncomprehending. She blinked, and like a switch, she snapped out of whatever funk she'd been in. "Uh, what?"

"How much farther to the Virginia border?" Katie repeated.

"Um, I think about twenty or thirty miles."

Katie shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs from her fatigued mind. "I think we should stop somewhere soon."

"Um," Tommi started hesitantly, "can't we keep going? I want to get as far from ... there ... as I can."

"I understand," Katie replied, trying to sound reassuring. "But it won't do us any good to keep driving and have an accident. I'm exhausted, and in your state, I'm not going to let you drive."

"But..."

"No 'buts'," Katie said emphatically. "We went through that when we left, remember? We're both tired, it's after midnight, and it's starting to snow again. We're stopping."

Tommi sighed and nodded slowly. "Okay. Can you turn up the heat?"

Katie shook her head. "Nope. I get sleepy when I'm driving at night and I'm too warm. To stay awake, I need it cool."

Tommi made a show of zipping up her jacket. "Cool, I can understand, but this is colder than Alaska!"

Katie didn't bother answering. As the snow flurries came down faster, she was keeping all her focus on the road.

By the time they finally crossed the bridge into Virginia, the flurries had become a miniature blizzard; the twenty-four miles had taken over an hour. Katie pulled the car into the parking lot of the first national chain motel that she saw. A few minutes later, the two girls set down their suitcases in the warmth of their room.

Tommi flopped on her bed, emotionally and physically drained. "I think I'll wait to take a shower in the morning."

Katie slipped off her coat. "Not me. Nothing personal against your mom, but I hate the smell of smoke, and right now, I feel like I've been in a chimney all day! I have to take a shower." She strode eagerly toward the bathroom, disrobing and leaving a trail of clothes as she walked.

"You know," Tommi said thoughtfully as she lay on the bed, "I grew up with Ma smoking, and was used to living in a house with the smoke smell, but since I've been at college, I got used to not smelling smoke. I probably reek, too. I think I changed my mind. Don't take too long in the shower!"

"Sara is a wonderful little sister," Katie called, nearly shouting to be heard above the rushing water of the shower. "I wish I had a sister like her."

"Yeah, she's a good kid," Tommi agreed. "And she deserves a lot better," she added softly.

"What's that?" Katie called back.

"Nothing," Tommi responded quickly. She hadn't intended for Katie to hear, even a mumble, and she felt suddenly sorry about what she'd said. It wasn't right to speak ill of her family, she thought. Then again, they'd been mean. Vicious, she corrected herself. Liz and Ma had been vicious in their attitude toward Tommi. She began to question herself - what could she have done to make it better? How could she have helped them accept her?

"What would you have done if Liz hadn't backed down?" Tommi asked, curious at the way Katie had interposed herself. "She was irrationally mad!"

Katie's laughter was muffled by the shower. "She'd have found herself flat on her ass faster than she could blink. I may have forgotten to tell you, but I'm a third-degree black belt. Dad insisted that I should learn how to defend myself."

"I would have loved to have seen that!" Tommi permitted herself a smile. Seeing Liz taken down a notch would have been a treat.

The pleasant thought was fleeting, however. She missed Sara - already. They hadn't been gone for more than a few hours, and Tommi really missed Sara. Her younger sister had been so sweet and loving and caring - the kind of family that Tommi didn't have, not any more. But Liz and Ma hated her. They obviously thought that she'd betrayed them - and his dad - and had made no secret of their feelings. Tommi's eyes misted, and then the tears started flowing.

"Are you okay?" Katie asked, wrapped in a towel as she stood by the bathroom door.

The question startled Tommi. "Huh?" she asked as she wiped her eyes.

"I said, are you okay?" Katie asked again, a look of concern on her face.

Tommi thought for a moment and then shook her head sadly, tears slowly rolling down her cheeks. "I don't know."

Katie sat down on the end of the bed. "I wish I knew what to say," she said, her voice soft and sad. "I ... don't know how to help you." She'd seen how rough of a night Tommi had had.

Tommi tried to laugh. "This is the first time I've seen you at a loss for words." The joke fell flat. Tommi wiped at her tears again. "Why do they hate me so much?" she wailed. "What did I do to them?"

Katie shook her head. "I don't know," she said. All those years of school, of learning about psychology and counseling and all that other stuff -it all seemed so useless now that she really needed it.

"They kept comparing me to dad," Tommi bawled. "They keep acting like I'm supposed to be exactly like him! They never let me be me!"

Katie scooted over beside Tommi and pulled her close. Tommi's head leaned against Katie's shoulder, and Katie wrapped her arms around the sobbing girl.

"I hate him!" Tommi sobbed. "Even when he's dead, he mocks me! I hate him!"

"Shhh," Katie cooed as her hand stroked Tommi's hair soothingly. "It'll be okay. They aren't here now. I'm here for you."

Tommi tried to nod, but failed as sobs wracked her body. "I never realized it before, but they've always hated me! When I was the only boy, Liz and Ma were jealous of Dad trying to spend time with me! Whenever I failed at something, it was always the three of them mocking me! Even Ma did it!"

"It's okay, now," Katie said softly, over and over. "It's okay."

Presently, Tommi's sobs lessened, and her breathing got slow and regular. Gently, Katie craned her neck to look at Tommi's face. As she suspected, Tommi's eyes were closed; she was finally asleep.

Katie slowly eased Tommi onto the bed and pulled a blanket over her. Shaking her head, she tucked Tommi in, turned off the main lights, and tiptoed to the sink area to finish getting ready for bed.

She pondered the past day and a half; Tommi had been right - her mother and Liz hadn't been just nasty; they'd been positively vicious and cruel. Why, though, was a mystery to Katie. Did they resent that Tommi had gotten away from the town and its mine? Did they expect to see her father, Ron Wilson, in Tommi, and then hate him for failing to measure up? She wondered if it was simply that Mrs. Wilson and Liz were just mean to their core, and took out their anger and frustrations on anyone nearby. If the last possibility were true, Katie thought to herself, she really felt sorry for Sara, stuck in that home having to catch all that resentment and anger day after day. Katie suspected that there was a lot more behind the anger and viciousness than just the surrogacy. She knew she'd have to uncover this mystery - if only for Tommi's sake.

Tommi had her earbuds in so she could listen to her own music, without disturbing Katie's driving. It hadn't taken long for Tommi to realize that Katie didn't have much tolerance for distractions while she was driving.

Tommi noticed that Katie had turned down the car's stereo; knowing that Katie had something to say, Tommi pulled out her earbuds.

"You want to stop for a break and something to eat?" Katie asked.

Tommi thought for a very brief moment. "Go ahead," she replied without enthusiasm. "I'm not very hungry."

"Well, you've got to eat something," Katie rebutted. "You didn't have anything for breakfast."

"I had a slice of toast," Tommi snapped back quickly, almost angrily.

"Whoa," Katie cautioned quickly, "I wasn't criticizing you. I was just saying that you might want to eat something more than just some toast."

Tommi realized how angry she'd sounded, and she dropped her head in embarrassment. "I'm sorry," she apologized quickly.

Katie glanced quickly at Tommi before returning her focus to the road. "I know you've had a very stressful couple of days," she said, trying to assuage Tommi's guilt at her angry outburst. "Just remember, I'm on your side, okay?"

"K," Tommi answered meekly.

"I'm going to stop at the next town. A little stretch and a bite to eat will probably help you feel a lot better."

"I suppose."

Katie was starting to wonder if she shouldn't call Rachel. Tommi was in a serious funk. Usually, it was easy to get her to engage in conversation, but since last night's fiasco, she'd been very quiet and withdrawn. The "slice of toast" had really been a small bite from half a slice of bread, washed down with no more than a few sips of juice. Nor had Tommi gotten anything for a snack when they'd stopped to gas up the car.

Katie also knew that she was getting tired of driving. They'd been on the road for almost five hours, and Tommi hadn't driven a mile. At first, Katie figured she'd let Tommi rest some more, but after their fuel stop, Tommi had declined her turn without much comment.

"After we stop," Katie continued, "you'll need to drive some. I'm getting tired, and unless you want to spend another night in a motel, I need to take a break from driving." Katie was hoping to push Tommi to a more upbeat state of mind.

"I guess," Tommi answered.

Katie took a deep breath and pondered her options. Finally, she spoke up. "Okay," she started, sounding stern, "either you get your act together, or we're going back so you can have some long talks with Rachel." Before Tommi could object, Katie continued. "I saw how rough it was for you these past couple of days. I was there, remember?" She sighed heavily. "Lord knows, if it had been my family, I'd be pretty rattled, too."

"But..." Tommi started to protest.

"I saw how mean your mom and sister were. But I also saw how sweet and loving Sara was. Hang on to that! I know you can't forget the pain your mom and Liz caused you, but you can focus on the love from Sara, can't you?"

Tommi started to speak again, but she stopped and slowly closed her mouth. Katie could almost hear the mental gears grinding in Tommi's mind. "I guess you're right," she finally admitted softly. "I guess I should try to think about what little good did come of it." She wiped away a small tear. "You know, I've never been close to Sara, not like this visit. We never got along, not until now."

Katie nodded. "Atta girl."

Tears suddenly started flowing from Tommi's eyes. "I really did lose everything! My friends, my family, my ... you know." Tommi shook her head and wiped at her cheeks again. "All because of a stupid one-night stand! Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

"You didn't lose _everything_," Katie reminded Tommi. "You've got a lot of new friends back at school, and you've gained a very caring little sister."

"But I can't ever go home again!" Tommi cried in anguish. "Even when this is all over, I can _never_ go back." She shook her head, her gaze dropping as her eyes closed. "All Ma or Liz have to do is tell someone what I did, and" She didn't need to say more.

Katie winced inwardly. She'd seen how 'redneck' Tommi's hometown really was, with all the stereotypically intolerant attitudes. If some of Tommi's old high-school friends learned what she was doing - Katie shuddered inwardly at the thought. Tommi really could never go home again, even after her surrogacy. Tommi's life would truly be in danger in her home town.

"I bet," Katie said, trying to break what was rapidly returning to a depressing conversation, "that when you meet mom and dad, you'll feel like you have a new home town and extended family."

"Wake up! We're home!" Katie called to Tommi, who was sleeping on her reclined seat since they'd switched drivers a couple of hours earlier.

Slowly, Tommi stirred from her slumber. "Huh?" she asked as she tried to rouse herself.

"We're home." Katie repeated.

Tommi stretched and looked out the windows, trying to orient herself. "What time is it?" she asked through a yawn.

"About eleven thirty," Katie replied.

Tommi finished her yawn. "How long have I been asleep? I ... remember heavy traffic - was it in Jacksonville?"

Katie nodded as she turned off the ignition. "Yeah. That wreck on the interstate cost us almost two hours. It's a lot later than I hoped. Let's go see if my folks are still up."

She needn't have worried. A crack of light formed beneath the garage door, widening as the door rose silently. It seemed as if the girls were expected - which, of course, they were.

Tommi watched the door opening with a sense of dread. She'd already had one very bad experience, and she was quite understandably nervous. As the door lifted higher, she saw the shadows, then the wheels, and finally the bodies of two cars parked neatly inside the garage. Her eyes widened as she noted the cars - a nice red sports convertible and a silver Lexus. Apparently, Katie's family was, in comparison to Tommi's poor family, loaded.

And the surprises didn't stop. Walking from the far end of the garage, from the door into the house, were two middle-aged people - Katie's parents. Katie's dad had his arm around his wife's shoulder as they slowly ambled toward the still-opening garage door. As soon as the

door stopped moving, they rushed out to greet the two girls, both faces beaming with happiness.

Katie was immediately embraced by her mom, and kissed on her cheek. "I'm so glad you're home, sweetie," her mom told her enthusiastically. "We were starting to get worried."

Katie's dad waited his turn, and then gave his daughter a hug. "Thank you for calling, Pumpkin, so we'd know how things were going." He kissed her on the forehead.

To Tommi's surprise, Katie didn't seem to mind, even a corny nickname from her father; if anything, it was normal to be greeted like this by her parents. Tommi felt a pang of loneliness; his family would never display affection in such a manner.

Katie's mom turned to Tommi. "You must be Tommi Sue," she said, her voice warm and friendly. Before Tommi could react, she found herself wrapped in a warm hug. "I'm Veronica Snyder. We're so glad you decided to come." Katie's mom let Tommi out of the embrace. "You can call me Ronnie, if you'd like."

"Uh, I mostly go by just Tommi," Tommi stammered through her confusion at the reception she was getting. After all, Katie's parents were strangers to her.

Katie's dad stepped to Tommi and took her hand. "Glad you could come home with my little Pumpkin," he said with genuine friendliness. "I worry so much when she drives alone."

From the corner of her eye, Tommi saw Katie make a nodding gesture, a sign to her dad, perhaps. Then Tommi found herself surprised by a cautious but warm hug from Tommi's dad. "I'm Roger Snyder," he offered as he dropped the quick embrace. "But Katie said you might like to think of me as 'Dad'."

Tommi's eyes started watering, and then tears started streaming down her cheeks.

Ronnie glanced nervously at Roger, then at Katie, then back to Tommi. "I'm sorry ..." she started.

Tommi shook her head to cut her off. "No," she said firmly, "it's ... " she shook her head, uncertain of what to say. "My family ... my dad and Ma ... would never ..." She stopped, wiping at the tears. "I ... just feel ... overwhelmed." She saw the looks of concern on the parents' faces. "No, I've never had anyone welcome me like ..." She stopped, turning away and wiping at her eyes, embarrassed by her display.

Ronnie wrapped her arm around Tommi's shoulder. "I'm sorry if we embarrassed you. We just want you to feel welcome."

Tommi suppressed a sob. "I've ... never felt more welcome ... in my life," she said through tears.

"You ladies go on inside," Roger interjected. "I'll bring in your bags."

Tommi sat on the sofa, her senses reeling from the emotional overload. On the coffee table sat a tray with sandwiches and iced tea; Ronnie had anticipated that the girls might be hungry and thirsty. With a start, Tommi realized that Ronnie had probably prepared them only minutes before they arrived.

As she chewed a bite of sandwich, Tommi glanced around and took in her new surroundings. First was Katie's mom; Ronnie was about forty-five, only a few years younger than Tommi's mother, and about the same height - five foot six or seven. There, the similarities ended. Tommi realized that, in comparison, her own mom was a slob. Even in her night gown and robe, Ronnie looked ... elegant. Her short auburn hair was neatly done, even as she was ready for bed, and with no traces of premature graying, unlike Ma Wilson. Her robe was neat, and from the way it hung on her, Tommi could tell that Ronnie kept trim and fit. The most amazing thing, Tommi realized, was the way Ronnie's green Irish eyes sparkled with life and joy. Her smile was contagious. She seemed - no, Tommi corrected herself - she was happy, full of joy.

Katie's dad Roger was also a surprise to Tommi. He was shorter than Tommi's dad had been - perhaps five foot eleven - and not nearly as physically imposing, but he carried himself with a quiet dignity and confidence that Tommi had never seen in her own dad. Roger, like his wife, had a smile that seemed carved permanently into his features, and his blue eyes sparkled with life. Tommi realized that her dad got respect through being physically intimidating; Roger, on the other hand, seemed to be a man that people would respect because he appeared so honest and friendly and confident without an air of self-importance. Tommi felt pangs of envy that Katie was lucky enough to have such parents.

"And when Katie called us last night and told us about your visit home," Ronnie was still talking, though Tommi had missed a little of the conversation, "we insisted that you both come early, and that we could adjust our plans."

Tommi forced herself to swallow the food in her mouth. "Thank you, Mrs. Snyder," she began.

"Oh, pooh!" Ronnie chided, and even that was friendly, "Call me Ronnie."

Tommi nodded. "I'll try. It's hard, though. For all my life, I always addressed adults formally."

"Well, you can relax around here," Roger explained. "Besides, as you go through college, you'll be dealing more and more with adults on a peer-level, so you'll need to change your habits." He smiled. "It's part of growing up, learning that adults are peers, rather than authority figures not to be questioned."

Tommi listened to Roger with surprise. She'd never had an adult talk to her like this, especially her own parents. He had just given her some wise counsel on the meaning of growing up, given as if Tommi was his own daughter.

"Roger," Ronnie interrupted, "stop it. I'm sure the girls are too tired to listen to your philosophical ramblings." She smiled at Tommi. "When he gets on his wise, old dad kick, he can talk for hours and hours." There was mirth in her voice and a twinkle in her eyes.

"Oh, hush, Ronnie," Roger replied, equally light-heartedly. "I was only making an observation."

Everything that Tommi had experienced growing up was counter to this loving good-natured exchange; she couldn't remember her Ma and Dad ever joking with each other.

The entire situation was disorienting to Tommi. Katie's parents, until an hour ago, total strangers, were warmer and more welcoming to Tommi than her own family. Tommi had grown up in a cramped, messy, house that by comparison to Katie's home was a ramshackle hut. It struck her that Katie lived in a home, but her family lived in a house. The difference was the people and the attitudes and love and warmth present within the walls. Katie's home had it; Tommi's didn't.

"Mom, Dad," Katie interrupted, "we've had a very long couple of days, so if you can hold off, I think Tommi and I would like to just get some sleep." She winked to Tommi. "You'll have us for several days, so you can talk more starting tomorrow," Katie glanced at her dad, "and you'll have time to share as much of your 'fatherly wisdom' as Tommi can stand."

Ronnie glanced at her husband with an "I told you so" grin. "Whenever you're ready for bed, I'll show you to your rooms. Roger already put your things there for you. "

Tommi lay in bed in the guest room, staring at the ceiling. Her head was awl; in less than two hours, she'd been treated like part of a family that she'd never even dreamed could be reality. She envied Katie. Katie had a mother and father that loved her unconditionally, that weren't critical of her, that were happy and friendly - everything that Tommi's family wasn't.

Even the home was a stark contrast to her life. The Snyder's home was almost showcase neat, and tastefully decorated without being ostentatious. Even the guest bedroom where Tommi lay was tasteful and neat, with a definite "homey" touch, and it had its own private bath. Back home, the entire family shared one tiny bathroom. It wasn't that they couldn't have added a bathroom, but Ma and Dad never considered it a priority. A private bathroom seemed unreal, almost as unreal as the generosity and friendliness Ronnie and Roger had shown her.

For the first time in her life, Tommi realized just how poor they'd been. Often, or so went the stereotype, poverty was compensated by caring, close family. Not so for her, Tommi realized. Her poverty had been a brutish sort of existence, without material goods or love. It had been poverty both materially and emotionally.

All Tom had ever had were his parents' expectations of him, expectations that he - now she - couldn't live up to, and the resultant scorn and anger. It was just the way it was - and Tommi had never known anything different. Dorm life hadn't exposed Tommi to the harsh reality of

what she'd experienced. The dorm was sort of communal, without family, without a large degree of privacy.

Even the bed in which she lay seemed alien, foreign to her. Katie had proudly told her how her dad Roger had hand-crafted the bed and dresser in his workshop because he loved to work with wood in his spare time. He'd made the furniture for his daughter, too, as a way of showing his love for her. Even after Ronnie and Katie bragged about the special bed for Tommi, Roger had been modest. How utterly different from Tommi's dad, or Ma, or Liz, for that matter! Tommi knew that her dad could have made things around the house, but he didn't; he was always out with his working buddies. And if any of his family did something, they always seemed to go out of their way to make sure everyone knew of their accomplishments.

Tommi felt her eyes tearing again as she tried to comprehend the family love all around her. It didn't seem fair. Her own flesh and blood, her own kin, had turned their back on her, but Katie's family had accepted her, just as Katie had predicted. Everything around her sharply punctuated the bitter reality that she'd faced and escaped at home. Tommi was truly alone; her family had rejected her. Tears flowed more freely, and soon she was sobbing lightly.

Presently, she heard the door creak open. "Are you okay, dear?" It was Ronnie.

"Uh huh," Tommi answered weakly. She figured that Ronnie was just checking up on her.

Ronnie slipped into the room, closing the door softly behind her, a ghostly shadow gliding through the dim light to the bedside. "I heard you crying," she said, stating the obvious. "Are you okay?" She sat down carefully on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not sure," Tommi whispered through her tears.

"Katie told me all about your visit home," Ronnie said. "I can understand if you're hurting inside."

Tommi nodded, sniffing from all the tears. "Yeah," she answered simply.

Ronnie reached across Tommi toward the nightstand, retrieved a tissue, and handed it to Tommi. "Here."

Tommi blew her nose, took another tissue from Ronnie, and dabbed at her eyes. "Thank you," she said as Ronnie took the tissues from her.

"I can't begin to imagine what it was like."

"It's not fair," Tommi protested weakly. "I didn't do anything to them! But they ... they hate me!"

"Maybe," Ronnie answered gravely. "And maybe not. Maybe they're just confused and don't know how to deal with you."

"It's not just the change," Tommi replied quickly. "I remember ... all those years, all the yelling and criticism and ... anger." She sniffled again, and used the tissue that Ronnie offered. "Katie is so lucky," Tommi changed the subject. "I hope she knows how lucky she is."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd known her as a teenager," Ronnie laughed. "She was pretty ... difficult ... when she was a teenager. In fact," she confided in a lower whisper, "there was a time her father and I wanted to find a convent boarding school for her."

"But ..." Tommi shook her head in confusion. "I don't understand."

"Every family has difficult moments. When Katie was being so rebellious and angry, we had our share of arguments and yelling. But we still loved her, and we made sure she knew that, too."

Tommi felt tears welling up again. "I wish I had a mom like you."

Ronnie bent over and gave Tommi a hug. "Well, since Katie considers you a sister that she never had, in a way, I guess I can be like your second mom."

Tommi started at Ronnie's words. "What?"

"Didn't she ever tell you?" Ronnie seemed surprised. "She talks about you all the time, and she's told me many times that you're the little sister she always wished she had."

Tommi was more confused. "I don't get it. You've never met me, and yet you treat me like I'm family. You haven't pried into my life, or why I'm doing ... what I'm doing, or anything, but..."

"Shhh," Ronnie said soothingly. "If my little girl says you're like a sister, that's good enough for me. We trust her judgment." She smiled, a warm smile that Tommi could barely see but could almost feel in the darkness. "Now, you girls had a long day driving, and you need some sleep. Close your eyes and rest."

Ronnie's reassuring words, and her soothing melodic tone, were almost hypnotic to Tommi. "But..." Tommi started to lift her head, to speak in protest, "it's all so ... overwhelming. So ... confusing."

"Hush," Ronnie repeated, reaching out to gently brush the hair from Tommi's eyes and soothingly stroke her cheek. "Rest now."

Tommi felt a soothing calm entering her as she eased her head back onto the pillow. "I'm ... a bit scared," she confessed in a hushed whisper, "that this is all a dream, and I'm going to wake up back home with Ma and Liz yelling at me."

"Would you like me to sit with you for a few minutes?"

Tommi tried to nod, but her head felt strangely heavy. "Please," she answered. Ronnie's hand gently stroking her cheek and Ronnie's soothing words quickly worked their magic.

Within minutes, Tommi drifted off to sleep, and unlike previous nights, it was the sort of peaceful sleep that she hadn't experienced since the start of the trip.

"Aren't you going to ask about ... everything?" Tommi blurted. "I mean, doesn't it seem ... weird?"

Ronnie exchanged glances with her husband and Katie, and then she smiled at Tommi. The four were seated around the table having lunch, and the topics of conversation had been everything but Tommi's changes and upcoming procedure. "Of course we're curious, dear," Ronnie answered with her usual smile, "but we figured if you didn't want to talk about it, it would be rude to pry."

Tommi glanced around the table and shook her head, chuckling. "It is kind of like an elephant in the room."

Roger seemed surprised. "Well, not really," he replied, surprising Tommi. "If Katie hadn't told us, I wouldn't have known. After all, you are a charming and attractive young lady."

Tommi blushed. "I don't know about that part," she said modestly.

"Do you want to talk about the procedure, I mean?" Ronnie put the question on the table.

Tommi seemed surprised that even at this point, after the subject had been raised, they were still polite enough to let her decide if the conversation should proceed. "I'm getting comfortable with the whole thing," she answered. "I mean, at first I was pretty embarrassed, but it's kind of becoming, I don't know, kind of natural."

"As I understand it," Roger began, "you'll be a surrogate mother to carry the baby of some girl who is pregnant but doesn't want the baby?"

"Pretty much. The whole idea of the foundation is to help prevent abortions," Tommi explained.

Ronnie looked surprised. "Maybe I'm a bit behind technology, but it seems surprising that they can transplant a baby into a new host mother."

Tommi smiled. "And more." She looked down at her own body, seeing her blossoming breasts and feminine figure, and then back at Ronnie. "Just look at me."

Ronnie shook her head. "It's hard to believe you were a ... "

"A guy," Tommi finished her sentence. "Yup."

Roger raised an eyebrow. "How ... complete ... is the surgery? I would assume that you have all the parts you need to carry and deliver a baby? And ..." He glanced for a brief

second at Tommi's chest as he stopped speaking. He snapped his gaze back up, embarrassed both at his glance and the subject.

Tommi almost laughed aloud. "My _breasts_ are side-effects." Tommi took a sip of iced tea.

"How did you get started doing this?" Ronnie inquired.

Tommi did laugh aloud this time. "I lost my scholarship after I got into a little trouble."

"Oh," Roger seemed surprised.

"With the dean's daughter."

Roger's eyes widened, as did Ronnie's. "Ooohhhh. I see."

"Yeah," Tommi echoed. "In my defense, she was the aggressor. I thought we'd have a nice simple first date, but she had other ideas, I guess. I tried to explain, but unfortunately, the dean wouldn't listen, and I lost my scholarship. It was either join this program or go back home and work in the mines."

Ronnie winced. "It doesn't sound like you had much choice."

Tommi shook her head. "Not really. I _can't_ go back, not to work in the mine. And there really aren't any other jobs back home, either." For a brief moment, Tommi felt all the pain trying to come back to overwhelm her. She fought it back. "I saw an ad for adoption facilitators that looked like it paid well, so I checked into it."

"That sounds pretty ... innocuous," Ronnie replied. "Sort of like a clerk doing paperwork."

Tommi laughed. "That's what I thought, too, until I met with Rachel - the center director."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just find women volunteers?" Roger asked the logical question.

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, they prefer women. But sometimes, if they don't get enough women volunteers, they'll take men - if those men pass all the tests."

Roger nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose they would be concerned about your health, especially your mental health. It sounds like a big step."

"What's involved in the procedures?" Ronnie asked as if talking about planting a garden.

Tommi was shocked at how casually the conversation was going. She didn't sense any condemnation or judgment from the Snyders; just honest curiosity. It was refreshing to Tommi. "Well, they start with a tissue sample, turn that into stem cells, and then grow the needed internal parts in a lab. They have to do some genetic manipulation - I'm XY male, but my new parts are XX female. When all the cloned organs are ready, they surgically implant them. Since they're made from my own cells, there's no chance of rejection. It's like my body has always had them."

"Oh, so they're fully functional?" Ronnie asked. Tommi's blush gave away the answer. "I suppose that makes sense," Ronnie continued. "You'd need proper hormone levels to support the pregnancy." Her eyes widened. "And that would explain your ... um?" She glanced at Tommi's chest too.

Tommi smiled. "Yeah."

Roger nodded in understanding. "How long until you get the transplant? The baby, I mean? Or have you had it already?"

"No," Tommi answered quickly. "I'm scheduled for the transfer about two weeks after we start school."

"Is this ... um ... permanent?" Ronnie asked slowly. "Are you a girl forever now?"

Tommi shook her head. "No, it's just for the surrogacy. Then I can change back. They'll re-grow my ... regular parts, and I'll have a second surgery."

"Oh, I see."

"But some of the changes won't reverse. My general female form, you know - my hips are a bit rounder, my breasts ... grew. Without male hormones, I've lost quite a bit of muscle." Tommi sounded a bit sad as she explained the changes. "I'll have to work out a lot to get my muscles back, and surgery will fix my ... shape."

Ronnie got a sad look in her eyes. "I wish they'd have been able to do that ... years ago."

Roger quickly put his hand on his wife's; Tommi realized that he knew exactly what his wife was thinking, and that she needed some comfort.

Ronnie looked at Roger, the two communicating silently through their expressions, before she turned back toward Tommi. "We wanted a larger family," she explained softly. "But my second pregnancy was ... bad. The embryo implanted in the tubes. I_knew_ something was wrong. It didn't feel right." She shook her head sadly. "When it started to go wrong, I almost didn't make it. They had to operate, and I lost the baby and my ovaries and tubes." She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

Katie's mouth hung open in shock. Tommi realized that Katie had never known why she was an only child.

Ronnie put her hands on Tommi's. "What you're doing is a miracle." Even now, as tears ran down her face, she tried to smile.

Tommi nodded mutely, not knowing what to say. Somehow, she'd become a catalyst for Ronnie and Roger to reveal to their daughter something that had been hidden for years. Tommi wondered how Katie was going to react. Would she resent that her mother had

shared a deep painful secret with Tommi? Would this revelation somehow affect their friendship? Tommi felt a sudden chill of fear.

Roger gave Katie a warm fatherly hug and kissed her forehead. "You drive carefully," he admonished.

Katie nodded, smiling sadly. "I will. You know I always do." She turned to her mother. "Love you, mom," she said simply. "I love you both."

Ronnie wrapped her arms around Katie. "You girls come back for Spring Break, okay?"

Katie stole a quick glance at Tommi. "We'll see." She let her mother kiss her.

Roger turned to Tommi and held out his hand, expecting a handshake. Instead, Tommi threw her arms around him and gave him an enthusiastic hug. She repeated the hug with Ronnie. "Thank you," she said before she got in the car. "This was just what I needed."

Ronnie smiled. "Remember, you're welcome here any time."

As Ronnie and Roger stood in the driveway, smiling and waving, Katie backed into the street and the pair slowly drove away. As the car turned the corner, half a block from the house, Tommi could see Katie's parents, still standing, watching, and waving.

"You were right," Tommi said as she settled into her seat. "That was just what I needed."

Katie nodded. "I told you they'd love you,"

"Is everything cool between us?" Tommi asked, concerned about the tone of Katie's response. "I mean, when your mom told me about her ... problem ..."

Katie shrugged. "One thing I learned from my parents is that everyone has - or should have - a private space - things they don't or won't, or shouldn't, share." She sighed. "I've known since I can remember that there was something that she didn't want to talk about. Lots of little clues - she always seemed sad whenever someone had a new baby. She always left the room and let Dad explain whenever I said I wanted a little brother or sister. Things like that. I learned to not ask."

"I was afraid you might feel, I don't know, like I was taking your place or something."

"I'd be lying if I said it didn't bother me a little at first," Katie confessed. "But I know Mom needed to get that off her chest, so to speak. Maybe it was a bunch of things coming together that let her talk. But your being there, with what you're doing, helped a lot."

Tommi wasn't sure where the conversation was going, but she also knew that she and Katie needed to get things between them clear. "I didn't know that you told her that I was like a little sister," Tommi continued cautiously.

Katie smiled, a first for the discussion. "Yeah. And she seemed pretty happy. Ecstatic, even." She thought for a moment. "That might be part of the trigger. Your experience might be, to Mom, a miracle, something that would have helped her. It's probably too late for Mom, but it can help others avoid the pain she suffered." She shrugged again. "Mom and Dad are the most giving, caring people I've ever known. They always think of others before themselves."

"Yeah, I kind of got that impression," Tommi agreed.

"I always knew my folks were pretty pro-life; I never understood why. Now I know."

"If I'm like your little sister, can I borrow that teal sweater?" Tommi teased.

"Keep your mitts off my stuff, or you'll find out how much pain having a big sister can be!" Katie laughed. "And remember, I am a black belt!"

"Sounds like you had an interesting trip," Rachel observed. It was three days before the start of the spring semester. She leaned back in her chair, holding a notepad in her hand as she looked over what she'd written. "You enjoyed Florida?"

Tommi nodded. "Funny - I feel like I've got a family there that treats me like I'm their own daughter and accepts me as I am."

"I see. And how does Katie feel about that?"

Tommi smiled. "We talked a lot about it on the way back. I think she's cool about it. She even told them that she thinks of me as a little sister she never had." Tommi's voice dropped to a near-whisper. "I know how she feels. For the first time, I felt like I have a little sister in Sara. And then I had to leave her there with Ma and Liz." She shook her head as her eyes misted. "Why? Why can't they accept me?"

Rachel closed her eyes, shaking her head sadly. "I don't know." She sighed. "This happens a lot." She gazed evenly at Tommi. "We talked a lot before your trip to try to help you not get your expectations up, and to think of what might happen and how you might cope. Did that help?"

Tommi shook her head, her eyes almost closed. "Nope."

"No?" Rachel seemed genuinely surprised.

"I thought it might be bad." Tommi sighed. "It was worse. It couldn't have been more of a disaster." She looked at Rachel. "Please don't take this as a criticism of you, because I know you're trying to help, but I don't think there was any way you could help me prepare for that ... disaster."

"Thanks for not blaming me," Rachel replied gratefully. "I wanted to help, but sometimes it's hard." She thought for a moment. "What most caught you by surprise? What most upset you?"

"I lost my family."

Rachel flinched a tiny bit before she could recompose herself. She'd tried to get Tommi to see that she might be rejected by family. Evidently, she'd failed. "If you ever really had a family in the sense that you're thinking."

Tommi looked confused. "I don't understand." She shook her head. "That sounds like a riddle, not an answer."

Rachel leaned forward and dropped the pad on her desk. "You expect me to have an answer for you?"

"Well, yeah," Tommi replied. "You usually do."

Rachel shook her head. "Sometimes, I have an answer, but most of the time, my job is to help you find your own answers."

"I don't get it."

Rachel sighed. "Some of your issues are generic; they apply to all clients, or all male clients. Those I can give answers to."

"But ..."

Rachel shook her head. "I don't know your family, apart from what you've told me. I don't know your friends. I can't give you exact answers all the time."

Tommi looked genuinely distressed. "Then ... how do I solve these problems?"

Rachel had a very slight hint of a smile. "Haven't you learned anything from rooming with a psychology major?" She saw Tommi's uncomprehending expression. "You have to find your own answers. Your problems, like with your family, are unique to you. All I can do is listen, and try to guide you down a path that will help you uncover the answers. But I can't provide them."

Tommi sat, stunned. She'd come to rely on Rachel to help her. Now it sounded like Rachel couldn't help.

"You look upset and confused," Rachel observed after a few moments.

"Yeah," Tommi agreed. "Is this where I lay on the couch and you starting figuring out why I hate my mother?"

Rachel laughed. "There is a significant school of thought in psychology that doesn't like the Freudian method. In my opinion, it takes too long, and about the only sure result is transferring lots of money from the patient to the psychologist. In your case, the problems with your mother might be from this year, or from something that happened when you were little, or any time in between. It might be your perception, or it might be simply the way she is." She shook her head. "I don't know the facts. I wasn't there."

"So ... I have to figure this out?" Tommi sounded uneasy.

"Or accept what is and worry about what will be."

Tommi shook her head. "That doesn't sound very easy."

"It isn't," Rachel agreed. "There are a few things you can think about, though."

Tommi took the bait. "What are they?"

"First, you were invited to Florida for Spring Break. It sounds like a nice getaway if you decide to go."

The reminder of going to Katie's parents' home for Spring Break made Tommi smile. "It would be nice."

"And you've got a loving little sister that you can call and text."

"Yeah."

Rachel continued. "I'm going to set you up with a personal peer - someone your age, who's gone through what you're going through. A personal mentor, if you will. That might help you some."

"Okay," Tommi answered warily. "I'm not sure about that."

"Trust me - it'll help you a lot." She leaned back in her chair. "And one more thing."

"What's that?" Tommi asked curiously.

Rachel smiled. "It's almost the big day. You're scheduled for your baby transfer in almost three weeks."

Tommi felt a surge of mixed excitement and dread. This was what it was all about - everything she'd been through had led up to this - the baby, her baby, would be given to her in a very short time. She suddenly wondered if she would be able to handle the event.

It was as if Rachel could read her thoughts. "Don't worry. Women have been carrying babies and giving birth for countless millenia. You'll do fine," she said with a confident smile. "But there is one small thing..."

Tommi's eyes widened and her countenance reflected sudden fear. "What ... what's that?" she asked tentatively.

Rachel tried to frown, but didn't completely succeed. "You put on a few more pounds than you should have over the break. I want you to meet with our nutritionist and make sure you're on a strict healthy diet, and until the transfer, I want you in the gym three times a week." She smiled, to help appear that she was giving friendly advice and not nagging. "You want to be strong and healthy to carry the baby, right?"

Chapter 8 - The Big Day

The buzz of the alarm clock sounded excessively loud that morning. Tommi reached over to swat the snooze button, but missed; the buzz continued. "Damn" she muttered as she levered herself up to find the offending noisemaker.

"Is it time?" Katie's groggy voice sounded from the other side of the dark room.

"Yeah," Tommi answered unenthusiastically. She found the switch for her desk lamp and turned it on, and then flinched from the sudden bright light. "Damn!" she said again. Shielding her eyes from the light with one hand, she groped for the alarm with the other. Finally, the noise stopped.

"I volunteered to take you at this ungodly-early hour, right?" Katie complained.

"Yup."

Katie sat up in bed and swung her legs to the floor. "What the hell was I thinking? Five in the morning is too early to be getting up."

"Aw, c'mon," Tommi tried to sound enthusiastic. "You said that you'd do anything for your little sister, right?"

In response, Katie tossed her pillow at Tommi. "That doesn't work this early in the morning," she replied.

Slowly, Tommi stood, stretching slowly and trying to shake off the sleep. "Be back in a minute." She stumbled toward the door and disappeared down the hall. In a bit, she was back.

"You okay?" Katie asked as she pulled on her sweater.

Tommi shrugged. "I guess so."

"Nervous?"

Tommi nodded. "Yup." She peeled off her pajamas and began to dress. Her clothes had been laid out the night before in anticipation of this moment.

"Yeah, I can understand that. I'd be nervous, too," Katie responded. "I'm not sure I could do it, and I started out a girl." She had a sudden thought. "You might skip the bra; I doubt you'll get to wear it under your surgical gown."

"Would it be too much to admit that I'm scared?" Tommi had stopped dressing and was staring doe-eyed at Katie. Her lower lip quivered as she spoke.

Katie realized how nervous Tommi was. She wrapped her arms around her, pulling Tommi into a warm embrace. She could feel Tommi trembling. "It's okay to be nervous," she said soothingly. "But you're going to be okay. I'll be with you. Rachel will be with you. Everything is going to be okay."

Tommi nodded. "We need to get going. I've got to be at the clinic at five thirty."

"And the clinic is only four or five minutes away, so we have plenty of time." Katie replied calmly. "Finish getting dressed, get your bag, and then we can go."

Tommi nodded without enthusiasm. "I'm hungry."

"Ah, ah, ah!" Katie chided as Tommi turned toward their mini-fridge. "You know what Dr. Tina said - nothing to eat after midnight."

"I know," Tommi rebutted as she slumped into her chair. "It's just ..."

"You're nervous, and you want to take your mind off the procedure, right?" Katie completed her sentence.

"Yeah."

"You got your bag?" Katie tried to distract Tommi.

Tommi picked up her bag of things. "Right here. Just like I packed last night."

"You get your toothbrush and stuff?"

"Of course I got my ..." Tommi's voice trailed off as she thought. She got a sheepish expression. "I don't think I packed the things I used this morning."

Katie fought the impulse to say "I told you so." Instead, she looked at her watch. "Maybe we ought to go. We don't want you to be late."

Tommi finished putting her brush, toothbrush, and other things into her bag. She slowly stood and pulled on her coat. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

Katie put on her own coat and opened the door for Tommi, closing it behind them.

The halls were silent and dim - in the energy-saving night mode, there was enough light to avoid accidents, barely, and the automatic thermostat was turned down to a cool sixty-four degrees. The two strode quietly down the hall, down a staircase, and into the main lobby.

It was there that Tommi got a surprise. Several of the girls were waiting, most in their pajamas and robes. They surrounded her and began to give her hugs and wish her well. Tommi was in tears by the time she and Katie left the building. It was, Katie hoped, exactly what Tommi needed - moral support from her friends.

Despite Katie's efforts, Tommi was silent for the brief ride to the clinic. As instructed, they went to the back emergency entrance; Katie observed that from the back entrance, it seemed more like a hospital than a simple clinic. She let Tommi walk in, parked her car in the nearby lot, and rejoined Tommi.

By the time Katie walked in, Tommi was sitting in a wheelchair, with a nurse attending to her, taking her vital signs. The nurse looked up. "You don't have to stay if you don't want to," she said simply. "We'll take good care of our little girl."

Katie looked at Tommi's fearful eyes, and shook her head. "Tommi is as close to me as a sister. I'll stay."

The nurse smiled. "Okay."

Presently, the nurse led Tommi back to a small room. As Tommi sat on the edge of the bed, the nurse took a bundle from one of the closets. "Here. Put this on."

Tommi took the hospital gown, still folded, and sighed. "One of these?"

The nurse smiled and picked up the gown. "This is custom made for us. It's not like those cheap close-in-the-back-and-show-off-your-rear gowns most hospitals use. The ties are on a flap that folds across your front and ties on the side, because we'll be working mostly on your front. It's more like a comfy set of double-breasted footy pajamas."

Tommi smiled. "So I get a bit of dignity?"

"Just a bit," the nurse grinned. She scooted Katie from the room. "Open the door when you're changed, dear," the nurse commanded as she followed Katie, closing the door behind her.

Moments later, Katie was sitting beside the bed, while Tommi lay down under a blanket. "These PJs may be custom made, but they're not as warm as my flannel ones, and they're drafty," Tommi observed.

"Give them points for trying," Katie countered.

"How is my patient doing this morning?" Dr. Tina called as she walked in. "All ready?" Dr. Tina was wearing surgical scrubs, not the usual office attire Tommi had always seen her wearing.

Tommi shook her head. "No."

Dr. Tina smiled. "It's not so bad. You won't feel a thing."

"That's what you said yesterday," Tommi answered.

Dr. Tina grinned. "Do you get the feeling we're kind of hovering around you, endlessly taking samples for tests and asking you how you're doing?"

Tommi nodded. "Yup." Katie laughed lightly.

Dr. Tina shrugged. "Busted, I guess. You're..."

Tommi raised her hands to her chest, cupping her breasts. "Using the term 'busted' is kind of ... I don't know ... wrong?" she giggled as she glanced down and cupped her breasts.

Dr. Tina smiled. "That's my girl." She looked at Tommi's chart. "Are you still doing okay with the hormones?"

Tommi nodded. "I took the last dose last evening."

"Nothing orally since then?"

"No," Tommi answered, "and I'm starving."

Dr. Tina managed not to laugh. "We'll get you fed soon enough. And I think you'll find our cuisine far better than standard hospital fare."

"But first?"

"I've got to do a quick exam." Dr. Tina pulled back the blanket and untied the front of Tommi's pajamas. She probed gently at Tommi's abdomen. "Any tenderness?"

"Nope."

"No feelings that you might be ready to menstruate?"

"Nope."

"No discomfort with the hormones?" Dr. Tina continued.

"Just a little sensation of bloating, and my breasts feel a bit heavy and swollen, and a bit more tender than usual."

Dr. Tina made a couple of notes on the chart. She felt Tommi's breasts, palpating them quickly and professionally. "You've got a good healthy pair," she observed with a smile.

"Not my fault that my family tends to have big boobs," Tommi observed dryly. "Personally, I'd prefer not to have large breasts, but I guess I don't have much to say about it, do I?"

"No, it's the luck of the genetic draw," Dr. Tina agreed. "And they will grow some more as you carry the baby to term." Dr. Tina hung the chart back on Tommi's bed. "I think you're ready to go."

"So soon?" Tommi glanced nervously at Katie.

"Would you prefer to wait a while and get even more nervous?" Dr. Tina asked with a sly grin. "You're first up today. We like to schedule our new patients early, so we don't feel rushed and can give you extra attention if needed."

"Oh."

"I'll get Deb to start your IV, and then we'll take you to the OR. The ... donor ... is getting prepped, too. We should be ready to start in fifteen or twenty minutes." Dr. Tina informed Tommi before she turned and walked out the door.

Almost as soon as Dr. Tina had gone, Deb came in. Like Dr. Tina, she was in scrubs too. "How are you doing today?"

"Nervous."

Deb smiled. "It'll be okay. I need to get an IV started and then I'll give you some medication."

"Are you going to knock me out?" Tommi asked, almost hopefully.

Deb shook her head. "No, we can't do that. It's a stressful operation for the baby, and we can't add general anesthesia to the mix. You'll have something to help you stay relaxed, and we'll give you an epidural once we get you in the OR." She looked at Tommi like a teacher would look at a star pupil that just made a silly mistake. "I'm sure you were told that yesterday."

Tommi winced. "I guess I don't remember everything I was told yesterday. I was a bit nervous." She wrinkled her forehead in worry. "To tell the truth, I still am."

Deb smiled. "Don't worry about it."

"So I'll be awake?" Tommi sounded frightened by the prospect.

"Some people like being awake and being aware of the miracle they're participating in." Deb saw that Tommi wasn't thrilled. "You'll be conscious, but it'll seem kind of like a dream."

"Can ... can Katie be with me?" Tommi asked, though she fully expected Deb to say no.

Deb looked at Katie and back at Tommi. "I'll ask Dr. Tina." Quickly, she hung the IV bag and inserted the needle into Tommi's arm. As the drip started, she took a syringe and injected its contents into the drip line. "That should help you relax some." She took the now-empty syringe and left. In a moment, before Tommi could say anything to Katie, Deb poked her head back in. "If Katie wants to, she can be with you."

Tommi looked at Katie, her eyes pleading. "Please?"

Katie nodded, smiling. "Anything for my little sister."

Deb looked confused. "I thought ... your family ...?"

Katie smiled. "Long story. Bottom line, Tommi's like the little sister I never had, and my folks treat her like family. So sometimes, I call her my little sister."

Deb nodded. "That's sweet," she said. "Now you'll have to follow me to get changed and scrubbed if you're going to be with her."

Katie took Tommi's hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'll see you in a few minutes, okay?"

Tommi squeezed Katie's hand in return. "Okay."

Tommi felt like she was waking from a vivid dream, where she'd been floating her way through an operation, almost as if she was watching it from above the operating table. "Katie?" she asked, sounding panicked as she jerked her head up to look around and cut through her disorientation.

Katie squeezed her hand. "I'm right here," she answered quickly.

"Am I ... is it ... did they...?" Tommi sounded confused as she tried to lift her head higher still to see Katie.

Katie nodded. "You did fine through the transfer. Congratulations - you're going to be the mother of a little baby girl."

Tommi let her head collapse back on the pillow. "It wasn't a dream?"

Katie shook her head. "No. And you did super."

Slowly, Tommi started to move her hands down toward her belly, only to have her left hand stopped by the IV line. Her right hand moved down and across her belly. "Am I really ... pregnant now?" she asked in awe.

Katie let her feel her belly for a moment. "You're supposed to keep your hands off the incision for three days or so, until it heals."

Tommi nodded. "Am I imagining it, or did Dr. Tina tell you that I have to rest for a few days while the placenta is firmly attached?"

Katie nodded. "You're not imagining it. That's pretty much what she said. You're going to be on total bedrest for the next week. You can't even get up to pee. You've got a catheter to take care of that."

"But ... my classes ..."

Katie smiled. "Depending on how you do, the clinic will let you use a computer this afternoon or tomorrow. I'll bring your books over then. Some of the girls will be around to help you with your studying, so you don't get too far behind."

Tommi nodded slowly. "That sounds good. I'd hate to come this far and flunk out because I got too far behind in my classwork."

Deb came in and picked up the chart. "I have to check your vitals again."

"Don't you have other patients having their procedures?" Tommi asked as Deb recorded the readings. Tommi felt like she was tied down by the IV and the instrument wires.

Deb smiled. "Nope. I'm at your disposal. That's how we work this. When you get a transfer, you get a nurse assigned to help you from pre-op through surgery and then through recovery. My job today is to take care of you, and only you for as long as you're in here."

Katie whistled. "If this were a private hospital, no one could afford it!"

Deb smiled. "We do tend to go overboard taking care of our special patients." She put her stethoscope in her ears, unbuttoned Tommi's pajamas, and listened to her chest. "Breathe deeply. Again." She listened. "Hold your breath." Deb listened for a moment. "Okay breathe normally again." She hung her stethoscope around her neck and then took another instrument that looked like a stethoscope married to a palm-sized oddly-shaped box. Seeing the perplexed look on Tommi's face, she smiled. "This is a fetal Doppler stethoscope. It's a lot more sensitive than a regular stethoscope."

"What ..." Tommi started.

Deb smiled. "Listening to the baby's heartbeat." When she finished, she took the earpieces from her ears. "Would you like to hear?"

"I ... I guess." Deb removed the earpieces from her own ears and carefully placed them in Tommi's. The girl's eyes widened at the medical evidence that she was now truly carrying a baby.

Deb took the stethoscope from Tommi and put it away. "That's probably enough for today. We'd really like to do an ultrasound today, but it would irritate your incisions, so we'll wait until

tomorrow." She winked at Tommi. "If you think the sound of a heartbeat is something, wait until you see your ultrasound."

A head peeked around the door, looking into Tommi's room. "Hi."

Tommi looked up from her laptop, where she was working on her classwork. She smiled when she recognized Dianne. "Hi."

Dianne slipped around the door into the room, sidling up to the side of Tommi's bed. "How are you doing?"

Tommi leaned back, letting her attention drift from her homework. "Tired."

"I can imagine," Dianne replied. She held up a small bag. "We ... the girls and I ... thought we'd bring a few things for you." She handed it to Tommi.

"Thanks," Tommi smiled as she took the bag. She pulled out a couple of blouses and nighties, and a makeup kit. She grimaced at Dianne. "Makeup? In a hospital bed? C'mon."

Dianne laughed. "A girl always has to be ready to look pretty. And you never know who you might have for visitors."

"Somehow, I doubt I'll have visitors that would inspire me to wear makeup," Tommi scoffed. "But nighties - those should be better than the special pajamas they gave me. Thanks." Then Tommi remembered some of the nursing staff, and the unending tests and ultrasounds. "If they'll let me wear them, that is."

Another head poked around the door. "You got time for company?" Melody spotted Dianne. "Oh, hi! I didn't know you were coming." She strode to Tommi's bedside, resting her hands on the bed rails.

"What is this, Grand Central Station?" Tommi joked. "I spend most of my days alone, with nothing but homework and being poked by nurses, and then suddenly I'm in a crowd of visitors?"

"We love seeing you, too," Mel said lightheartedly.

Dianne saw that Tommi was starting to tear up. "You okay?"

Tommi nodded as she wiped her eyes. "I'm glad to see you, but I don't know why I'm crying," she explained. "I think it's all these damned hormones."

"My Dad always said that Mom was on an emotional roller-coaster when she was pregnant," Dianne offered. "He said he really had to be careful of what he said or did, because she'd get sad or upset really easily."

"Great," Tommi pouted. "Katie's really gonna love _that_ in a roommate."

"How are you doing, otherwise?" Mel asked cautiously. "Can you, you know, feel anything?"

Tommi shook her head. "You mean, can I feel the baby?"

"Yeah."

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know. I mean, I feel different. Bloated, full, like that. But I don't know if it's the surgery or the baby or what."

"Well, it's going to be interesting to see you go through this," Mel stated.

Tommi raised her eyebrows. "Oh? You seem kind of ... curious."

Mel lowered her eyes; her face flushed slightly. "Well, I'm planning on having children someday, and it's, well, kind of like a learning lab."

"Oh, so I'm a lab experiment, too?" Tommi laughed.

Mel looked horror-stricken at how Tommi had worded her response. "No, it's... well...." She dropped her gaze. "That didn't sound right, did it?"

Tommi reached out and let his hand rest on Mel's. "I _know_ what you really mean. I wasn't trying to poke fun at you." She looked at Mel, and then at Dianne. "It's nice to have so many friends to help me, and I know I'm probably going to need a lot of help."

Dr. Tina picked that moment to come in. She frowned when she saw the visitors. "You girls need to let her rest!"

Tommi scowled. "I've been resting for four days!" she protested. "I need a little company to keep me sane!"

Dr. Tina wasn't intimidated, nor was she very sympathetic. "You have a lot of staff around here to talk to so you can maintain sanity." She glanced at the laptop on Tommi's bed. "And you've got your classwork to keep you busy."

"Tommi needs time with her friends," Dianne countered. "We're important to her, too."

"Yeah," Mel added. "Moral support."

Dr. Tina laughed as she shook her head. "And you've had some time to visit. But we have a more important concern, and that's making sure Tommi is properly healed and able to go back to school. Now shoo!" She pointed toward the door, her face a mask of determination.

Slowly, reluctantly, Dianne and Mel each gave Tommi a quick hug before they trudged out the door. Mel stopped and turned. "I'll call the Red Cross so they can make sure this POW camp treats you humanely," she said sarcastically.

The glare from Dr. Tina could have frozen boiling water. Mel scooted quickly around the corner and out of view.

Tommi frowned. "My friends come to visit, and you chase them off? Can't I have a little time with them?"

Dr. Tina shook her head. "Not when I'm doing rounds and you're going to get another ultrasound. If I like what I see, you'll be paroled tomorrow." She picked up Tommi's chart to record her vitals from the monitors. "Unless you'd rather skip the ultrasound and stay with us the whole weekend." As if on schedule, Deb came into the room to assist Dr. Tina.

Tommi's frown vanished, replaced with an expectation of being released. Then she frowned again. "Couldn't you have just said that?" she complained.

Dr. Tina grinned. "Where's the sense of power in doing that? That would be ... boring. No excitement, no drama!"

"Sometimes, I think you're a bit strange," Tommi observed with a giggle.

"Yes, I know," was the reply, accompanied by an enigmatic smile. "It keeps life interesting."

As Dr. Tina pulled a cart from against the wall, Deb picked up a bottle and squeezed some warm jelly on Tommi's abdomen. Easily, professionally, Dr. Tina put the ultrasound probe on the jelly and swished it around before she began to slowly move the probe. "Um hmm," she said to herself. "Everything looks good." She saw the curious expression on Tommi's face.

"Have you ...?" She stopped, her eyes wide, a horror-stricken expression on her face. "I haven't shown you an ultrasound, yet, have I?" She shook her head. "How could I miss that?" she asked herself; she seemed very distressed that Tommi hadn't been given the opportunity to see the images yet. "Would you like to see?" she asked apologetically.

When Tommi nodded, Dr. Tina maneuvered the cart so Tommi could see the screen. "Let's let you see what you've done." Dr. Tina began to move the probe carefully, craning her neck to see the image. The blurry image changed, as the probe slid over Tommi's belly.

"There's the head," Dr. Tina said, pointing out a part of the image, "and the body, and wait, there's one of her arms!" She continued to move the probe, and Tommi saw different views of the tiny fetus within her.

"What's that ... pulsing?" Tommi asked as the image went across the body again.

Dr. Tina smiled. "That's the baby's heartbeat," she answered.

Tommi watched for a few more moments before leaning back against the pillow. "Wow!" she said softly to herself as Deb put away the ultrasound machine and cleaned the jelly off Tommi's abdomen. "That's ... amazing!"

Dr. Tina nodded, sounding awestruck herself. "Those images are pretty powerful, aren't they? I never cease to marvel at the miracle of new life."

The noise began as soon as the door opened. It was the sound of happiness, of welcome, of friendship and even love. Tommi felt her eyes watering as she took in the sounds and sights of all her friends cheering her return "home", to her dorm room. The large banner above the window said, in big bright letters, "Welcome Home, Tommi", and beneath that, in slightly smaller letters, "We Missed You" and "Congratulations".

Katie pushed through the small group and put Tommi's bag on her bed before she shoed Mel from Tommi's chair. "Here," she offered Tommi the chair in a tone that sounded more like a command than a suggestion, "get off your feet and rest."

Tommi groaned. "Great. First, I had to deal with Attila the Nurse, and now you're going to watch over me like a hawk?"

Katie grinned. "More like a protective older sister."

Before Tommi could even sit down, Dianne handed her a paper plate with some of the "healthy snacks" set out on Katie's desk. "In case you're hungry."

Tommi looked at the plate and sighed. "You, too?"

Mel offered Tommi a glass of flavored sparkling water. "We all had a talk on helping you stay healthy."

"Just great," Tommi sighed. "Now all of you know what I can and can't eat, so I can't cheat and sneak some tasty food!" Tommi shook her head. "Maybe I should have stayed in the clinic," she said, shaking her head slightly. "I only had one nurse hovering over me there!"

"So," Ashley asked, sounding timid, "what's it like?"

"What?" Tommi was confused by the general question.

"Being pregnant." Ashley clarified. "Do you feel any different?"

Tommi thought for a moment. "You know how you sometimes feel a little bloated ... before a period? It feels a little like that, only not as uncomfortable. Just a little ... full."

"Can we see?" Erica was curious, and from the chorus of agreement, she wasn't the only one.

Tommi shrugged. "I don't think there's much to see," she said. "The baby is only three and a half months along. It's not like I'm going to be showing for a while."

"Oh, okay." Erica sounded disappointed.

Tommi glanced at Katie, sighed, and pulled her blouse up. She realized that the girls might have been confused by her loose-fitting blouse. It was a maternity blouse, but she wore it only to keep pressure off the surgical incision while it healed. "See?" she said, "nothing there but the incision."

Christina peered at Tommi's abdomen from one angle, then another, and then a third. "I don't know," she commented. "It does seem a little bit rounder."

"Nah."

"You're imagining it."

"I don't see anything." There was doubt, and a little disappointment, in the voices.

Tommi shook her head. "I told you there was nothing to see."

Christina listened to the protests of disbelief. "No, seriously," she continued. "It's not like you're huge and round - yet, but your belly is just a teeny bit less flat." She glanced around. "Aw, c'mon. Am I the only one who thinks that?"

A chorus of "Yes" answered her.

Erica, though, disagreed with the consensus. She looked at Tommi and shrugged. "I'm not sure." She thought for a moment. "Look, Christina's been an artist most of her life, right? And she's very good, right?" The girls all agreed, even as Christina blushed at the compliments. "And she's majoring in fine arts, right?"

"So?"

"Artists, or so the stereotype goes, can recognize tiny details that everyone else misses." She shrugged. "Maybe Christina can see some slight changes in Tommi. I remember a story I read someplace where an artist realized that his mistress was pregnant after only a few weeks, just from the subtle differences."

Katie thought for a second, and grinned, shaking her head. "Maybe, but I don't buy it."

Tommi, however, looked thoughtful. "I wonder how I'm going to change as ... as the baby grows?"

"Do you feel any different?" Ashley asked.

"Yeah, like odd cravings or anything?" Linda piped in. "When my mom was pregnant with my youngest brother, she had the strangest food cravings! Sometimes she just had to have a grilled pepperoni, onion, and jalapeno sandwich!"

"My aunt craved liverwurst," Erica added with a wicked grin.

Tommi felt queasy thinking about such sandwiches. "Ugh! I _hope_ I don't get cravings like that!"

Katie nodded. "Yeah, me, neither, because I have to live with her!" she laughed.

"How soon can you go back to classes?" Ashley changed the subject.

Tommi was grateful for the change of subject; talking about the food left her feeling a bit nauseous. She wondered briefly if she was going to be plagued by morning sickness. "Tomorrow," she said.

"But she can't carry anything heavy," Katie chimed in, "including books, for another ten days. No heavy lifting of any kind. So we'll need to help out."

Tommi frowned. "Good grief," she sighed. "I'm not totally helpless."

Katie just shrugged. "But you _are_ going to follow your doctor's orders, right?" It was _not_ a rhetorical question.

Tommi rolled her eyes. "I'm beginning to regret signing the permission form, so Katie and Dr. Tina can talk about my condition."

"Well, it's too late now! I can get all the info I need to take care of my 'little sister'!" Katie chuckled, to the amusement of the other girls.

"How are you feeling?"

Tommi sighed. Everyone was asking her the same question - "How do you feel?" or a variant thereof.

"Same as two days ago," she replied without enthusiasm.

Dr. Tina raised an eyebrow as an expression of curiosity. "I take it you're a bit tired of the question?" she asked.

Tommi nodded. "Everyone, and I mean _everyone_, keeps asking how I'm doing. I know you and Rachel and Deb and everyone here needs to know, medically, but ... it's getting old, especially when girls I barely know ask."

Dr. Tina shrugged. "Rachel can give you a better answer as to why so many people are asking the question, but, to put it simply, our clients are still ... unique. The procedure is not as common as we'd like, and so there's a little bit of ..." She wrinkled her nose as if the thoughts were repugnant, "oddness."

"So I'm a freak for the sex change, and an even bigger freak because I'm carrying someone else's baby?" Tommi sounded a bit angry.

"I'm afraid so," Dr. Tina answered.

"Great!" Tommi sulked.

"Have you been following my orders?"

Tommi nodded unenthusiastically. "No lifting of anything more than a couple of pounds. Minimize walking. Any time I'm not moving, I rest with my feet elevated if at all possible. No pressure on my abdomen, including a laptop computer. Follow the diet precisely. Don't have fun. Don't laugh or giggle or express loud emotions."

Dr. Tina laughed. "I never said those last two, but I'll have to remember them in case I need to use them on an obstinate patient." She patted the exam table. "It's time for an exam."

Tommi sighed. "Yeah, I know." As Tommi scooted back onto the table, Dr. Tina pulled out the stirrups. Tommi sighed as she lifted her legs into them. "I really hate this."

"I don't know a woman who likes it," Dr. Tina agreed as she pulled on her latex gloves.

"Except I'm not a woman - or wasn't. So I never got a chance to get psychologically used to it," Tommi complained. "It probably seems more intrusive to me than it does to most of your patients."

Dr. Tina thought briefly about responding to Tommi's complaint, but decided not to. Instead, she began the very personal examination. She figured that Rachel would be better able to talk to Tommi about her adjustment.

Knowing that Dr. Tina had gone into 'professional' mode, Tommi stopped talking to her and thought of other things to distract herself from the exam.

In no more than a few minutes, Dr. Tina was done. "Everything is looking good."

Tommi slid her legs out from the stirrups and carefully sat up. "No ultrasound today?"

Dr. Tina shook her head. "Nope. Deb got your blood and urine samples already, so you're good to go. You're probably supposed to talk to Rachel next, right?"

Tommi nodded. "Yup."

Dr. Tina smiled. "Keep taking care of yourself." She let herself out of the exam room, shutting the door behind her so Tommi could have privacy to change.

Tommi stood from the exam table, slipped off the exam gown, and pulled on her own clothes. She still felt a little sore from the surgery, and was actually glad that the doctor hadn't lifted the restrictions on her activities. Tommi walked back to the lobby.

"Suzie, " she interrupted the receptionist.

"I bet you're ready to see Rachel now," Suzie replied cheerfully. She looked extremely radiant and happy, even if her belly seemed enormous. "You can go in now."

Tommi guessed Suzie was about eight months along. For a brief moment, Tommi wondered if she would look as happy and pretty as Suzie did when she was eight months pregnant. Then she wondered where that thought had come from. Suddenly, she wondered what she was doing. She was now a pregnant young woman - and only a few weeks ago, she'd been a carefree, happy, male student. She felt her eyes start to mist.

"Tommi?" Suzie said quickly, when she noticed Tommi's mood shift. "Are you okay?"

Tommi started, and then realized that she'd missed some of what Suzie had said. "I'm okay," she lied quickly. "I was just ... daydreaming."

Suzie's eyes narrowed slightly, and the smile faded. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Suzie had observed enough patients over her career that she knew something was bothering Tommi, but also that Tommi wasn't going to talk to her about it. She figured that Rachel would get to the bottom of whatever was troubling Tommi. "You can go in now," she repeated, knowing that Tommi hadn't heard her the first time.

"Oh, okay," Tommi replied, still unsure of herself. With a feigned smile that Suzie saw through, Tommi walked back toward Rachel's office.

Rachel greeted Tommi at her door. "How are you feeling today?" she asked.

Tommi sighed. "One more," she muttered to herself as she lowered herself into one of the comfortable wing chairs..

"One more what?" Rachel asked as she took her own chair.

Tommi closed her eyes for a moment, shaking her head slowly. "Everyone keeps asking how I'm feeling," she said. "I'm kind of tired of it."

"Okay," Rachel answered slowly and cautiously. "I take it you're feeling a bit ... emotional today?"

"That's an understatement," Tommi snorted. "I feel like my emotions are in turbo mode right now."

"We did tell you that it would be like that," Rachel countered, trying not to be offensive, but rather to sound supportive. "Your hormones are going to make you more emotional."

"Yeah, I know," Tommi acknowledged. "It's like I'm on an emotional roller coaster, though. Sometimes, everything is ... great. And then, two seconds later, I feel like crying." She shook

her head. "It was bad enough just with the changes that came with having periods. This is a hundred times worse!"

Rachel nodded in sympathy. "And it's probably harder for you than for some of our other patients."

"Because I was a guy, and didn't grow up with the mood swings of periods, right?"

"Yup." Rachel glanced at her computer. "You're still on restricted activity, right?"

"Yeah."

"How is that working for you? Are you having any problems?"

Tommi sighed. "It feels really weird to be reliant on people for everything." She shook her head sadly. "Katie and the girls won't let me carry even a notebook to classes. Someone is always hovering around me to carry my books between classes, or carry my lunch tray. I feel like I'm helpless."

"You don't like that?"

"No! I should be taking care of myself! I can ..." Tommi stopped, frowning. "It's ..." She was having trouble finding the right words to express her feelings. "I hate it. I hate feeling so helpless!"

Rachel nodded. "Post surgery is the toughest, especially for patients like you."

"Former guys?" Tommi asked.

Rachel nodded. "There's something about not being allowed to do even simple tasks for ones-self that really bothers guys. Women don't like it either, but it really bugs most guys."

"I won't argue with that."

"Is your class work going okay?"

Tommi shrugged. "I'm pretty much caught up." She smiled for the first time of the visit. "I appreciate the laptop you're loaning me so I can stay current. Otherwise..."

Rachel glanced at the desktop computer monitor. "According to Dr. Tina's best estimates, the baby is now about sixteen weeks along. You've got some twenty-three weeks to term, so you should be due ... around the first of July." She frowned. "Is that going to be a problem with summer school?"

Tommi thought a moment. "It shouldn't be. It'll depend on how long I'm out of school to have the baby."

"And _that_ will depend on whether this is a simple delivery, or if you have complications along the way or during delivery." Rachel let the words sink in for a moment. "That is why it's very important for you to follow our program and keep yourself healthy _and_ to report any problems right away."

"How common is it to have complications?" Tommi asked, before quickly adding, "I mean, for ... patients like me?"

"Guys?" Rachel shook her head. "It's not that simple. A lot of it, to be honest, seems to depend on your attitude."

"My attitude?"

"Yes, your attitude. I won't lie; pregnancy is hard. It seems to be a bit harder for male volunteers. There are a few minor physiological differences, such as your skeletal structure, but a lot of those were mitigated when we did the accelerated healing protocols. During that time, your body thought it was eleven or twelve and just starting puberty, so it reacted accordingly."

She smiled knowingly. "You _did_ notice that your hips widened a little bit, right? That's because your body thought it should." She got a more sober expression. "Even with all of that, it's still harder for male volunteers. That's one reason we'd rather not have cases like yours."

"One reason? There are others?" Tommi seemed surprised.

Rachel laughed. "You'd be surprised. We get a _lot_ of male volunteers." She shook her head. "Not very many make it through the screening."

"Why not?" Tommi was curious why _she_ made it, and others didn't.

"Some are in it for the money. They don't have ... staying power. They ... well, sometimes it's a mess, the way they freak out as their body changes, or when they feel the baby inside them."

"Oh." Tommi sounded very unsure of herself.

"We have some who just want the transexual surgery aspect; they think they can carry a baby and get real functional female parts." She shook her head again. "They don't usually pass the screening either. Some guys have ego problems. You know - macho types." She sighed. "There are more types of guys who fail the test than pass. We had one guy who lost a bet with his wife. He was going to carry their children after he did a surrogacy." She shook her head. "You'd be surprised at the reasons some people give - or don't give - when they sign up."

Tommi appeared confused. "But ... I was just looking for a job ... to pay my tuition."

Rachel smiled. "Is that _all_ you wanted?"

"Yeah," Tommi replied, sure of herself. "So why did I pass?"

Rachel leaned back in her chair. "If that was really your only motivation, you wouldn't have passed."

"I don't get it."

Rachel permitted herself a small smile. "You will. Someday, you'll figure it out."

"You have my test results. Can't you tell me?"

Rachel shook her head, still smiling. "I can only say two things about it. First, there's something else, something stronger, than the money motive. The test didn't tell me exactly what it is, just that you are a remarkably good candidate. And second, this is another one of those situations where you have to find your own answers." Rachel's expression became quite somber. "I can help guide you in the questions you ask yourself, but I don't have the answers."

Tommi sat in her desk, watching all the other students gathering their books, and wondering. She was still on restrictions, and Ashley was supposed to be here to get her book bag. She frowned; she was going to have to break the rules if Ashley didn't show up soon.

"Uh, excuse me, but do you need help?"

Tommi started at the voice; she'd been looking the other way, and was surprised to see the young man standing here and addressing her. "Uh, what?" she asked, puzzled.

"Do you need some help?" The young man gestured to her book bag. "I've noticed that you've always had a friend help carry your books since you were out for a few days. I didn't see anyone come for you today, so I thought you might need some help."

"Oh." Tommi's head spun. The guy's logic was impeccable, and she was stuck - for the time being. "One of my friends is supposed to be here to help," she said quickly.

"It looks like she's late, and you're going to be late for your next class," the guy observed. "By the way, I'm Brian. Brian Townsley."

"Hi," Tommi said, hoping to stall for time. She was in a pickle here. Students were already filing into the room for this classroom's next lecture, so she had to leave. But Ashley was late, and that meant that she was going to be late for her next class and violate her restrictions on carrying weight. "Uh, I guess I'm kind of stuck. But ..."

"Would it hurt so much to let me carry your books to your next class, in the daylight, in public, without being forward, just to be helpful?" Brian seemed quite mild-mannered, and overly polite.

Tommi glanced around and sighed. There was no sign of Ashley. "I don't seem to have a choice, do I?" She sighed again. "I'm Tommi Sue."

Brian smiled as he picked up Tommi's book bag. "Yeah, I know."

Tommi started. "You know my name?"

Brian nodded. "Me and about half the other students in class. It's not like your name is a state secret, especially when the teacher calls on you a lot."

Tommi relaxed a bit; his answer made logical sense, but it still felt odd that he knew her name. She couldn't help wondering what else he knew about her.

As they walked down the stairs, Brian kept talking. "What are you majoring in? Or haven't you decided yet?"

Tommi wished that Brian would stop prattling on and on. She was sure that he was glancing at her, at her chest, at the gap between the lapels of her jacket, everywhere, as she talked. "I'm pretty sure of engineering," she replied, "but I'm not sure which type of engineering yet."

Brian grinned. "Maybe you'll go into computer engineering? Then I'd see you around a lot more."

Tommi suppressed a shudder. This guy seemed to be overly interested in her. "I'm not sure. I was kind of leaning toward mechanical engineering, but lately I've taken a big interest in biomedical engineering."

Brian's nodded appreciatively. "Biomedical is a good field." As they got to the building entrance, Brian paused. "Where's your next class?" he asked as he held the door for Tommi.

"I'm heading to the Chemistry building," Tommi replied cautiously, hoping that he wasn't also going to a chemistry class. She didn't recall having seen him in that class, but between the stay in the clinic and the bed rest in her dorm room, she'd missed almost two weeks of classes, so she wasn't sure. "I hope it's not too far out of your way," she added, trying to sound polite.

Brian winced, enough that Tommi noticed. "Well, it is a bit out of the way, but I already volunteered to help you, so I guess it's okay."

"Where were you going?"

The young man wrinkled his nose; he'd been hoping Tommi wouldn't ask that question. "I've got calculus next."

Tommi felt bad; the math building was the opposite direction. "We'd better hurry so you're not late for your class, either." She wasn't kidding about wanting to rush, but it was mostly because she felt very uncomfortable with Brian's attention.

"I noticed you missed a few classes, and now you have some restrictions. It's nothing serious, is it?"

Tommi wanted to scream inside. There wasn't anything this guy could ask that would be more personal. But she had to try to remain polite. "Um," she stammered, "it's kind of private. I really don't want to talk about it."

The rest of the walk was less talkative. Tommi had hoped that Brian wouldn't be so inquisitive about her, and her blunt response about it being a private matter had had the desired effect. Brian changed the subject to the history class they shared - what did she think of the professor, how did she do on the quiz, and so on. Mercifully, they got to the chemistry building and to her classroom.

As Tommi sat down, Brian put her book bag beside her. "Thank you," she said, a required polite formal acknowledgement of his help.

Brian smiled. "No problem. I suppose I'll be seeing you around?"

Tommi realized that he hoped to see more of her. She shuddered inwardly - again. "Probably, especially since we're in the same history class." She wondered if she sounded polite enough, but feared that she sounded sarcastic, catty, or, worse yet, inviting.

"Sorry I missed you after history," Ashley apologized profusely as she peeked into Tommi's room. "I forgot." She saw Tommi was stretched out on her bed resting, her feet propped up by a spare pillow.

Christina and Linda were sitting in the two chairs in the room, watching television with Tommi. Christina frowned at Ashley. "We all promised we'd help, remember?"

"Yeah, but I got caught up studying for a test," Ashley protested. She sat at the foot of Tommi's bed. "I'm really sorry."

Tommi shrugged. "It's okay. I got it worked out."

Ashley's eyes widened. "You didn't ... carry your books, did you?" She sounded horrified that she might have caused Tommi to hurt herself.

"Not this time," Linda replied, sounding stern. "Someone else helped Tommi - this time. But it was your job."

"Sorry," Ashley apologized again. "Who was it?"

Tommi shrugged. "One of the people in my class."

"Oh?" Linda was curious. "Who was it?"

Tommi frowned. "Just another student, okay?"

Christina's and Linda's eyes widened. "Was it a guy?"

Tommi scowled. "Just drop it, okay."

Linda grinned at Christina. "It was a guy." She turned back to Tommi. "Who as it?"

"Just some guy, okay?" Tommi replied angrily. "Can we drop it?"

"No," Linda countered immediately. "Not until we know more."

Tommi shook her head. "Look, the whole thing is creeping me out, okay? The guy was very polite and helpful, and he knew my name, and he was hoping I'd be studying engineering and that he would see me around." She shuddered visibly. "It really weirded me out, okay?"

Christina laughed. "It's not uncommon for girls to get noticed by the guys in class, especially nice-looking girls."

"Knock it off, okay?" Tommi sounded upset. "It just felt ... creepy." She glared at Christina. "And I'm not some "hot" college co-ed, okay? He shouldn't be noticing me."

"You're not feeling attracted to guys?"

"No! That's ... gross!"

"How about girls, then?" Linda asked.

"What?"

Linda stood, pulled off her sweater, and removed her bra. She held her large breasts in her hands, pressing them together, licking her own nipples, and generally putting on a seductive show. After a few seconds, she grinned at Tommi. "How about girls? Does stuff like that turn you on?"

Tommi scowled. "No, not really." She really was surprised that Linda's show hadn't done anything for her.

Christina leaned over and cupped Tommi's breast, catching her by surprise. "Having your own kind of takes the thrill away, doesn't it," she said with certainty.

"You've got girl hormones and a girl body. It wouldn't be surprising if you start reacting to guys like a girl," Linda explained as she refastened her bra before she pulled her sweater back on.

Tommi wrinkled her nose. "That's ... sick!"

"Aren't you the slightest bit curious?" Christina asked. "Haven't you thought about what it would be like to _use_ your girl parts?"

"Nope. And I'm going to keep it that way," Tommi answered definitively. "In case you forgot, I still have a boy's brain and thoughts and memories - which is why it was so creepy to have a guy hitting on me."

Linda sat back down. "Have you been more ... aroused lately?" she asked bluntly.

"What?"

Linda shrugged. "I've heard that pregnancy makes girls more ... horny. I was just curious if it was true."

Tommi shook her head, her nose wrinkled in disgust. "You guys are nuts," she protested strongly. "This is a weird conversation."

Christina, Ashley, and Linda all laughed. "No, it's kind of normal. We girls talk about things like this more than guys - or parents - realize," Linda explained. "So, does being pregnant really make you hornier?"

"I wouldn't know," Tommi shook her head, but a very slight blush betrayed her.

Linda laughed again. "Tell the truth!"

Tommi scowled. "Okay, it does feel ... different. A little wetter sometimes, okay? Like ..." She frowned. "Maybe it is a bit of arousal. So what? I'm keeping focused on keeping fit and keeping my grades up. And I'm _definitely_ not interested in any guys, okay?"

Chapter 9 - Coping with More Changes

The constant stream of students in the student union building, some milling about, others conversing in small groups, still others weaving hastily through the crowds to other destinations, was a distraction that Tommi didn't need. Nor did she need the feeling that many of the students were staring at her. The background din of hundreds of people convinced Tommi that some were whispering about her. Tommi had hated public places ever since her original surgery. Being forced to wait in the most public, highest-traffic place on campus was driving her to the point of paranoia.

Tommi sat nervously at a table in one of the dining areas, glancing frequently at her watch between quick peeks around the throng of students. She wondered if this was a fool's errand - she was supposed to meet a "mentor" from the surrogacy program, someone that Rachel thought would help her cope with life. Tommi had two problems with that - first, she wasn't

sure she wanted to share her difficulties and issues with another person, especially someone she didn't even know, and second, she had no idea who the mentor was, or what she looked like.

Tommi took another sip from her coffee cup and stared at the table. She was certain that the new mentor wasn't going to show up. She checked her watch, and decided that she'd give the mentor five more minutes.

"Excuse me," a voice sounded to Tommi's right. "Are you Tommi Sue Wilson?"

Tommi was startled; she'd been so focused on herself and on watching the main entrance that she had obviously missed seeing the person approaching from inside the dining area. She looked up at the interloper. "Yes," she said hesitantly.

The girl beamed as she slid into a chair opposite Tommi. "Hi," she said as she extended her hand. "I'm Julie. Julie Davis. Rachel McKnight sent me."

"Hi. I ..." Tommi stopped abruptly. She realized that she didn't need to make an introduction; the new girl already knew who she was. "Hi," she repeated.

"Ms. McKnight did a good job describing you," Julie said in a cheery voice. "I didn't have any trouble recognizing you."

"So you're my ..."

Julie grinned. "Your mentor, if you want to call me that."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I'm supposed to give you advice and help you cope and all that. But when I first started, mostly, I needed someone I could talk to. So if that's what you want, I can do that, too." Julie seemed quite at ease with the whole situation, which was itself unnerving to Tommi.

Tommi eyed the new girl carefully. She was rather plain - her blonde hair was cut short, and she wasn't wearing any makeup or jewelry. She wore a simple pullover sweater atop a plain white blouse - an obvious maternity blouse bulging prominently at the waist. Tommi couldn't see the bottom of Julie's ensemble, but strongly suspected it was quite plain as well. Julie was moderately tall, not slender, and not overly curvy - except for the roundness in her belly.

Julie noticed Tommi gazing at her rounded belly. "Yes," she said with a big smile, "I'm quite pregnant. Almost eight months." She seemed quite pleased to share the news of impending motherhood.

Tommi's eyes widened. "How is it? Being pregnant, I mean. Are you ... scared?"

Julie laughed, a soft pleasant sound. "Not this time." Julie noted that Tommi's eyes widened. "This isn't my first go-round, or my second."

Tommi's eyes nearly bulged from their sockets. "Third?"

"Yup."

"Why?"

Julie smiled and shrugged. "It's kind of an ultimate act of service," she said, "and it pays well. It's how I've funded my college so far."

"So far? Are you a senior?"

Julie laughed. "No, I'm just a junior."

"Oh. Are you going to do it again next year, then?" Tommi was genuinely curious of Julie's motivations.

Julie shook her head. "No. Three is enough."

"Then what?"

Julie smiled. "I'll have saved enough for my senior year, and then some. This summer, after I have the baby, I'll change back."

Tommi's eyes widened. "You're..."

Julie simply nodded. "Before I got to college, I was John Davis. I had the surgery - like you did."

Tommi was thoroughly confused. "Why did you do it? Volunteer, I mean."

Julie shrugged. "A few reasons, I guess. I grew up in a very devout family, and I always believed that abortion was one of the greatest sins. So when I had a chance to do something about it, it seemed natural."

"Oh."

Julie smiled. "And I needed to pay for college, and I didn't want to graduate with tens of thousands of dollars of student loans hanging over my head."

Tommi took another sip of coffee, at which Julie frowned. Seeing the disapproval, Tommi quickly added, "It's decaf." She knew that her mentor was going to report to Rachel, and she felt a need to prove that she was complying with the guidelines.

"Oh, okay."

"Can I ask you something?"

Julie nodded. "That's what I'm here for."

"How do you cope? I mean, with family and friends."

A tiny, brief hint of sadness flickered across Julie's features. "Mom is okay with what I'm doing. In fact, she kind of likes it; she had four sons and no daughters. So it's kind of a fantasy for her to have a daughter, even temporarily. My brothers - well, two are okay with it, but the third is like my dad."

"I take it your dad doesn't approve?" Tommi asked hesitantly.

Julie shook her head. "Not really. I mean, he understands why I'm doing it, but he isn't happy with it. He says it's unmanly." She was studying Tommi's reactions closely. "How about your family? Are they accepting you?"

Tommi's eyes betrayed her pain. She dropped her gaze into her coffee cup. "No," she admitted, her voice tinged with sadness. "Ma and my older sister hate me. My hometown is so redneck that I can never go back if they ever find out about this."

Julie put her hand on Tommi's, a very feminine gesture of support and sympathy. "I'm sorry," she said simply. "I know it's hard. How about your dad? I take it he's like the others."

"Dad ..." Tommi's voice choked as the corners of her eyes moistened, "Dad died in the mine several years ago."

Julie's hand clasped Tommi's hands more tightly. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to bring up something that's painful to you."

Tommi dabbed at the tears. "You didn't know," she said, trying to put Julie's conscience at ease. "After all these years, you'd think that I would have accepted it."

The two sat in awkward silence for a few moments. Julie seemed afraid to bring up any subjects, lest she inadvertently cause Tommi more pain, and Tommi struggled to regain her composure.

Tommi decided to direct the conversation. "How about your pregnancies? How were those?" Tommi's voice was nervous, since she was just starting her own.

Julie winced, and then rubbed her belly. "Sorry. The baby decided to do a somersault." She smiled. "I haven't had many problems. Just the usual stuff, you know - morning sickness, swollen ankles. But the childbirth? My first one was long and not fun - probably twenty-five hours in labor." She saw the worried look on Tommi's face. "You shouldn't worry. I was an unusual case. They almost didn't let me do a second, and then, when it came time to deliver, they wanted to do a C-section." Julie smiled. "I always was stubborn, and I told Ms. McKnight that I'd get through it on my own - which I did."

"Okay." Tommi was being deliberately vague with her questions. Even after months with the clinic, she still felt uneasy about her situation. "How about other things? Other experiences while you were pregnant, or between pregnancies?"

Julie smiled slyly. "I think I know where you're going. But that's kind of personal."

"But..."

"It's personal for me, and it'll be personal for you. If you do decide to ... um, experiment ... be sure you take precautions, unless you want to end up with one of your own." Julie's enigmatic smile broadened.

"I've heard that pregnant women are ...," Tommi winced, not knowing precisely how to word the statement, "kind of easily ... aroused."

Julie blushed, which sort of confirmed Tommi's fear. "That varies, too."

"And in your case?"

Julie shook her head. "Personal again."

"Say it does happen to me. And I get quite ... horny. How am I supposed to deal with that?" Tommi shook her head. "Rachel hasn't given me any hints about that."

Julie smiled, shrugging. "You have 3 choices. First, you can try to ignore it. Go for the celibate life. Second, you can masturbate. Third, you can go for sex."

Tommi's eyes widened with fear. "Sex? Like in ..."

Julie shrugged. "Doesn't have to be with a guy. I'm told that lesbian sex is just as satisfying, and my mentor told me it was a lot easier to deal with psychologically."

"But ..." Tommi shook her head. "'I'm getting nervous as hell just thinking about having sex - any kind of sex - while I'm like this."

Julie just smiled. "You're holding back - a lot." She saw Tommi start to deny it, but cut her off. "You delayed our meeting for a long time - far longer than you should have, just like I did when I first met my mentor." The smile broadened. "I promise I'm not a spy for Ms. McKnight. My only job is to help you in any way I can. Please try to remember that."

"Coming through," Tommi said with urgency as she barged through the bathroom door. It took but a moment to see a vacant stall, and she darted in, not bothering to close the door as she leaned forward over the bowl and commenced heaving the contents of her stomach. Since she hadn't eaten since the night before, there wasn't much, and she was wracked by dry heaves for a few minutes.

"Oh, great!" Shelly's voice carried with a tone of pure disgust. "It's not bad enough that you're _here_, like you are, but _now_ you're puking in the bathroom every morning! Gross!"

Tommi's stomach was settling down a bit, and she felt that the vomiting bout was over. "Someday, Shelly, you're probably going to be pregnant. And when you are..." She broke off the thought.

"You hope I get morning sickness really bad, don't you?" Shelly finished contemptuously.

Tommi shook her head, a gesture unseen by Shelly. "No," she replied simply. "As much of a pain in the ass as you are, as much of a self-righteous bitch as you can be, I hope that when you get pregnant, you _don't_ get morning sickness like this."

Shelly's mouth dropped open in shock. "But ..." she stammered, obviously taken by surprise that Tommi would call her what she had, and that Tommi had then actually wished her _well_.

"As much as I dislike you," Tommi continued as she stood up, "I don't dislike you enough to wish this on you." She walked unsteadily to the sink, where she cupped her hands to drink some water to rinse the foul taste from her mouth. After that, she rinsed off her face, dried it, and left the bathroom. Shelly stood near the stall, still in shock.

In her room, Tommi eased herself into her chair. "I wish I didn't have to deal with _that_ every morning," she sighed.

"You and me both," Katie agreed as she pulled on a sweater. "Is it getting any better?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, it's not quite so bad." She opened a desk drawer and pulled out a half-eaten packet of crackers. "Dr. Tina says that most morning sickness is in the first trimester, but sometimes it can last throughout a pregnancy." She sighed. "Dr. Tina said I could take phenergan for the nausea, but that stuff really knocks me out."

"Maybe it's worse in you because you started life as a guy?"

Tommi sighed. "That's what some of the experts at the foundation think. They say that I'm not used to estrogen, let alone the surge that comes with pregnancy, and that's what's upsetting my system." She took a small, exploratory bite of a cracker to see if it would stay down.

"Well, at least it's getting better. You haven't missed early classes for a week now."

"Knock on wood," Tommi added. "I bumped into Shelly in the bathroom again."

"Oh? Was she her usual bitchy self?"

Tommi nodded. "Yup. I wish I knew why she's so pissy toward me."

Katie smiled. "She's a bitch to everyone, not just you. It's nothing personal."

"Between her, the Betas, and Brian, I'm almost at my limit." Tommi finished the first cracker and took a sip of water.

"Oh? Are the Betas still being nasty?"

"Especially Olivia. She's a real bitch!" Tommi replied angrily. "For a while, they were leaving me alone, but now they're getting bad again."

"They're just a bunch of stuck-up snobs. Try to not let them bother you."

"Easier said than done," Tommi snorted as she took another cracker from the package.

"So what's with Brian?"

Tommi sighed. "I wish he'd leave me alone," she complained. "He always wants to walk me to or from class, and he always wants to talk." She felt a chill run down her spine. "He's freaking me out."

A knock sounded on the door. Katie opened it, and let Ashley in.

"Ready?" Ashley asked Tommi. Ashley was ready to go to class; she had her jacket on and her book bag over her shoulder.

Tommi grabbed one more cracker, twist-tied the remainder of the package, and shoved it back in the drawer. "Just about." Tommi stood, took her jacket from the back of the chair, and slipped it on. Her incision had healed, Dr. Tina had approved of how well the placenta was attached, so Tommi's restrictions on carrying and lifting had been eased considerably. She just slung her book bag over her shoulder. Tommi grabbed a bottle of water and slid it into her book bag, and nodded as she picked up her cracker. "Ready." At the door, she turned to Katie. "I've got another checkup at the clinic this afternoon, so I probably won't be back until around five."

"Okay," Katie answered without looking as she picked up her own book bag.

The hallway was busy as girls hurried to get to their first classes. "Hey, Mel," Tommi called cheerfully. "How's it going?"

Melody turned and smiled. "Good. And you?"

Tommi shrugged. "So, so. Are we doing the pizza thing tonight?"

Mel grinned. "Yup. And I've got a good movie picked out."

Tommi smiled. "I bet there's no action or shooting or blood," she quipped.

Mel shook her head. "Nope. What you keep calling a "chick flick". And it fits, since you're one of the girls."

"Hey, Tommi, Ashley." It was Erica's voice.

"Morning," Ashley said with a quick glance at Erica. "Going to work out at the gym, I take it?"

"Yup," Erica answered with a smile. "Hey, why don't you guys join me tomorrow morning? You don't have early classes on Tuesdays."

Tommi smiled. "Three reasons. First, when I can sleep in, I like to sleep in. Second, I have to do my workouts at the clinic so they can monitor me."

Erica frowned. "That's two. What's the third?"

"I don't think the gym staff would be happy if I barfed on the elliptical machine," Tommi said with a wry smile. She and Ashley continued their journey out of the dorm.

As they walked through the crisp morning air, their breaths visible puffs of steam, Ashley asked, "How is it going today?"

Tommi laughed to herself. There was something about Ashley, a naïve innocence, that made her questions tolerable where others were annoying. "My morning sickness isn't as bad."

"That's good." Ashley seemed a bit pensive. Finally, she mustered up the courage to ask what was on her mind. "Do you think," she began hesitantly, "that I could come to the clinic with you and get to listen to the baby's heartbeat, too?"

Tommi smiled; she wasn't surprised. Ashley was the most curious of the girls, and in a refreshing way. "We can ask."

Ashley was thrilled by the prospect. "That would be _wonderful_."

"Why are you so interested?" Tommi asked the question that had been nagging her for a few weeks.

Ashley looked down at the sidewalk. "Someday, I want to be a mother. If I can ever find a guy who likes me," she added softly.

"You can always be a mother," Tommi rebutted. "You could always do what I'm doing."

"But ... I want children of my own. I don't want to be a single mother, like my mom, or a temporary mother." She realized belatedly what she'd said, and looked up at Tommi, her eyes wide with fear that she'd said offended Tommi. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

Tommi gave Ashley a reassuring smile. "No offense taken."

Ashley looked down again. "It's just that ... I'll never find a guy who's interested in me," she said sadly. "I'm not very pretty." She shook her head. "I'm kind of jealous of you, you know."

"Oh? Why?"

Ashley looked at her for a moment before she resumed staring at the sidewalk. "You're pretty. Not like me. And you're better ... equipped ... to attract boys' attention."

Tommi sighed. "You know, as a former guy, I can tell you that most guys think there are two kinds of girls. The first is the drop-deal knockout, the busty sex-kitten that guys want to take out for a temporary good time. The second is the kind of wholesome innocence that they want to have as a constant companion, friend, lover, and mother to their children."

Ashley looked up sharply at Tommi, her eyes wide with uncertainty for a moment. "You're just saying that. I've never met any boys like that."

Tommi shook her head. "You're too shy. Most guys like a girl who's self-confident. And what I said doesn't apply to all guys. Some guys never grow up, and always think with their penis. All they want is to bed a pretty girl that they can brag to their friends about it." She sighed, realizing that perhaps, she'd been like that before the surgery. "But the ones who are worth catching are the ones who see inner beauty and charm. Those guys want someone warm and witty and charming and smart and friendly." She smiled. "All the things you have going for you."

Ashley shook her head. "Why can't I find any of them? I don't get any notice from any boys!" she complained.

"You will," Tommi assured her. "Someday, you'll find a guy who appreciates you for who you are, and will treat you like a princess."

"I hope so," Ashley replied. "I've only had two dates in my whole life. And both were disasters."

The two girls reached an intersection in the sidewalks. "See you around three?" Tommi suggested. Ashley nodded, and the two girls parted company, each going to her class.

"Good morning, Tommi," Brian said cheerfully, mere seconds after Ashley had gone her separate way.

Tommi groaned inwardly. "Morning," she said without enthusiasm.

Brian's features clouded. "Are you doing okay this morning?"

Tommi sighed as she continued toward her history class. "Not really. I had another bout of morning sickness."

Brian's eyes widened. "Morning sickness? But that means ..." He sounded greatly disappointed.

Tommi realized that she'd never explained her procedure to the boy. For a brief moment, she considered not telling him; from his disappointment, he clearly considered Tommi as a "good girl". Her being pregnant could shatter his illusions and cause him to leave her alone. But Tommi's conscience wouldn't permit her to do such a thing. "The short version is that I'm a surrogate mother in the Morris Foundation's program to foster adoption instead of abortion. I'm carrying a baby that would have been aborted."

Brian looked relieved. "So it's not really yours?"

Tommi sighed to herself. Maybe she should have let Brian think ill of her. "No. As a volunteer, I'm getting paid to help prevent an abortion. That's how I'm paying for college."

"Go!" Katie said firmly.

"But ..."

"But nothing," Katie interrupted Tommi's objection. "I've got a project due, and I need to stay so I can keep monitoring the tests. But Mom wants you to come for a visit."

Tommi shook her head. "It's not ... right. It's your family, and I don't feel comfortable going without you."

"Both Mom and Dad want you to have a relaxing Spring Break, and they both insist that you visit. Mom even said she's got your room ready for you."

Tommi winced. While it was nice to be treated as if she were part of Katie's family, spending some time at the Snyder's home without Katie, and having the spare bedroom called "her" room seemed wrong. "Okay, I'll think about it."

Katie smiled. "You know Mom isn't going to take "no" for an answer."

Tommi sighed. "I know. Your Mom can be quite ... insistent."

Before Katie could acknowledge Tommi's observation, the door burst open, and four girls came in. "So have you decided?" Erica asked enthusiastically.

"It'll be great!" Christina added.

Katie's brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?" she asked warily.

"Road trip to Ft. Lauderdale," Linda replied with a grin. "It's going to be a great trip."

Katie glanced at Tommi. "This is the first I've heard of this trip. I thought you were going to my folks' place."

Tommi shrugged, her features displaying her uncertainty. "I haven't decided where I'm going."

"It'll be a lot of fun. Sun, beaches, parties. What more could you ask for?" Ashley chimed in.

"We're going shopping for new bikinis," Christina added.

Tommi shook her head, frowning. "I'm not wearing a bikini," she said firmly. "It's not like I've got the figure for it, either." She rubbed her belly without being conscious of the action.

Erica looked surprised for a moment. "Nonsense! You've got a great figure, and you're not showing yet! Much."

"Yeah," Linda agreed. "The diet you're on is keeping you looking good."

"Besides," Erica added, "you've got a better figure than some of the girls I've seen wearing thongs!"

Linda laughed. "I'm sorry, but I'm trying to picture you in a thong, and it's not working!" The others guffawed at the mental image of self-conscious Tommi in a thong.

"I got invited to Katie's place for the break," Tommi replied. "I haven't made up my mind yet. I'm worried that my car might not survive another long trip like that."

Ashley offered a solution. "How about this - you ride down with us in my car, spend a few days at Ft. Lauderdale, and then spend the rest of the time with Katie's folks? We can pick you up on the way home."

Katie realized that the girls weren't going to take "no" for an answer from Tommi, and her mom wasn't going to allow Tommi to not visit. "Sounds like a reasonable compromise."

"But..." Tommi began, feeling like she was being railroaded into a vacation that she wasn't sure she wanted to take.

"Rachel said it was okay to visit my folks," Katie reminded Tommi. "And if you follow the rules about partying, you should be okay for a few days on the beach."

"But..."

"Go!" Katie roared. "Get out of here! Have some fun!"

"What didn't you like about the trip?" Julie was curious about Tommi's reaction to the Spring Break trip. She sat across from Tommi at a corner table, in a small eatery just off campus. She'd chosen the location for a bit more privacy.

Tommi shook her head. "Just about everything! My friends had a great time at Ft. Lauderdale, but I was miserable!"

"Oh? I always loved going to Florida for vacation." Julie was genuinely surprised.

"The first thing we did when we got there was going shopping for bikinis." Tommi sighed. "I really don't like shopping for clothes, especially things that are feminine!" She wrinkled her nose. "They were so revealing! I felt ... naked."

Julie laughed. "I always liked starting Spring Break with a new bikini. It's kind of normal."

"Normal? Didn't you feel ... weird when you got your first bikini?" Tommi was flabbergasted at Julie's attitude that buying a bikini was normal.

Julie shrugged. "I suppose I had some trouble the first time," she admitted. "But I just got used to it."

Tommi shook her head again. "Plus, I put on a bit of weight from my pregnancy, and my ... breasts ... are bigger. I felt like I was putting my body on display."

Julie smiled. "You'll have to talk to Rachel or Tina about how much your breasts are growing. So, did you like the beach?"

"No." Tommi sat back in her chair, looking thoughtful for a moment. "I felt like every guy on the beach was checking me out, staring at my body. And I know what they were thinking - exactly what I would have been thinking a few months ago."

"And that would be..." Julie was asking leading questions; she knew that Tommi had to confront those things that made her uncomfortable, so she'd have a good attitude during the rest of her pregnancy and especially during childbirth.

Tommi had a look of disgust on her face. "Most of the guys were wondering whether I'd be any good in bed, whether they'd have any chance of scoring." She shook her head. "But that wasn't the worst part."

"Oh?"

Tommi scowled. "Some of the girls were so ... catty!"

Julie laughed. "In case you hadn't noticed yet, women can be extremely jealous and vicious - much more so than most guys realize."

"No kidding! I've seen that in the Beta girls, and in Shelly."

"And on the beach, I bet?" Julie prompted.

"Yeah."

"Did you consider that a lot of girls were envious of you, of your figure, of your looks?" Julie posed an interesting question. "Girls don't like competition."

"But I'm not competing! I don't have anything for them to be jealous of. I'm just a plain girl!" Tommi protested. "I just wanted to be left alone."

"Doesn't matter," Julie replied. "You didn't do a lot of partying, did you?"

Tommi shrugged. "I went to the parties. Since I wasn't drinking, I was the designated driver. Some of the guys thought I was a party-poopster since I wouldn't drink."

Julie shook her head. "No matter that underage drinking is illegal, it's still common during Spring Break."

"I couldn't believe how some of my friends behaved!" Tommi sounded shocked. "They ... it was disgusting!"

"What?"

"A couple of times, Linda and Christina and Erica stayed out the whole night. They'd found someone to hook up with."

Julie nodded. "And I take it you didn't think much of that behavior?"

Tommi shook her head vigorously. "It's so ... stupid! They just met the guys, they were probably drunk, and I doubt they took precautions. And they could have gotten an STD! It was stupid!"

Julie took a careful sip of her coffee. "You know, girls can be just as interested in sex as guys are, and sometimes, more so." She didn't mention how female Tommi's response had been.

Tommi wrinkled her nose. "It sounds like you're telling me that, if I did have sex ... as a girl ... it would be ... normal?" Tommi frowned. "Are you hinting that you've slept with a guy?"

Julie smiled enigmatically. "Whether I have or haven't is a personal matter. But you might find, especially now that you're pregnant, that you get aroused easily, and the hormones in your body, coupled with normal human curiosity, may lead you to try something."

"Ewww!" Tommi exclaimed softly. "That's ... gross!"

"Maybe now. Maybe always." Julie shook her head. "Every person is different. Some ... guys who've had the procedure find themselves much more satisfied sexually as women. Some don't. Some never try. All I'm saying is, you might try sex as a woman, and you might like it. And if you do try, it's just normal curiosity."

Tommi found the subject revolting, and yet, a tiny part of her found it intriguing. "You said you're changing back this summer?"

Julie simply nodded as she took another sip of coffee.

"So can I infer from what you're saying that, either you never tried, or if you did, you didn't find it appealing enough to stay?"

Julie smiled. "Nice try. But that's still personal."

"Your breast growth is normal - both from pregnancy and normal body maturation. You're a full C-cup now, according to Tina's measurements," Rachel observed. "But I'm sure Tina told you that." Rachel looked carefully at Tommi. "I assume you didn't overdo anything? No strenuous activities, no drinking, no sunburn?"

"I was a good girl," Tommi replied half-sarcastically. "I took care not to have any fun."

Rachel gave her a disapproving stare. "You can knock off the sarcasm," she chided Tommi.

"Okay," Tommi said meekly, suitably chastised.

"You're still pretty upset about how your friends acted on Spring Break, aren't you?"

Tommi nodded. "I remember hanging out with the guys, and all the talk about who nailed who, and in great details. It was like it was a contest. Maybe I was brought up to think that girls are somehow more innocent, but I was surprised at how the girls were almost ... obsessed with sex!"

"Did you ever do anything like that - before your surgery?" Rachel asked.

Tommi started. "Well, not really." She frowned. "I mean, I had a thing with a girl back home, but we'd known each other since grade school, and it wasn't a one-night stand."

"How about the Dean's daughter?"

Tommi winced and her face flushed red. "That's different."

"Different? How?" Rachel shook her head. "Either you did or you didn't. Was it okay then?"

Tommi shook her head. "I wasn't trying for anything. All I wanted was a nice first date. She was the one who was aggressive."

"But it was still a one-night stand."

Tommi nodded slowly. "And I felt kind of guilty about it. I mean, it was great sex, but it didn't seem ... right. I guess it wasn't any more acceptable than what my friends were doing."

Rachel laughed. "With everything that's happened to you, is it possible that your perspective has changed? Or is it that you're starting to feel strong ... desires ... because of your hormones, and that you're scared?"

Tommi started at the bluntness of Rachel's observation. She sank back into her chair, her gaze dropping away from Rachel's eyes. "It scares me," she admitted softly.

"In what way? Are you afraid that if you try it, you'll find it addictive? Is that why you've been kind of distant to Suzie lately, because she frightens you? Because you're afraid that you might find that you enjoy being a woman, and you might want to stay?"

"Yes," Tommi admitted, still looking down at her lap instead of at Rachel.

Rachel nodded slowly. "Tommi," she began, and paused until Tommi looked up at her. "Tommi, in all the years the program has operated, fewer than one in twenty men decide to stay women."

Tommi nodded mutely, afraid to speak, despite the reassurance in Rachel's statistics.

"And fewer than half of the men who've been in the program experience full male/female sex. But most do masturbate, because they find the needs can get pretty intense during a hormone-laden pregnancy, especially when their bodies aren't used to female hormones." Rachel gazes evenly at Tommi. "If you do decide to masturbate - to relieve some of your, um, tension, you won't be the first, and it will not turn you into a sex-crazed whore. It won't mean that you're going to stay a woman. Your hormones aren't going to make you suddenly go ga-ga over some guy with tight pants and a big bulge, and take that guy to your room to bed for a one-night stand. It's your mind that rules, not your hormones."

"So what you're trying to say is that girls can be just as sexual as guys, and it's normal, and I shouldn't be afraid of that?" Tommi asked meekly.

"Pretty much," Rachel answered.

"Somehow, that isn't very reassuring."

The sound of the key in the door interrupted Tommi; she looked up from her book toward the door.

Katie pushed the door open. "What a day!" she sighed as she dropped her book bag onto the floor by her bed. She pulled her pillow up as a backrest and slumped down on the bed. "I hate tests like that."

Tommi closed her book and turned her chair toward Katie.

Katie's eyes narrowed. "Something up?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

Tommi nodded grimly. "We ... haven't talked much ... since I got back, that is."

Katie scowled. "I thought everything was normal. Unless" Her eyes widened. "You're talking about what happened on Spring Break, aren't you?"

Tommi nodded again. "I think we need to talk."

Katie sighed. "We've been over that."

Tommi closed her eyes and shook her head. "I just ... think ..."

"It's fine!" Katie said emphatically. "I know you had a great time; Mom told me how much you enjoyed shopping with her, and how relaxed you seemed."

"But ... they're your parents!" Tommi objected sharply. "It seems wrong, like ..." She couldn't figure out the words to finish her thought.

Katie sighed aloud. "I do not feel like you're stealing my parents! I'm honestly very glad that you had a good time with Mom. She adores you, and was very glad you could visit, especially since I was stuck up here."

"But..."

"I am not jealous that you had a good time with my parents!" Katie said firmly. "I am glad. Very glad." She leaned forward on her bed. "Tommi, have I ever lied to you?"

"No," Tommi answered cautiously.

"That's right, I haven't. And when I told you that you're like a little sister to me, I was telling the truth. You are like a little sister. Mom and Dad think so, too."

Katie waited until Tommi looked her in the eye. "Honestly, I am not jealous." She laughed lightly. "Maybe when I was younger, I would have been, but I'm not a little kid anymore." She tilted her head back, biting her lip, thinking for a moment.

When she looked back at Tommi, she continued. "Mom needs you," she said. "She's always needed another daughter to help her over a pain that I didn't even know she was carrying." Katie wiped at her tears. "I think I needed a little sister, too." She pushed herself up, crossed the room, and squatted down beside Tommi, her arms wrapped around Tommi in a tight embrace and her head on Tommi's shoulder. "You're family to us. Don't you ever doubt it."

Chapter 10 - The Big Day

Tommi put her phone down and sighed heavily as her head drooped. Her expression echoed the pain in her heart. She slowly shook her head, as she began to cry. Soon, tears were streaming down her cheeks. "It's not fair!" she exclaimed softly to herself over and over.

A knock on the door barely registered with Tommi. When the knock sounded a second time, even louder, she called out, "Come in." She barely moved from her position, sitting on her bed, her knees drawn up and her chin resting on them as her tears dripped from her cheeks onto her slacks.

"Hi," Mel said in a chipper tone. Then she noticed Tommi's posture. "Is this a bad time?"

Tommi looked up at her friend as if she'd barely comprehended Mel's words. "What?"

Mel flinched at the sight of Tommi. Tommi was crying about something, and judging by the redness and puffiness of her eyes, she had been for quite a while. "Are you okay?" Her voice was instantly sympathetic and concerned.

Tommi stared at Mel for a few seconds, tears continuing to trickle down her cheeks. "No," she finally said.

Mel's demeanor changed instantly. "Do I need to get you to the clinic? Is everything okay with the baby?"

Tommi shook her head slowly. "It's not that. It's Sara, my little sister," she managed to say between sniffles and sobs.

Mel tensed. Tommi's health and that of the baby were paramount, and concern about her physical and mental state was a frequent topic of discussion among Mel and her close circle of friends. They also knew that Tommi and her sister had gotten very close; Tommi spent hours every week on the phone with Sara. If her sister was in some sort of trouble, it could seriously affect Tommi's pregnancy.

Mel eased down on the bed beside Tommi and put her hand on Tommi's shoulder, pulling her into a hug. "Is everything okay? I know how excited you were when she was accepted to come here next fall."

Tommi wiped at her tears in a futile effort to dry her cheeks. Almost as soon as the old tears were wiped away, new ones trickled down her face. "She's not coming," Tommi sobbed.

"But ... why not?"

Tommi shook her head, and the tears came faster. "She didn't get enough financial aid. She can't afford it."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Mel said soothingly as she hugged Tommi more tightly. "What's she going to do?"

Tommi shook her head sadly. "Same thing as everyone else stuck in that damned little hell-hole - get a job," she said bitterly. She wiped her tears again. "She said she'll save up until she can afford college, but it won't work that way. She'll end up getting married just to get away from Ma, and then she'll have kids and be stuck in a dead-end life." Tommi buried her head in Mel's shoulder; her body wracked by sobs and her crying audibly.

"Oh, Tommi," Mel cooed as she gently rubbed Tommi's shoulders. "I'm so sorry."

"And I can't help her," Tommi cried. "I want to help her get away from there, but I can't afford it, either."

Mel had a thought. "Maybe she can ..."

Tommi knew where Mel was going. "I already checked the rules. She's only seventeen, and not eligible for the program."

"Oh, Tommi," Mel said softly, "I'm so sorry!"

Tommi wore a determined expression as she strode purposefully into the clinic. Her gait was that of a pregnant woman. She was almost seven months along, clearly showing, and the increased mass had changed her center of balance and given her the characteristic 'pregnant woman waddle'. Sometimes, as now, her hands gently cradled the bulge in her abdomen, accentuating her pregnancy. She barely noticed any more and didn't really care.

Suzie looked up as Tommi came in. "Hi, Tommi," she started in her normal chipper voice, but as soon as she saw Tommi's expression, her tone changed. "Are you okay?" Her fingers were already moving to the phone, to page Dr. Tina or Rachel if needed.

"The baby is okay," Tommi reassured her quickly. "I need to talk to Rachel if she's in."

Suzie glanced at her computer. "She's in a meeting for another fifteen minutes or so, but then she's free." Suzie looked back up to Tommi.

"I'll wait," Tommi said firmly. Tommi glanced at Suzie again, and felt a twinge of envy. Suzie had given birth to her baby. Her baby! Unlike the others who hosted surrogacies, Suzie now had the responsibility of caring for her own infant. If pregnancy made some women glow, the joy of motherhood made Suzie positively radiant, if also a bit tired.

"Okay," Suzie replied automatically. She knew something big was troubling Tommi, but it wasn't her job to inquire - unless Tommi volunteered something. "You know where the snacks and coffee are if you'd like."

Tommi nodded. She hadn't been thinking about eating or drinking - only about Sara. But when Suzie mentioned the refreshments, Tommi's stomach began to remind her that she'd missed lunch. "Thanks. Maybe I will get a bite."

The refreshment center was a decent-sized room off the main lobby, strategically located where it wasn't obvious to those who didn't know of it. It had been designed specifically for the clinic's clients. The massive refrigerator always held an assortment of healthy salads, fruits, and vegetables for snacking. Several varieties of fruit juice and caffeine-free soft drinks filled one shelf, and a coffee machine always had fresh hot decaf coffee. Tommi selected a pre-mixed fruit cup and poured herself a cup of coffee with hazelnut-flavored creamer. She eased herself into a chair and peeled open the snack. Before she knew it, the fruit cup was just an empty plastic container. Tommi hadn't realized how hungry she was, especially after spending most of the morning laying in her bed crying.

Tommi was contemplating getting another snack when Suzie poked her head around the corner. "Rachel is free," she announced. "She's expecting you."

Tommi nodded. "Okay." She awkwardly levered herself up from her chair, picked up her coffee cup, and waddled out of the refreshment center toward Rachel's office. Tommi was no longer surprised by how pregnancy made some motions difficult. Some days, she seemed to be fatigued by even the simplest of things, like getting into or out of a chair.

Rachel's door was open; when Tommi peeked in, she saw that Rachel was busily at work on her computer - as usual. At least Rachel wasn't pregnant; she'd given birth to her baby a few weeks ago, and was quickly regaining her figure. Tommi cleared her throat, which caused Rachel to look up quickly. "Oh, hi, Tommi. Come in."

Tommi eased into a chair, sighing with relief as she got the weight off her feet. "Oof," she sighed. "I never realized that carrying a baby would be so tiring."

"And you still have a couple of months to go. It doesn't get easier," Rachel commented knowingly.

Tommi nodded, her expression glum. "Yeah, I know. You and Dr. Tina have told me and told me. And told me."

"You can't say we didn't warn you of what was coming." Rachel looked past Tommi's fatigue and glum expression. "You're getting that radiant look, you know? Even when a pregnant woman is tired, there's a certain ... something ... about her looks. You're getting it."

"Great," Tommi snorted. "All I need is for people to tell me I'm 'glowing'. It's not bad enough that strangers think they have the right to feel my pregnant belly."

Rachel shrugged. "It's annoying, but it's part of the game. How are things with that young man you keep talking about?"

"Brian?" Tommi snorted contemptuously. "It seems like he's always around, always wanting to talk about stuff, always wanting to help carry my books, like I'm totally helpless! He practically worships the ground I walk on!" She sighed. "I was hoping that he'd see my pregnancy as a sign that I'm not some kind of pure and innocent goddess and leave me alone." She shook her head. "But now he thinks I'm selfless and noble, and he seems to

worship me even more! He just doesn't get it that I'm not really a girl, and I'm not interested in him - at all!"

Rachel fought the impulse to laugh at Tommi's predicament. "You didn't have to tell him it was a surrogacy. Then he might have just thought you were a naughty girl."

"Yeah, I realized that," Tommi complained. "About ten minutes after I told him."

Rachel sat back in her chair. "You didn't come here to talk about him, did you?"

Tommi shook her head. "No."

"What, then?"

Tommi winced as she contemplated her request. "I ... my sister ..."

"Sara?" Rachel interrupted. "She was accepted as a freshman, right? So she'll be here next fall?"

Tommi shook her head. "She was accepted, but she didn't get enough financial aid. She ... can't come." There it was again - the stab of pain at the news. Tommi felt her eyes starting to water - again. Tommi felt like she'd lost the sister that she'd only recently gotten close to.

"Oh. I'm sorry," Rachel answered.

"I was wondering," Tommi began hesitantly, "is there anything you can do? Could she, you know, join the program?"

Rachel shook her head sadly. "You know the rules, Tommi. We can't enroll her since she's only seventeen. She hasn't taken the tests, so we don't know if she'd even pass. And she has to volunteer. You can't be the one to sign her up."

Tommi sighed, dropping her head. "I know," she said sadly. "I had to ask." She wiped at the tears. "It's not fair," she complained bitterly. "She deserves better than being stuck in loser-ville."

"I'm sorry," Rachel repeated sincerely. "There's nothing I can do. And I know you were so looking forward to having her join you here on campus. It's been just about all you've talked about lately." She sighed. "Having Sara come was a very bright ray of sunshine for you. We could see a significant change in your attitude; it's just about all you've been talking about since her admission application was accepted."

Tommi looked up at her words. "Was it that obvious?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes," Rachel responded without having to think further. "It was that obvious. Having a close sister has really been helping you adjust to being ... a woman."

Tommi's face got a slight frown. "I'm not adjusting to being a woman. I'm not really a woman, and I won't be when this is done," she snapped. She saw the startled reaction on Rachel's face. "I ... I'm sorry. Too much stress, I guess."

Rachel smiled sympathetically. "I know. And I guess I'm sometimes a little careless about thinking of you as a natural woman. I'm sorry."

Tommi shook her head as she wiped at another stray tear. "It isn't fair," she complained, changing the subject from what would turn into another uncomfortable discussion of her difficulties being a guy in a pregnant woman's body. "Isn't there anything you can do? Maybe find her a job in the office or something?"

Rachel shook her head again. "No, Tommi," she replied softly. "It's company policy that we reserve jobs for our clients first. Even if that weren't policy, I don't have any openings. I'm very sorry, but there's nothing I can do."

Tommi let her head slump forward as she accepted the inevitable. Then suddenly, she froze. Rachel could almost see the mental gears turning in Tommi's mind. Very slowly, deliberately, her head lifted. Tommi's lips were pursed, and her eyes burned with determination. For several seconds, she breathed steadily. The determined expression on her face was unnerving to Rachel.

Finally, Tommi spoke, softly, but with the firmness of iron. "There is something that I can do," she said.

Rachel's eyes widened. She was suddenly afraid that Tommi was going to do something rash. "What ... what are you talking about?" she asked nervously. She'd seen patients do desperate things before, and Tommi was clearly desperate to help his little sister.

"I'll do another one," Tommi said firmly.

"What?" Rachel wasn't sure she'd heard Tommi correctly.

"I'll do another baby." Tommi repeated. "If you can help me get the money to Sara without her knowing, I'll sign a contract for another baby." She paused as more mental gears shifted. "Maybe some type of special grant, or a sponsored scholarship or something - you know - like the one you helped me get from the corporation?"

Rachel measured her offer. "You've been remarkably frugal, and can probably pay for the rest of your education from your first contract. Are you sure you want to go again?" she asked. "You know what this means, don't you? It'll delay your transition back. And you have been having some ... issues ... with the adjustment."

Tommi nodded firmly. "I'm sure. I'll do anything for my little sister," she responded. "She's all I have left of my family. I have to help her ... somehow. Any way I can. And this is only way I can think of." Tommi looked evenly at Rachel as tears started streaming down her cheeks. "Unless you have another idea."

Rachel slowly shook her head. "No, I don't."

The bubbling of the fountain, surrounded by budding and blossoming trees, was a very tranquil setting. Tommi sat on one of the benches, enjoying the warmth of the early-morning sun. For the moment, she was ignoring the students scurrying around her. She was off her feet, resting, and talking to her mentor/friend Julie. Nothing else mattered - at least for a few moments. Soon enough, she'd be back to the normal hustle and bustle of campus life, and the self-conscious feeling of being a visibly-pregnant co-ed.

"You aren't going home at the end of the semester, even for a brief visit?" Julie asked, almost incredulous that someone wouldn't want to go home.

Tommi sighed. "I guess I never told you, did I?" She shook her head sadly. "Ma and my older sister Liz hate me for leaving home and coming to college. They have some notion that I should have stayed home and gone to work in the mine."

"Wow!" Julie exclaimed softly. "I never knew that. That's got to be tough."

Tommi nodded. "Even if they weren't against what I'm doing, it wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

"You know the stereotype of West Virginia being a redneck, hick kind of state?"

Julie nodded. "Yeah, but that's just a stereotype, right?"

Tommi shook her head. "It's an understatement for my home town. If I were to spend time there, it would be a major scanda, an unwed pregnant girl, visiting my Ma's home. People would immediately assume that I got a girl knocked up, and that she was visiting my Ma in a get-to-know-the-family sort of way." She sighed. "And if anyone knew the truth" She shivered involuntarily. "I can't go back."

Julie whistled softly. "I'd have never guessed that it would be like that. So are you going to Florida?"

"No," Tommi replied quickly. "I'm staying here for summer school. As far along as I am and given my circumstances, Rachel and Dr. Tina would prefer that I not be far away. Just in case..."

"Yeah, I know how they can get," Julie agreed with a chuckle. "Don't you kind of feel ... alone sometimes, though? Like this summer, when everyone else will be gone?"

Tommi's eyes got a far-away, sad look in them. "Yeah, I guess," she said softly. "I hadn't really thought of this summer, though. I suppose it's going to be tougher than most of the time." She forced herself to smile. "I guess I won't have many distractions from my classwork." Her eyes widened suddenly and momentarily.

Julie grinned. "Except for a baby kicking from time to time?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. I suppose I should be getting used to it, but I'm not. The baby is bigger, and it's kicking more."

Julie nodded sympathetically. "I know the feeling. I really hate it when the baby kicks me in the bladder."

Tommi glanced at Julie's very large belly. "How much longer do you have?"

Julie absently rubbed her belly. "I'm due any time now. If I don't start labor soon, Dr. Tina is going to induce Friday morning." She smiled. "If I don't have to have a C-section, I should be back in class Monday morning."

Tommi noticed that Julie had a sad, wistful look in her eyes. "Is it hard? I mean after the birth? Knowing you carried the baby, but that you'll never see her again?"

Julie gulped suddenly, and tears started streaming from her eyes. She looked down as she nodded mutely.

Tommi suddenly felt bad for bringing up the subject. "I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I didn't mean ..."

Julie shook her head. "It's okay. You're in the program, so you'll understand." She looked past Tommi to the bubbling, spraying fountain. "Yeah, it's hard. Sometimes, I wish I could keep the baby. But I know that's not practical, and it's not what I signed up for." She shook her head as her cheeks moistened. "I know that the center is very careful screening the families that will adopt the babies, so I know my baby will go to a loving home." She wiped her tears and stared past Tommi into the fountain. "You'd think that after two, this one would be easier."

Tommi reached out her hand and rested it on Julie's. A silent unspoken message of support and sympathy flowed between the two girls. Tommi knew the feelings that she was developing toward the baby in her womb, and knew that Julie had to be feeling the same, and Julie knew only too well the sense of loss that Tommi was going to experience in a few weeks.

Julie abruptly changed the subject. "It looks like you're following your fitness program pretty well." She laughed even as she wiped at the vestiges of tears on her cheeks. "I know one girl who didn't follow the program, and she had about forty pounds to lose after her baby was born."

Tommi laughed. "Dr. Tina keeps threatening to incarcerate me and force-feed me healthy foods if I don't stick to the diet."

Julie looked over Tommi's figure. "From my non-professional view, it looks like you're doing pretty well. You've got the trim basketball-under-the-shirt look, not the bloated whale look."

"Yeah, I'm trying to keep from getting too big. Except there's one place I can't stop growing. Or rather, two places."

Julie laughed. "It happens." She glanced down at her own bosom. "They'll be about a cup size bigger, and then your milk will come in and they'll seem even bigger still. But for most women, they go back to normal after they quit producing milk."

Tommi winced. "They're already big enough," she complained. "But Dr. Tina said mine won't go down much postpartum, because I'm still a "growing girl." She said I'm going to be stuck with D-cups ... or bigger!"

"I know girls who'd _kill_ to have D-cups."

"They can have mine, for all I care!" Tommi retorted. "That's the one part of this that bugs me the most. I'm not really a girl, but I've got bigger boobs than most _real_ girls!"

Julie nodded. "Having boobs was the thing that took me the longest to get used to." She glanced briefly at Tommi's chest. "Although, I'm not as ... blessed as you are."

Tommi sighed. "It's the one thing ... two things ... that I'm most self-conscious about."

Julie nodded. "Well, it'll be over soon. You're due in July, so you should be ready for reversal surgery in late August - maybe even before school starts."

Tommi looked away suddenly; her lip was trembling. "I'm not ..." she started. "I'm going to ... do another one."

Julie's jaw dropped as she considered the words that she'd just heard. "You're serious? Why? You've been pretty frugal with this one, and saved a lot, so you really don't need the money."

"It's personal," Tommi replied softly. "Promise me you won't tell anyone." She saw Julie's confused expression. "I want to tell them in my own way. Please promise you won't spoil it?"

Tommi suppressed a groan when she saw Brian waiting for her as she walked toward class. It was becoming almost a ritual, and she was getting quite nervous about the young man. He was obviously smitten with her. Tommi wondered if he'd be as smitten if he knew the entire story.

"Good morning," Brian said cheerfully as he fell into step beside Tommi.

"Morning," Tommi mumbled.

Brian noticed her mood. "Are you okay?"

"Not a good night," Tommi replied. "I didn't sleep well. About every time I got settled down, the baby would move and make me uncomfortable again."

Brian winced. "That's got to be tough."

Tommi nodded unenthusiastically. She did feel exhausted. Fortunately, it was Friday; after a checkup and a workout at the clinic, she had the entire weekend to catch up on her rest. "Men don't know the half of it." She cringed as she realized that her response had been stereotypically female - like her entire brain was slowly changing to match her body. She shuddered involuntarily as she continued waddling down the sidewalk, her hands absently under her belly for support, and her book bag slung over one shoulder.

As a pregnant co-ed, Tommi felt very self-conscious as she walked about campus. "You know," she observed, "everyone is staring."

Brian shrugged. "No big deal. It's not like you're the only pregnant girl on campus."

"Yeah, but they probably think that you did this to me," Tommi replied, her voice a bit angry. "It feels very awkward."

Brian thought for a moment before answering. "You're probably imagining it because you're tired." He tried to calm Tommi. "I'm sure no-one thinks that you and I are ... well...." He flinched, knowing that Tommi was probably right, and that he didn't have a good answer for her.

Tommi ignored his feeble words. She knew what some of the Betas had been saying, in words spoken just loud enough that she'd overhear. They called her a slut, a whore, a tramp, and worse.

"Look, we're just friends, right?" Brian continued. "So there's really nothing there." He looked at her, hoping that she'd disagree, that she'd say that they were more than just friends.

Tommi sighed. "Yeah, whatever." She really didn't feel like talking much.

"You look uncomfortable," Brian observed, changing the subject.

Tommi shrugged. "Guys will never know how uncomfortable it can be," she observed. "But it's what I chose to deal with."

Brian knew he wasn't getting very far with the subjects he'd tried. "What are you doing for the summer?"

"I'm staying here. I'm due in July, and the doctor wants me close to the clinic. I'll go to summer school. What about you?"

Brian breathed a silent sigh of relief. Tommi was conversing, not just giving curt annoyed answers. "I've got a job with a small IT company in my home town. I'll be working with network and router setup and configuration and troubleshooting."

Tommi frowned. "That sounds ... boring."

"Nah," Brian retorted. "It's great experience. Real-world work, not the theoretical stuff like in classes. It's a high-demand field, and it pays well."

"So what exactly will you be doing?"

"For the existing customers, I'll be in charge of remote diagnostics and trouble-shooting of their networks. If I get to help with new clients, we'll do surveys of the customer facility, and then we'll design a network, buy the equipment, and configure and install it."

Tommi nodded. "It still sounds boring."

"No, it's ..." Brian's voice trailed off. He suddenly realized that, to someone who didn't live and breathe IT and networks, it was boring. He chuckled. "Yeah, I guess it does, compared to some other jobs."

"And that's why I'm not going into EE or Computer Engineering," Tommi added. "Bioengineering seems a lot more varied and interesting." She realized that her words could be taken as snooty. "At least to me."

As usual, Tommi and Katie's room was the get-together spot, and the small circle of friends was all assembled, taking a break from studying. Katie gave up trying to work when they all piled into her room. "I'll be up late tonight trying to finish my term paper, you know," she chided the girls, "and all because you feel chatty."

Erica laughed. "You think you're the only one in the dorm getting an early start on studying? Finals start in a couple of days. We've all been hitting the books pretty hard. We need a little time off."

"Yeah," Linda chimed in. "You should give yourself a little break, too. We've all earned it - we survived the semester."

Katie frowned. "Almost," she added. "If you blow your finals, you won't have survived."

Ashley set her soda on Tommi's desk. "I'm going to be here for summer school," she announced.

"You've told us," Linda reminded her. "That's the last thing I'd want to do - spend the summer doing more studying."

"So what are you doing?" Mel asked of Linda.

"Same thing as last summer - lifeguard in a water park," Linda informed the group.

"I got a summer internship at Disney," Christina boasted.

"In one of the parks?" Ashley asked, sounding almost in awe.

Christina shook her head. "No, in the marketing department. I want to work there when I get my degree, so this fits perfectly!"

In turns, the girls explained their summer plans. Erica described the work she'd be doing in her dad's business. Kim's news that she was spending the summer in Europe elicited envious comments. Compared to that, Mel's plans for working at a summer camp seemed boring. And Dianne was planning to just hang around at home and help watch her younger siblings. The only ones who hadn't announced their plans were Katie and Tommi, and everyone knew Tommi's plans.

"So, what are you doing?" Christina asked Katie. "Summer school, too?" The girls all laughed; Katie was easily the most serious student among them.

Katie shook her head. "I'm taking the summer off," she announced. "I'll be working with a youth group at home."

Tommi knew all eyes were on her. "I'll be sticking around for summer school, too" she said simply. "Dr. Tina wants me close when I have my baby." She suddenly flinched as the baby kicked. "Oof! I'll be glad when _that's_ over!"

"Are you going to come down to Florida after that?" Katie asked hopefully. "You'll need some time to rest, and Mom and Dad would love to see you again."

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"At least I'll be around to help you," Ashley said hopefully. "At least until ..."

Tommi flinched again. "Ugh! Right in the bladder!" She pulled herself up. "Be right back," she explained as she waddled toward the door.

As the door closed behind Tommi, Christina sighed. "This isn't much of a party, is it?"

Erica shook her head. "What do you expect? After finals, we're not going to see Tommi again, are we?" She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

"Ashley will. But the rest of us won't," Christina replied, her voice melancholy.

The unspoken fear had been spoken. The sense of foreboding and gloom that had been hovering around the fringes of the room descended fully.

Linda nodded glumly. "She'll probably have the _other_ surgery before summer is over, too, so she won't be ... one of us."

"It's going to be ... weird," Kim agreed. "I mean, how are we going to deal with a ... guy who was a girl and who lived in our dorms? Someone we shared intimate _womanly_ secrets with? And who's seen us ... well, _au_ _natural_."

By the time Tommi returned from the restroom, all sense of fun and frivolity was gone. Tommi had no sooner stepped into the room than Linda leaped up and pulled her into a tight embrace as she shed tears on Tommi's shoulder.

Tommi was taken aback by the sudden display of emotion. "What's going on?" she asked, confused.

"I guess it kind of hit us," Erica said sadly. "Next week is goodbye."

Tommi eased out of Linda's tearful embrace. "It's not like it's forever," she said.

Christina shook her head. "I know we'll all be back next fall," she said sadly. "But, well, it just won't be the same."

"Yeah," Kim added. "How can it? It just ... won't work."

"But" Tommi's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "Oh! You're talking about ..."

Mel nodded sadly. "It won't be the same. I don't see how it can."

Tommi glanced at Katie. "Why not?"

Linda glanced at Mel, and then looked back to Tommi. "How can it? I mean, after your ... um ... operation" She shook her head.

"I'll be back in the fall," Tommi said simply. "And I hope I'll have the same roommate, too."

"But ... after you have your ... surgery ..." Even Katie was dumbfounded.

Tommi smiled. "I'm not having that operation, at least not for a while. I'll still be one of the girls when we all come back next fall."

Erica's eyes widened momentarily, and she practically leaped to Tommi and hugged her tightly. "That's great!" she exclaimed, tears of joy welling up in the corners of her eyes.

The other girls squealed with delight, taking their turns hugging Tommi.

Eventually, the girls drifted back to their own rooms, a fact which Katie appreciated. "Now I can finally get this paper done."

"Trying to push that A to an A-plus?" Tommi laughed as she sat on her bed, leaning against her pillow. Her feet and her back were very tired. "I'd give just about anything for a back rub," she sighed.

Katie laughed. "Careful what you wish for. I know at least one young man who'd probably give you three back rubs a day in exchange for one date."

Tommi groaned. "I could have gone a long time without having _that_ thought stuck in my brain."

"So, what gives?"

"About what?"

Katie scowled. "About not having the reversal surgery." She looked evenly at Tommi. "I haven't roomed with you all this time to _not_ have learned something about you."

Tommi shrugged. "Surgery was tough. I figured it'd be best to wait a while after having my baby before I went through that again."

Katie shook her head. "I've heard your complaints about guys looking at you, about women's clothing, about your periods. I _know_ you're struggling with fitting in as a girl when your brain is still thinking like a guy. I know you're unhappy with the way the Betas act toward you, and having to deal with Shelly the Bitch. So what gives?"

Tommi sighed. "It's kind of personal."

Katie started to ask again, but she stopped. Her gaze narrowed as she frowned. "This is about Sara, isn't it?" she asked, her question sounding more like a statement of fact.

Tommi looked down, away from Katie's gaze, and shook her head. "No," she lied quickly - too quickly, she immediately realized.

"You're not fooling me. It _is_ about Sara," Katie affirmed. Realization of Tommi's plans slowly dawned on Katie. "You're going to carry another baby to help her pay for college, aren't you?"

Tommi's reaction confirmed what Katie suspected. Tommi looked up, her eyes pleading. "You can't tell her," she begged. "Please promise me that you'll never tell her. She'll feel like she owes me something! Just like Ma and Liz would always do. They never let me forget a favor, and they'd use the favor as a kind of psychological blackmail. I _can't_ let Sara think that I'm no better than Liz or Ma! Please, please, please promise me!"

Tommi squirmed in the chair, feeling quite uncomfortable. There were several factors bothering her. First, it was summer, and therefore hot and humid, and the air conditioning didn't completely compensate. Second, because of her swollen belly, Tommi had turned awkwardly to fit in the chair. And third, the baby was quite active today.

A sudden sharp pressure, like a massive cramp, took Tommi's breath away. She held her breath, wincing at the pain. Tommi knew it was a contraction, and a strong one.

Tommi had had a few of them before - on her first minor contraction, she'd rushed to the clinic out of fear. After a few hours of observation, Dr. Tina determined that it was false labor. She counseled Tommi on contractions, false labor, and on the signs she needed to watch for. Dr. Tina told her these initial contractions were changes in her uterus to prepare for labor, and that she'd be giving birth soon. Since then, Tommi had only experienced a few more mild contractions.

"Are you okay, Miss Wilson?"

Tommi slowly recognized the voice as the pain began to subside. "Huh?" she mumbled. "Uh, yeah, I'm okay."

The professor frowned. Anyone could see Tommi's obvious pregnant state. "Are you sure?"

Tommi nodded, aware that she was suddenly the center of attention of the class. "I'm okay," she insisted again.

The professor raised an eyebrow at her as if questioning her judgement, but then he shrugged and turned back to his lecture.

Tommi knew that the other students were staring, and some of the girls were whispering, but she forced herself to turn her focus back to the lecture. After a few minutes, the whispering and staring died down.

The next contraction hit Tommi just as suddenly, and with a little more force. She couldn't help crying out a bit as the wave of pain washed over her.

"Hold my hand," a strong female voice said from beside her. "Take my hand and squeeze if you need to."

Tommi managed to turn her head, and saw that an older woman, in her mid-thirties, was squatting beside her. Tommi recognized the woman as a school teacher who was getting some continuing education credits during the summer. She grasped the woman's hand and squeezed firmly as the pain continued. Tommi gritted her teeth, trying not to cry again, as the contraction continued.

The woman waited patiently until the pain had subsided some. "I think class is over for you," she said calmly. "Those two were about twelve minutes apart. You're going into labor."

"I'm _okay_," Tommi protested. She felt confused by the fuss. "I had a couple of false labors already, so this is just..."

The older woman smiled knowingly. "I've had three of my own, so I think I know a little more about labor and childbirth than you do," she said. She looked at the students who were starting to circle them. She picked a couple of the girls. "Can you help me get her to my car? I'm going to take her to the hospital."

The professor nodded, visibly relieved, while the two girls nervously hurried over to Tommi.

"Can you stand?" the woman asked.

Tommi thought for a moment and nodded. Carefully, aided by the two girls, she stood up.

"Okay," the woman directed gently, "let's walk out to the elevator, and down to entry. You can rest there while I get my car, okay?"

Tommi nodded. "Okay." Flanked by the two 'volunteer' assistants, Tommi waddled out of the classroom, knowing that all of the students were staring at her, and not really caring what they might think.

"My books," Tommi said as they waited for the elevator. "I've got to get ..."

"I've got them," the older woman replied quickly. "Do we need to take care of your car, too?"

Tommi shook her head. "I live in the dorm."

"Do you have an overnight bag ready?"

Tommi shook her head. "My friend, Ashley, will bring it to me. She's kind of expecting to have to help me."

The elevator arrived and the ladies stepped in. "Okay. When we get in the car, you can call your friend, okay? Does your OB have a preferred hospital?"

Tommi shook her head. "No. I need to go to the Morris clinic. That's where my doctor is."

The older woman raised an eyebrow in surprise, but otherwise said nothing. The two girls helping Tommi, on the other hand, were confused and also didn't speak.

The doors opened onto the ground floor, and the ladies scurried out. The older woman was periodically checking her watch. She led Tommi and the two girls to the building entrance, where there were a few benches; Tommi sat down.

"I'll go get my car," the woman explained. "If they're twelve minutes apart, you're going to have another contraction in two or three minutes, before I get back."

The two girls blanched. "What ... what do we do?" one asked nervously.

"Just keep her steady, and let her hold your hand. She's going to be in pain, and might squeeze kind of hard, but she'll be okay. It'll only take me a few minutes to get the car." The woman thought for a moment. "On second thought, take her to the restroom so she can sit down. If she's having contractions, her water might break, and it'll be less ... messy." She turned to the other girl. "Get a cool, damp, paper towel to wipe her forehead." She squeezed Tommi's hand reassuringly. "I'll be right back. Don't worry."

"That's easy for you to say," Tommi muttered as the woman exited the building in great haste.

Tommi did have a contraction while the woman was getting her car. The two girls with Tommi were very tense, but managed to help Tommi through the pain. As soon as the contraction was over, one stood by the building entrance watching for the car. When she saw the older woman pull up to the curb, the two girls helped Tommi to her feet and helped her waddle out. Both were very grateful when the woman told them that she had things under control, and they could go back to class.

"Okay, you wait here, and I'll go get someone with a wheelchair." The car was stopped at the emergency entrance to the clinic.

Tommi nodded. "Okay."

The woman needn't have bothered. Before the car came to a halt, a nurse hurried out to meet it, pushing a wheelchair.

As Tommi was being taken inside, the duty nurse said to the older woman, "We've got her now. You can leave if you'd like. Unless you're on her visitor list, though, we can't let you see Tommi. Privacy laws, you know," she added apologetically.

"I understand," the woman acknowledged. "I've got to get back to class anyway." As she started to get back in her car, but paused. "Interesting clinic," she observed. "I especially like the guard gate to the emergency entrance." Her words carried more than a touch of sarcasm.

"Not everyone agrees with our position," the nurse replied. "Since this is such an emotional issue, and the sides are pretty well dug in and not likely to change their minds, we have to take precautions to protect the privacy - and safety - of our clients."

The woman considered her words for a moment and nodded. "I understand. Well, I hope everything goes well for Tommi and that her delivery isn't as ... challenging as my first one was." With a friendly wave, the woman got back in her car and drove off.

Tommi lay in the bed, her face contorted in pain from yet another contraction. As it eased, she glanced over at the nurse. "Is Deb here?" she gasped through the last remnants of the pain.

The nurse shook her head. "No, she's got the evening shift. If you're still in labor, you might see her in a few hours. That is, if she gets assigned to you. We're kind of busy today."

"But ... Deb has been kind of like my private nurse through all of this," Tommi protested weakly.

The nurse ignored the unintended slight. "Well, you get the pleasure of my company today. I'm Beth, by the way."

"When will Dr. Tina be around to check on me?"

"Tina is in the OR doing a procedure," Beth explained. "Dr. Phillips is also covering labor and delivery today."

Tommi felt almost ill; not only was she having a baby, but she was alone, without any friends or her usual nurse or Dr. Tina.

Beth recognized her uneasy look. "It'll be okay," she said reassuringly. "You're among friends. We'll take good care of you."

Dr. Phillips' arrival couldn't have had better timing if it had been scripted. She walked briskly into the room, her short legs a blur of motion to keep up with the pace she kept. Dr. Phillips was shorter and a bit stouter than Dr. Tina. She came immediately to the bedside, still reading from the electronic tablet she carried. "Ah, Tommi Sue Wilson?"

Tommi nodded "Yes."

"I'm Dr. Phillips." She consulted the pad. "I see you've been here twice with false labor?"

"Correct," Tommi answered formally. She was quickly taking a dislike to Dr. Phillips. Whereas Dr. Tina was happy and delightfully informal, Dr. Phillips seemed quite distant.

"Okay, let's have a look."

Tommi reflexively put her legs in the stirrups, and the Dr. Phillips began the intimate examination.

"Um, hmm," Dr. Phillips said mostly to herself. "She's starting to dilate, so this is the real show." She looked at the nurse. "Get me the ultrasound cart, please. I want to see the baby's position."

After the ultrasound, which was interrupted by another contraction, Dr. Phillips helped Tommi sit up. "The baby looks good - in the right position for a normal delivery," she pronounced simply, "Since this is your first, it's probably going to be a few hours before you're fully dilated and ready to deliver."

"Hours?" Tommi asked plaintively. "Hours?"

Dr. Phillips nodded. "First deliveries usually take the longest."

"So what do I do?" Tommi grumbled. "Just sit here and suffer?"

Dr. Phillips tried to smile, but failed. In Tommi's judgment, her bedside manner was sorely lacking. "You've got a few choices. You can lie in bed. You can sit in one of the chairs. You can walk around a little."

"Walk around?" Tommi said, astonished. "Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm quite serious. Some women find it therapeutic - and distracting - to walk. Gravity and walking motion can help the baby move down the uterus. Some patients claim it shortens labor."

"But it hurts!" Tommi complained.

"I know, dear," Dr. Phillips said, patting Tommi's hand in the first gesture of humanity that Tommi had seen. "If it gets too bad, we can get you an epidural. But I'd really prefer to try to hold off as long as you can."

"Why? If it hurts ..."

"Because when you get an epidural, it will decrease the pain, but evidence shows it also tends to increase the length of your labor and significantly increase the possibility of a C-section - especially in your case."

"Oh."

Dr. Phillips frowned at Tommi. "You should have known that. You did take the classes, right?"

Tommi nodded sheepishly. "Yes. But I guess I wasn't completely paying attention."

"I hope you're paying more attention to your college professors than you did to your doctors and nurses." She smiled at Tommi.

Tommi considered that she might have misjudged Dr. Phillips. The doctor had obviously taken time to learn of Tommi's history and background. "Is there something you can give me, besides the epidural, which will, you know, take the edge off the pain?"

"I can get you something," Dr. Phillips began, "but I think it would be better to see how long you can go before you really need something. The sooner we start on pain relief," she explained, "the more we may have to do later."

Tommi gulped. She hadn't considered that angle. "Okay," she answered nervously. "I'll try."

"I know you're nervous," Dr. Phillips continued. "But I know that you'll do just fine." Dr. Phillips patted Tommi's arm and smiled. "You don't have anyone with you?"

Tommi shook her head. "Ashley is going to come as soon as she gets out of classes."

"We don't want you to be alone, so Beth will stay here with you," Dr. Phillips added. "She's here to take care of you, so if you need anything, ask. Okay?"

Tommi nodded again. "Okay."

"I'll be back to check on you periodically," the doctor explained before she turned and left the room.

Beth helped Tommi sit back on the bed. "You had the tour," she began, "so you know what we've got. Do you want to try walking around, or perhaps a warm shower on your back?"

Tommi sighed. "Part of me wants to rest. Part of me wants to do whatever it takes to get this over as quickly as possible."

Beth laughed gently. "I know the feeling. Every woman who's been through childbirth knows the feeling." She got a pillow from a small closet, fluffed it, and eased it behind Tommi. "Would you like to watch something on TV?"

Tommi frowned. "I don't really watch much TV."

"We've got a good selection of movies," Beth added. "Chances are if you want it, we've got it."

"How about Airplane?" Tommi asked hesitantly.

Beth's nose wrinkled in distaste at Tommi's choice. "I can check," she said, barely hiding her dislike for the movie.

Tommi laughed. "You should have guessed, with my background, that I'd like movies like that." She glanced at the clock and cringed - another contraction would be due in a few minutes. "I really don't want a movie I have to think about," Tommi sighed. "Just something to take my mind off the contractions. Maybe, like Galaxy Quest?"

Ashley halted mid-stride, her eyes wide with surprise, as she came around the corner and nearly ran into Beth and Tommi. "Hi," she stammered, quite obviously confused. "I got here as soon as I could."

Tommi smiled and opened her arms to hug her friend. "Thanks," she said, sounding both relieved and quite tired.

"How ... how are you doing?" Ashley asked, glancing at Tommi's still-pregnant belly.

Tommi was clad in a hospital gown. "It's ... different from what I was expecting," Tommi sighed. "Harder. Longer. Not like the movies."

Ashley paled. "How long ...?" she tried to ask.

"Oof," Tommi winced. "Another one." Her face contorted as she fought the pain of the contraction. In a practiced move, Beth guided Tommi to one of the many chairs lining the corridor and helped ease her down.

Ashley watched, fascinated and horrified at the same time, as Tommi began her practiced breathing as a way to distract herself from the pain.

After what seemed an eternity, but was really only slightly over a minute and a half, the pain eased, and Tommi sank back. "Don't know how long this will take," she commented dryly. "I'm an amateur, remember?" she added with a half-hearted grin.

"Do you want to sit and rest a moment longer? Or should we go back to your room?"

Tommi sighed. "Let me rest a minute, please."

"You're the boss," Beth replied with a pleasant smile. "I need to go to the nurse's station for a moment. You'll be okay, right?"

Tommi nodded, her eyes still closed.

"You're doing just fine," Beth said reassuringly. "I'll be back in a few seconds." She looked at Ashley. "She'll be okay, but if you need anything, yell, and we'll come running." When Ashley nodded nervously, Beth stepped quickly down the hall.

"How is it?" Ashley asked, curious about Tommi's experience. "Are you doing okay?"

Tommi nodded. "I'm okay. They're taking good care of me. But it's not what I expected."

"What does it feel like?"

"Contractions hurt, at least for me. It's like a giant cramp in my abdomen," Tommi explained. "When they're happening, it seems like they take forever." Tommi sighed. "You should have been here a while ago for all the fun when my water broke."

"Oh," Ashley paled a bit.

Tommi glanced up at Ashley, saw the expression on Ashley's face, and laughed lightly. "I'm not trying to scare you," she quickly added. "I know how much you want to be a mother, and that's why you're so curious."

Ashley winced. "I ... I didn't think it was obvious. I mean, I hope ... someday ... that I'll have my own children. But ..."

Tommi smiled. "And you'll do fine. I mean," she added in a hushed voice, "if I can do it - a former guy - then as a natural girl, it should be a snap for you."

Beth scurried back, carrying a small bundle in her hands. "Okay," she said to Ashley, "Tommi is in room fourteen. Why don't you take her things - and your purse - down there, and change into these?" She handed the bundle to Ashley. "Once we get into delivery, you'll need to be in scrubs anyway, so we might as well get that out of the way."

Ashley nodded and turned down the hall toward Tommi's room.

Beth smiled as Ashley walked down the hall. "She's more nervous than you are," she commented to Tommi.

Tommi laughed lightly. "She's a very nice girl. A bit young and naive, but a very good friend. And she wants to be a mother so bad." She glanced up at Beth. "That's why she's so curious." Tommi sighed wistfully. "I hope that someday she meets a really nice guy who'll sweep her off her feet, treat her like a queen, and help her raise the family she wants."

Tommi lurched forward in the chair and began to lever herself back to her feet. "How about another warm shower? My back is hurting a bit."

Beth smiled. "Good thing we don't charge for hot water, the way you love that shower."

Tommi smiled. "You guys put it in, so I figure the least I can do is to use it to show my appreciation."

Suzie wiped the cool washcloth across Tommi's forehead, while Ashley stood on the other side of the bed holding Tommi's hand. It was late in the evening, Beth had gone off-shift, and Deb had come in to replace her. After work, Suzie had come by to see how Tommi was doing, and she had decided to stay for a bit to help out. She did, after all, have a certain kinship with Tommi, and knew what Tommi was going through.

"Just like you practiced," Ashley encouraged Tommi. It hadn't taken her long to learn from Suzie and Beth how to coach Tommi. She was breathing along with Tommi, taking shallow breaths to model for Tommi. "Come on," she urged, "breath with me."

Tommi winced in pain, trying to follow Ashley's example. "It hurts!" she cried between breaths.

Deb nodded. "You're doing fine," she encouraged.

"I want this baby to be born," Tommi complained loudly. "I hate this!"

Suzie winced at Tommi's comment. She knew, from her own experience and from helping others, that labor caused a woman to say strange things, most often, things she didn't mean. "You're doing fine," she cooed. "It'll be over in a little bit."

As the pain of the contraction faded, Tommi sank back against the pillows. "It's been forever!" she complained.

Deb nodded sympathetically. "Do you need the epidural?" she asked softly.

Tommi glanced up at her, and then at Suzie. Finally, she glanced up at Ashley. "It hurts!" she cried softly.

Ashley reached out and stroked Tommi's cheek. "You're doing great," she said soothingly.

Tommi stared at Ashley for a few moments, seeing the encouragement in Ashley's eyes. Finally she glanced back at Deb. "I want to try to make it without the epidural," she said hesitantly.

"Are you sure?" Deb sounded very uneasy with Tommi's decision. It had been a long rough labor so far.

Tommi nodded. She turned and glanced up at Ashley and smiled. It was clear to Deb that Tommi's smile was forced, but it was also clear that Ashley was great moral encouragement to Tommi.

Tommi turned to Suzie. "I really appreciate you stopping by, and I know you want to be helpful," she said softly, "but you have a family at home. You have a little girl that needs you."

Suzie's eyes widened in surprise. "But"

Tommi smiled and shook her head. "I'm in good company," she said reassuringly. "Go take care of your family." She glanced at the clock. "It's late, this has been going on for quite a while, and you need some sleep so you can work tomorrow."

Suzie squeezed Tommi's hand. "Are you sure?"

Tommi nodded again. "I'm sure."

After giving Tommi a quick hug - an awkward maneuver with Tommi lying on the bed, Suzie walked to the door. She paused and glanced at Tommi. "Good luck." She left, only to reappear in the doorway a moment later. "The doctor is coming back to check on you again," she announced. Then she disappeared again.

As promised, a doctor did show up almost at once. To Tommi's relief, it was Dr. Tina. "Hi, Tommi," she announced cheerfully as she came into the room, reading the notes about Tommi on her electronic tablet. "I see you've been busy for a while."

Tommi nodded. "I figured if I waited long enough, you'd get a chance to help me," she said with a smile.

"Well, then consider the cavalry has come to your rescue. It's been a while since your progress was checked, so let's have a look. Your last contraction was ..."

"About three minutes ago," Deb answered promptly.

"And they're about how far apart?"

"Four to five minutes."

"Okay. Let's see."

Obediently, knowing the drill, Tommi bent her legs, pointing her knees upward and planting her feet on the bed a couple of feet apart.

Dr. Tina quickly conducted her examination. "You're fully dilated, and the baby's head is engaged," she announced. "I think it's time."

Tommi's eyes widened as she comprehended the fact that she was on the final stretch. "Okay."

"Deb," Dr. Tina ordered, "please put up the screen."

In response, Deb began to erect a surgical screen around Tommi's chest, just below her breasts. She saw the puzzled look in Ashley's eyes. "Normal procedure," she explained calmly.

"But ... her baby?" Ashley started to protest.

Tommi shook her head. "Sorry, Ash, but it's normal procedure. Neither of us will see the baby. It's supposed to be ... easier for me afterward." Her voice had a slightly sad tone, as if she just realized that she wasn't going to see the results of the miracle in which she was participating.

"Okay, when you get your next contraction, I'll need you to start pushing," Dr. Tina coached.

"About time," Tommi grouched. "I've been fighting the urge to push for hours!"

"Well, it's time to push now. Remember the classes - push, and when you breathe, try not to relax your abdomen. Try not to let the baby slip back."

"Okay."

The onset of the contraction startled Tommi, despite the number she'd already experienced. With Ashley's coaching, Tommi pushed, pausing to take a very short shallow breath before pushing more.

"The baby is crowning. The head is starting to come." Dr. Tina's commentary and Ashley's coaching were reassuring to Tommi.

And then the contraction was over. Tommi let her head drop against her pillow, and Ashley wiped the sweat from Tommi's brow with a cool washcloth.

"Try not to relax your abdomen. We don't want the baby to slip back," Dr. Tina prompted.

That set the pattern. Tommi pushed during her contractions, Dr. Tina urged her on and reassured her, and Ashley coached, held Tommi's hand, and cooled her forehead between contractions.

And then, without warning, in the midst of a major contraction, the pain and pressure eased, and Tommi felt the baby moving from her. "The head is out," Dr. Tina said needlessly. "One more should do it."

Tommi nodded. "I should have taken the epidural," she gasped.

"Too late now. Besides, you're almost done."

It took two more contractions, not the one that Dr. Tina had predicted, before Tommi felt the pressure end. She knew she'd given birth. As if to confirm it, she heard the sound of a newborn baby crying, and Deb suddenly became busy as she dealt with the newborn baby - swabbing the eyes, cutting the umbilical, taking the Aptgar score, and all the other routines associated with a successful birth.

"Can you please give me one little glance?" Tommi suddenly felt herself saying. She _needed_ to see the baby that she'd just delivered.

Dr. Tina shook her head, a sad look in her eye. "I'm sorry, but you know the policy."

Tommi nodded sadly, a tear suddenly welling up in one eye. "I just"

Deb glanced Tommi's way, looking over the screen. "I know, dear," she said sympathetically. "I know it's not the same as seeing the baby, but I can tell you that you're giving a family the gift of a very healthy little girl."

Tommi glanced at her, and then at Ashley. For some reason, she suddenly couldn't control the tears that started pouring from her eyes.

Chapter 11 - Blue

For no apparent reason, Tommi felt a tear slowly seep from one eye and dribble down her cheek. She absently wiped at the stray drops, but quickly gave up and leaned against the back of the chair, her head tilted to one side and her eyes mostly closed. She was lost in her own world, oblivious to the students around her.

"Tommi?" The familiar voice came from across the table.

Slowly, Tommi opened her eyes and straightened her head. "Oh, hi, Julie," she replied after recognizing her mentor. Tommi wondered to herself why she hadn't noticed Julie sitting down at the table.

Julie noticed the tears glistening on Tommi's cheek. "Are you okay?" she asked cautiously.

Tommi nodded mutely. Despite the gesture, her eyes betrayed that she wasn't okay, and that something was bothering her.

"You're having a rough time, aren't you?" Julie cut right to the heart of the question.

Tommi gazed at Julie, her expression blank. After a moment, she lowered her head. Slowly, she nodded. "Yeah," she answered softly as she wiped her cheek again.

Julie put her hand on Tommi's. "I know it's tough," she said quietly, her voice full of sympathy. "I've been there, remember?"

Tommi shook her head. "I _shouldn't_ feel like this!" she insisted. "I'm really a guy! I shouldn't be getting all teary-eyed thinking about a baby!"

Julie smiled. "It was a baby you carried for all those months, that you nurtured in your womb, and that you delivered into the world. It's only natural that you felt some emotional attachment, and now that you've given birth, that you feel some sense of loss."

Tommi sniffled and wiped her eyes again. It was a losing battle to try to stay ahead of the tears. "But it was so ... uncomfortable. The morning sickness, the constant kicking and the pressure on my bladder, the pain of the delivery. It doesn't make sense!"

"No, it doesn't," Julie agreed. "But your hormones are going crazy right now, adjusting back to normal after your pregnancy, and that adds to your emotions."

"I never thought I'd say this, but sometimes, I miss carrying the baby."

Julie nodded. "Rachel gave me a message."

"Oh?" Tommi stiffened at Rachel's name.

"She's enrolled you in the postpartum support group. It meets twice a week starting this evening."

Tommi stared at her for a moment, fighting conflicting emotions at the 'order' from Rachel. "How long does it last - feeling depressed, I mean?"

Julie shrugged. "It varies. My first one was really bad. So bad that I couldn't wait to do another pregnancy."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope."

Tommi thought for a moment. "Right now, I guess I kind of understand that feeling."

Julie smiled. "But you'll get over it. Focusing on your classes will help distract you."

Tommi shook her head sadly. "I'm not sure about that. Right now, I don't feel like doing much of anything but crying uncontrollably sometimes."

The rhythmic swish of the machine was almost hypnotic, but not so much so that Tommi didn't hear the door open as her summer roommate, Ashley, returned from classes.

"Hey, Tommi," Ashley called out before she noticed what Tommi was doing. "Oh, sorry. I'll"

Tommi shook her head as she spoke. "Nah, it's okay. I'm almost done, anyway."

Ashley dropped her backpack on her bed, still staring at Tommi, who sat on her bed, propped against the wall, nude from the waist up. Against her breasts, she held two cups, each with a small bottle attached, and with a vacuum lines running from the cups down to the main part of the breast pump humming away on the floor.

"You're out of class early today," Tommi observed casually, as if her pumping her breasts was nothing out of the ordinary.

Ashley realized that she was staring. "Uh, yeah. The teaching assistant had an emergency." She tried to turn away from blatantly gawking at Tommi's breast pump, but she was held too fast by curiosity at the sight.

Tommi smiled at Ashley's plight. It was the first time she'd felt like smiling in days. "If you're going to stare, why don't you sit down so you're at least more comfortable? It's your room, too."

Ashley sat down on her own bed, still intrigued. "Sorry. It's just that, well"

"You've never seen anyone using a breast pump before," Tommi finished her thought.

"I've never seen anyone lactate before!" Ashley added quickly. "Except in films in my high-school sex-ed classes, but never for real!"

"And you're curious, right? Just like you have been with every step of my, um, process?" Tommi noted wryly.

Ashley nodded, feeling her cheeks blush. "It's not ... um, I don't find it sexy or anything," she added quickly. "But, well, you know, someday I want to be a mother, and when I am, I want to nurse my own baby."

Tommi felt a sudden lump in her throat. "I'd have never said so a year ago, but, sometimes, I wish I could be nursing _my_ baby." She dabbed at the sudden tears in the corners of her eyes.

Ashley shook her head. "I didn't even know you were using a pump."

"Well, I've been trying to be discrete. It's not like I want to make a spectacle of myself, you know. Even though I've been a girl for months, and I'm living surrounded by girls, it still seems, well, weird!"

"I thought they were smaller," Ashley said as she continued to gaze and the pump.

"They come in all sizes. Single hand pumps, portable single electric pumps, double electric pumps, all the way up to this baby. This one is a hospital-size double electric pump. Not exactly portable, so I have to run back to the room to pump, but it's supposed to be the most efficient and best at mimicking a baby's sucking," Tommi explained. "That's supposed to keep the milk flow going well."

Ashley looked at the collection bottles attached to the cups. They already contained a good quantity of Tommi's breast milk, and were filling more, as milk dribbled in with each suck of the pump. "What's it like? Is it like when a guy, you know, sucks on your breasts?"

Tommi looked at the bottles, at Ashley, and then she shrugged. "I don't really have experience with that," she observed dryly.

Ashley blushed again. "Oh, yeah. Sorry."

"I take it you have?"

Ashley's blush deepened to crimson as she dropped her gaze. Her actions gave Tommi all the answer she needed.

"You little minx!" Tommi accused playfully.

"It's not like ... he didn't" Ashley sputtered defensively, embarrassed by the inadvertent revelation. "I never let him past second base!"

Tommi laughed. "It's okay. I promise I won't tell." She glanced at the bottles again. Satisfied that her breasts felt empty, she reached down and switched off the pump. "Now comes the fun part," Tommi said sarcastically. "After I put the milk away, I have to sanitize the collection cups and bottles."

"I didn't know you could do that in the program! Did the mother ask you?"

There was a flash of emotion across Tommi's features, betraying for only the briefest moment Tommi's distress about the question, but her expression vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared. Tommi shook her head. "It's a long story."

Ashley missed the cue as she settled back on her bed. "I've got time."

Tommi sighed. Maybe telling Ashley the story would help her with her conflicted feelings about the baby and the postpartum blues. "I didn't know about it, either. The day after I delivered ..." Tommi felt her voice choking as she recalled the immediate post-delivery emotions, "my milk came in. Well, it was colostrum at first."

"What was that like?"

Tommi tried to laugh but failed. "It scared the hell out of me! My breasts were full and tender. No, they were downright sore! Then this yellowish-brown liquid started coming out, and it wouldn't stop!"

Ashley's eyes were wide with curiosity.

"One of the nurses, Beth, came in and told me what was happening. She said it was natural, and that if I just let things be, in a couple of days the tenderness would pass and I'd quit producing milk."

"Oh."

Tommi shook her head, a sad smile on her face. "I tried, but it wasn't easy. I mean, you know how big these things are!" she exclaimed as she cupped her bare breasts. "And it seemed like they were into hyper-milk-factory mode! Within a few hours, they were swollen and very sore! I couldn't stand it!"

"So they gave you a pump instead?"

Tommi shook her head. "When I complained, after leaking all over my gown and bed and everything, Dr. Tina and Rachel came by to talk to me. They said I basically had two options. First, I could put up with the pain until my body stopped making milk. Second, I could pump to relieve the pressure, but if I did, my body would keep making milk - in fact, it might make more than it would have otherwise! I asked if I could give my milk to my baby!"

"What did they say?"

There was the flash of pained expression again, a bit longer. Tommi winced. "Rachel got really pissed when I called it my baby! She made it very clear that it was not my baby, and that I had no say in any matter whatsoever related to the baby." Tommi's eyes were watering again as she recounted Rachel's severe dressing-down, and her voice sounded angry.

"Oh! Then how ..."

Tommi closed her eyes for a moment. "Rachel stomped out, pretty mad. After she left, Dr. Tina explained that I could continue to pump and donate my milk to a milk bank. I asked if I could ask the new mother if she'd like it. That's when Dr. Tina got pissed, too, and told me

that I would never have direct contact with either the parents or the baby. She said that Rachel could ask, and, if necessary, make arrangements so my milk would be delivered to the new family." Her eyes misted, and then tears trickled down her cheeks, a fact to which she seemed oblivious. "But I'll never know where my milk is going."

"That sounds kind of harsh!" Ashley observed cautiously.

Tommi shook her head again, her eyes sad. "Yeah, but I understand the logic," she explained slowly, her voice heavy. "The new mother could be afraid that I'd interfere with her bonding with her new baby." She felt herself tensing from unpleasant memories, so Tommi closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "It'd just complicate things. The girl might, someday, look for me and turn her back on her mother." She wiped her tears again. "Damn," she swore softly, "I can't seem to control my tears these days."

Ashley tried to smile, hoping to lighten Tommi's mood. "I've noticed."

"They warned me that I would probably get postpartum depression. I didn't expect to be crying all the time, for no reason." She wiped her tears, and then turned her attention back to the milk bottles. One at a time, she unscrewed each collection bottles from its cup and carefully poured the milk into a larger storage bottle. She capped the storage bottle and stashed it in the mini-fridge the clinic had given her for that purpose.

"So that's what that is!" Ashley exclaimed. "Good thing I didn't try to drink it!"

Tommi giggled. "That would have been a surprise!" She lifted a form from the fridge and recorded some information. "Almost five ounces this time."

"It looks like a lot," Ashley commented softly.

Tommi set the paper down and sighed. "If I keep pumping regularly, Dr. Tina says I could be doing twenty to thirty ounces a day in a few weeks."

"Won't it be hard to pump around your class schedule?" Ashley suddenly realized the complication for the rapidly-approaching fall semester.

Tommi nodded. "It'd be a lot easier if the pump was portable. Besides, Rachel and Dr. Tina said I can't pump more than a couple of months, anyway. Apparently, producing milk interferes with hormones enough that pregnancy is difficult, and I am scheduled for another transfer about mid-semester."

"Yeah, I remember that from biology class," Ashley recalled.

Tommi shook her head. "I slept through some of the topics that didn't affect me - like lactating and female hormones."

"Guess you should have paid attention anyway!" Ashley joked.

"Yeah." Tommi began to disassemble her pump to clean it.

"So, what happened? Did the mother take your milk?"

Tommi shrugged. "Don't know. I don't think Rachel would tell me - if I even got up the nerve to ask her. I don't even know if it's one of their clients. It might be going to some hospital's milk bank." She hitched up her bra, slipped in a couple of nursing pads, and pulled on her shirt. She saw Ashley's curious expression at the nursing pads and laughed. "And these are not to make me look bigger! I'm already too big for my liking. But I didn't listen to Dr. Tina, and I had a let-down in one class and started leaking all over! The pads aren't an option."

Ashley laughed. "I better get to my homework." Still, her gaze was fixed on the breast pump.

Tommi smiled. "You're curious, aren't you?"

A blush was her roommate's response,

"Tell you what - I'll wash up the cups and bottles, and then if you want, you can see what it feels like."

Ashley looked down, embarrassed. "Yeah, I'm curious, and I would like to see what it's like." She glanced up at Tommi. "That sounds weird, doesn't it?"

Tommi smiled. "Not really. I bet even a lot of guys wonder what it feels like to pump." She paused, looking thoughtful. "And I wonder how many guys wonder what it's like to nurse."

"Miss Wilson?"

Tommi started, a bit confused, and tried to focus on her surroundings. She was sitting on one side of the classroom, about halfway to the back of the room. She was trying to be unnoticed since she was so far behind in her reading; clearly, she'd failed on this occasion.

"Miss Wilson, can you please answer the question?"

Tommi looked quickly at the professor, and then at the whiteboard. "Uh, I'm sorry, but I was a bit ... distracted."

"That much is obvious, Miss Wilson," the professor said derisively. "Please stay after class for a moment. I want to talk to you." He turned back toward the bulk of the class. "Anyone else?"

Tommi felt her cheeks burning as other students' hands shot up to volunteer an answer. Some of the students shot her a scornful glance. For Tommi, the day's class couldn't end soon enough - which meant that time slowed to a crawl and the remaining fifteen minutes seemed to take an eternity.

Finally, the bell sounded, and the other students gathered their things and scooted out the door. Tommi shoved her notebook into her backpack and stepped slowly toward the professor. "Um, you wanted to talk to me, Dr. King?"

The professor, a tall, older gentleman with a hawkish nose and a rim of dark hair around his bald pate, looked down at Tommi.

Tommi felt a bit unnerved looking up at Dr. King. She couldn't tell if his expression was one of contempt or arrogant superiority. Clearly, though, he was unhappy by her inattentiveness.

"I've noticed that you're having some problems concentrating in class," Dr. King observed dryly. "Your last two quiz grades and your last test grade have slipped significantly from earlier in the term, and your current level of class participation is lacking."

"I know," Tommi admitted sheepishly, looking down from his piercing gaze. "It's been kind of hard to concentrate."

"I would imagine so, after having to leave class to deliver a baby," Dr. King noted sarcastically. "I suppose that next, you'll tell me that you're distracted because you're away from your newborn?"

Tommi felt the tears start. "No," she stammered, wiping at her eyes. "I ... the baby was given for adoption." Despite her best efforts at controlling her emotions, tears began pouring from her eyes.

"Oh," Dr. King said, his voice suddenly less harsh. "I see."

Tommi noted an instant change in his attitude. "The baby was a Morris-Henderson baby. I carried it to term for a girl who ... couldn't."

"Well, I can see how that might leave you distracted emotionally. Still, your grades are slipping, and you do need to focus more in class."

"Yes, sir," Tommi acknowledged. "I'll try."

"You might see if you can get help with one of the other students. Perhaps Ms. Ericson? After all, she did help you get to the hospital."

"Uh, I don't think so," Tommi winced. "She wasn't too happy with my pregnancy being a Morris-Henderson baby. I don't think we quite see eye-to-eye politically."

The professor frowned. "Well, if I were you, I'd find someone to help you, even if the two of you don't agree politically. She is one of the better students in class."

Tommi gulped. "I'll think about it."

"Do that. But don't think too long. We've another test coming up next week."

"Yes, sir." Tommi turned and rushed out of the class.

She had to go back to her room to pump; her breasts were getting painfully full. And she had an appointment at the clinic's gym. If the routine for exercise and diet was rigid _before_ the baby, it was positively tyrannical after. Tommi was feeling more than a trifle resentful toward the demanding diet and exercise regimen. She still hadn't gotten over the sharp tongue-lashing she'd gotten from Rachel over the donated milk; in fact, Tommi was very deliberately avoiding just about _everyone_ at the clinic, and especially Rachel.

The older woman, Linda Ericson, closed her notebook and leaned back in her chair. "I'd say you're ready for the test."

"Thanks. I really appreciate your help." Tommi closed her own book.

Linda smiled broadly. "It's part of my job."

Tommi let herself chuckle lightly. "That's during the year, when you've got a class in front of you. This is different. You're not the teacher here."

"We're all teachers some of the time, whether we know it or not," Linda observed.

"So you moonlight as a philosopher, too?"

Linda laughed. Then she got a thoughtful expression. "Can you answer a question for me?"

"Shoot."

"Why did you do it? Carry someone else's baby, I mean?"

Tommi stiffened. "I thought we agreed we wouldn't talk about that," she said cautiously.

"You can't blame me for being curious," Linda replied. She picked up her coffee cup and took a sip. "You don't fit the stereotype."

"What stereotype?" Tommi asked cautiously.

Linda smiled. "The stereotypical Bible-thumping rabid right-wing right-to-lifer."

"Thanks."

"So why? Are you solidly pro-life? Are you religious? Or is it just a job?"

Tommi shook her head. "I don't think I fit any one of those categories." She looked over Linda's shoulder, staring into space as thoughts swirled around in her head. "It's a little of everything, I guess. Mostly, it fit my beliefs and my need to pay for college."

"Ah, so it is the money!" Linda seemed pleased that she'd found what she considered a right-wing motive.

Tommi shook her head. "Yes and no." She sighed. "It's not just a job. There's something ... special ... about life. When I was growing up, I attended too many funerals," her voice started to choke, and she looked away as she wiped the gathering moistness from her eyes, "Funerals of classmate's dads who died too young." She felt her voice cracking. "And of my Dad."

Linda put her hand on Tommi's. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ..."

Tommi paused as she fought the emotions that had been stirred by the memory - especially of her own dad. After a few seconds, she shook her head. "I guess that's why I think life is special. I learned enough in biology to know that every fetus is unique and distinct, and that no one has the knowledge to recreate one that's gone."

"I see." Linda seemed cool to Tommi's arguments. "Do you support a woman's right to choose what happens with her body?"

Tommi smiled, knowing the trap in Linda's question. "First of all," she began, "if you knew my whole story, I doubt you'd ask that question. Second, let me ask you a question."

Linda was a bit puzzled. "Fair enough."

"You're pro-choice, right?"

Linda's bewilderment increased. "Yes."

"So why is it that the only choice that many pro-choice people support is for a woman to have an abortion?"

"That's not fair," Linda replied curtly. "Maybe some people think like that, but most people I know don't. Abortion is ..."

Tommi smiled as she cut Linda off. "Look, I'd prefer we stop this discussion here, before we start an argument."

Linda's expression changed to one of relief. She'd come to the same conclusion as Tommi - further discussion would lead to an argument. She knew she wasn't willing to accept Tommi's position, and that Tommi wouldn't agree with hers. "Sounds like a good plan."

"Besides," Tommi said, her voice suddenly strained, "I've been in too many ... unpleasant ... discussions lately."

Ashley cautiously opened the door a crack and peeked into the dorm room she shared with Tommi. Since interrupting Tommi's milk pumping the other day, she'd tried to respect

Tommi's privacy. She sighed with relief; Tommi was lying on her bed, apparently napping. Ashley eased the door open and quietly strode in. She quietly set her backpack on her bed and sat down with a heavy sigh. It had been an arduous day of classes.

Ashley started when she heard a soft sobbing sound from Tommi's bed. She turned toward the noise, and was startled to realize that Tommi was awake, lying face-down on her pillow, crying softly. "Are you okay?"

Tommi acted as if she hadn't heard.

Ashley moved over and sat on the edge of Tommi's bed, her hand reaching down to Tommi's cheek. "Tommi, are you okay?"

Still sobbing, Tommi shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"Can you tell me what's wrong? Do you hurt? Should I call a doctor?" Ashley was very concerned that Tommi wasn't answering.

"No," Tommi insisted in a surprisingly firm tone. "No doctor."

"What's wrong?"

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know!" she sobbed. "I can't stop crying!"

Not knowing what else to do, Ashley lifted Tommi's head onto her lap. As Tommi continued to sob, Ashley gently stroked Tommi's forehead. "It'll be okay," she cooed over and over, even as she felt Tommi's tears soaking through her skirt and dampening her leg.

"I don't know what's wrong with me!" Tommi cried.

Ashley sighed to herself. She really wished that Tommi would go to the clinic. She knew that Rachel would be able to help Tommi deal with her depression.. But Tommi was adamant that she didn't need any help from the clinic.

"From what I've been taught," Ashley said soothingly, "postpartum depression is normal."

"This isn't normal," Tommi said through tears. "I feel like ... I'm not important. I feel like I've lost everything!"

"You are important," Ashley reassured Tommi.

"I feel all alone. Like there's no-one who cares!"

"Hush! I know that Katie cares about you - like a sister. And I'm here for you, too."

"Yeah, I guess."

"And all the folks at the clinic..."

"No, they don't care!" Tommi bawled aloud as her tears resumed. "They said they did, but they really don't care about me! Just about using my womb for someone else's baby!" The ferocity in Tommi's voice was shocking.

Ashley started at Tommi's outburst. "Maybe I should call Katie. Talking to her always cheers you up. Or Sara..."

"No!" Tommi insisted. "Don't call them. I don't need them feeling sorry for me!"

Ashley didn't know what to do. "Tommi, you need to talk to someone!" She sighed aloud. "I had an uncle who suffered from severe depression. You're starting to remind me of him - and that's scary!" Ashley deliberately omitted the fact that her uncle had committed suicide. Tommi didn't need any such ideas.

"Maybe," Tommi admitted. "I'll think about it."

"No, that's not enough. I want you to promise me you'll find someone to talk to."

"K," Tommi mumbled.

"How about Julie, your mentor?" Ashley suggested. "She seemed pretty helpful. I know she left some messages for you to call her, and I suspect you never called her back."

"She - he - had surgery to turn back a few days ago."

"Oh!" Ashley was surprised by that fact. "How about one of the support groups at the clinic?"

Tommi sat up, staring at Ashley, her eyes filled with anger. "Don't you get it? They used me, and then they treated me like crap! They don't care about me!"

"Tommi, you've got to do something! You blew the last test in your history class, and dropped your grade by at least one letter! If you blow the last test, you'll flunk the course!" Ashley knew she had to get through to Tommi - somehow. "And you're not doing any better in your other classes."

"IDFM!" Tommi replied without enthusiasm. When she saw the confused expression on Ashley's face, she clarified, "It doesn't fucking matter," Tommi dropped her gaze and let her head hang. "Nothing matters."

Ashley knew she was going to have to do something, even if Tommi didn't approve. She wondered if Tommi would ever forgive her for the phone calls she was going to make.

Chapter 12 - Crisis

After a boring class, Tommi walked wearily into the clinic. She glanced around the reception area nervously, and then walked over to the desk.

Tommi noted with some relief that Suzie wasn't working. Whether she was taking some personal time off or out on some errand, Tommi didn't care. Suzie was very close to Rachel, and Tommi felt the same bitterness toward the both of them.

"Oh, hi, Tommi," the other receptionist, a young girl named Claudia, called in a cheery voice. "It's nice to see you today."

"Yeah," Tommi answered, trying to sound nonchalant, but coming off instead as brusque.

"I see you have another milk drop off?" Claudia ignored Tommi's mood.

"Yeah. And I'm supposed to go to the gym."

"Okay," Claudia said cheerfully as she took the cooler with the breast milk from Tommi. "You know where it is."

"Yeah."

"Shall I let Rachel know you're here?"

"No!" Tommi's quick response sounded defensive, even nervous at the suggestion that she meet with Rachel. "That's okay. No need to bother her."

"Okay." Claudia's answer was more guarded, and her voice a little less casual.

Tommi walked nervously down the hall toward the gym; she was almost terrified that she would bump into Rachel, or Suzie, or Dr. Tina. She wasn't sure she trusted any of them, not after the spiteful invective Rachel had hurled at her, and she'd done it to Tommi only a couple of hours after a difficult delivery! Tommi fumed as she walked. She was a client.

What the hell gave Rachel the right to speak to her that way? Who did she think she was, the Almighty? Lure in a young man in a financial bind, turn him into a girl, treat her so nice and sweet, and then, once the hook is set, drop the charade and show her real colors - a mean nasty witch more interested in the end product than in Tommi.

Getting changed into a girl, carrying a baby, giving birth - it had all been incredibly tough. Now it was a nightmare. And Tommi had to go through with the second pregnancy to fulfill her contract with 'queen bitch' and her minions.

By the time Tommi got to the gym, her face was flushed from her anger, and her mood was black as coal. Tommi changed in the locker room and stomped into the exercise area. Fortunately, she noted, there were no other clients present, only the staff trainer. She had her run of all the exercise equipment. She decided to warm up on the elliptical.

The rhythmic motion of the elliptical did nothing to calm Tommi. Instead, it seemed to heighten her agitation, as if each step was a stomp on something that was bothering her. She was really making sure her steps had energy and force behind them.

"You're getting a little exuberant with the elliptical, aren't you?" The voice came from beside her, cheery and very familiar. Tommi stopped, scowling, took two deep breaths with her eyes closed, and turned to the newcomer.

"I'm supposed to make my exercise count," Tommi answered evenly.

"I haven't seen you for a while," Suzie replied cheerfully.

"Been busy with school," Tommi answered gruffly.

"Yeah, that'll keep you busy. But we miss seeing your smiling face around here." Her voice hadn't lost the chipper edge. "All you have time for is to drop off some milk or hit the gym. You never stop to talk to anybody."

"Whatever," Tommi snorted. "If you want this, I'm moving." Tommi abruptly turned from her machine and moved to the weight station. She moved the weights from their 'normal' settings to significantly heavier than she was supposed to be lifting. Still, it wouldn't matter - Tommi was really a boy, and she could handle this.

Suzie watched Tommi from a distance. She'd seen other patients get into the mental state that Tommi was in, and Suzie knew that Tommi needed observation. Postpartum was a tricky time, especially for former men. To begin with, they weren't used to feeling so emotional from the rapidly changing female hormones, and the sense of bonding and loss with the childbirth really put former men on an emotional roller-coaster.

Suzie pretended to do some light exercises so she could watch Tommi. She knew that Tommi was going to do something stupid; Tommi was too angry not to. And Suzie knew something had happened in post-delivery between Tommi and Rachel and Dr. Tina. She didn't know what, but it was only too obvious that something occurred that was really bothering Tommi - and Rachel, too.

It happened at the leg lift. Suzie could see that Tommi was trying more weight than she should, but Tommi, her face contorted in anger and full of grim determination, pushed forward. On the third lift, Tommi's left knee gave out with a sickening pop that could be heard across the room. Suzie and the staff trainer were at Tommi's side in seconds.

"I'm okay," Tommi insisted, almost snarling, though her face was suddenly white, and she had to talk through clenched teeth. "I'm okay."

The trainer looked at Suzie, who was shaking her head, and then back at Tommi. "Sit still and don't move."

Tommi moved to stand up, but as soon as she put weight on her left leg, she crumpled, crying out in pain as she fell back into the chair.

"Stay still," Suzie strongly suggested. "I'll go get one of the doctors." She scurried out of the gym, leaving Tommi alone with the trainer.

"What's going on?" the trainer asked bluntly. "You were trying to lift about four times the max in your routine. You know better than that!"

"Oh, shut up!" Tommi snarled. "You all run around here, telling me what I can and can't do, what I have to eat, what I can't eat. You tell me what I should feel, and how to help myself be happy. Well, I'm NOT VERY DAMNED HAPPY!" Tommi shouted. "Why don't you all leave me the hell alone?"

The trainer backed off a few feet. This was more a job for doctor and psychologist, not for a physical trainer. She knew help would arrive in moments. Better to shut up and let the patient calm down.

Rachel came into the gym in a run, followed closely by Suzie. "Tommi," Rachel said softly, "what happened?"

"I screwed up," Tommi yelled, her voice showing her pain. "What do you care?"

"Of course, I care. I've been worried about you. You haven't been by to see me in a while."

Tommi scowled deeply. "Gee, I wonder why. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that the last time we talked, you practically tore my fuckin' head off?"

Rachel flinched at the accusation. "I guess I was a little harsh with you."

"No shit!" Tommi sneered. "You call what you said a little harsh?"

"And now you've injured yourself. What were you trying to prove? That you could lift iron like the man you used to be? That you were tough enough that our 'girly things' didn't get through to you? Were you trying to prove that you were still really a man?" Rachel seemed to be lashing out, perhaps trying shock therapy to get through Tommi's anger.

It didn't work. All it did was make Tommi more agitated. "Fuck off!" Tommi snarled. "Just leave me the fuck alone!" She rolled to her side and slowly stood. With a triumphant look to demonstrate that she didn't need them, Tommi turned to walk from the gym.

She made a half step. As soon as she put weight on her left leg, her knee buckled again, pitching her unceremoniously to the floor. She landed with a thud, as a heavy "Ooof" burst from her mouth. As she lay, her face contorted in pain, Tommi cursed over and over. "I don't belong in this damned place! Everyone is so fucking mean to me! No one gave a damn about me!" On and on, she spewed her vitriolic, toxic, hateful words.

Dr. Tina slipped up beside Rachel, out of Tommi's immediate line of sight, and as Tommi continued to rant, giving vent to her emotional frustration and verbalizing her current physical pain, Dr. Tina slipped a needle into Tommi's arm.

Tommi turned toward Dr. Tina, her eyes ablaze with hatred. "What the fuck?" she snarled, even as she winced at the pain from her injured leg. She tried to twist away from Dr. Tina, but the pain overwhelmed her, and she nearly passed out.

In moments, Tommi was asleep from the sedative Dr. Tina had given her. A gurney was brought, and the ladies carefully hoisted Tommi onto it. Rachel, Suzie, and Dr. Tina walked the unconscious woman down the hall toward the exam rooms. "Get an X-ray of her left knee, stat!" Dr. Tina ordered the nurses that sprang into view. The team nodded and wheeled Tommi into the X-ray room, leaving Rachel, Dr. Tina, and Suzie standing in the hall.

"She's been avoiding me," Rachel said, breaking an awkward silence. "I had no idea this was coming."

"Well, if you'd have lit into me like you did to her, I'd be avoiding you, too!" Dr. Tina rebutted sternly. "You really went over the top with her when she asked about donating her milk to the baby."

"She knows the rules. We went over them many times. She should have known better," Rachel countered defensively.

"_He's_ a very frightened, gender-confused boy in a girl's body, dealing with emotions that are tough enough for a natural woman delivering her own baby. Put yourself in his shoes. All the bonding and attachment, all the crying and odd cravings, the feelings of a baby inside you, and then, poof, it's gone and you'll never see it again. That's hard enough for a real woman. Imagine how _he_ feels!" Dr. Tina was brutally frank in her evaluation of Rachel's little outburst to Tommi. "And what was that outburst in the gym about?"

Rachel glanced at Suzie for confirmation.

Suzie nodded. "I wasn't there, but it sounds like you were pretty harsh." She shook her head. "I wondered why she'd been avoiding the office. And your ... comments in the gym weren't very friendly, either."

Dr. Tina sighed. "Would _you_ trust someone who'd been sweet and caring and then suddenly half tore your head off - and in answer to what Tommi thought was an innocent question?"

Rachel swallowed hard, and looked at Suzie and Dr. Tina. Their silent nods confirmed that in their opinions, she _had_ been over the line - both times. "So what are you saying? That Tommi doesn't trust me now?"

Dr. Tina shook her head sadly. "She probably doesn't trust _any_ of us much. But you," she looked directly at Rachel, "unfortunately, I'd say she trusts least of all."

Suzie nodded her agreement. "She's been avoiding me, too. I'd guess that she thinks we all turned against her."

Rachel slumped back against the wall, sighing heavily. "Well, I really screwed this one up, didn't I?" She sighed again, closing her eyes and lowering her head, which was shaking slowly from side to side. "How could I have screwed up so badly? How am I supposed to win back her trust?"

Dr. Tina sighed heavily. "You better face the fact that you may never be able to completely win back her trust."

Rachel looked up at Dr. Tina and stared for a few moments before dropping her gaze again. "Great! Just great!"

"You'll be careful, right?" Dr. Tina pleaded with Tommi as she hobbled toward the clinic entrance. It appeared, from the X-ray and the initial examinations that Tommi had avoided serious damage; she had a very bad knee sprain, but nothing seemed to have been torn.

Tommi nodded. "I can't do much on these!" She waved one of her crutches a couple of inches in front of her to demonstrate her new limitation.

"Well, be a good girl. You're scheduled for an MRI first thing in the morning. And I want to see you back here in two days for another checkup, unless the MRI turns up something we didn't catch."

"Fine," Tommi snorted. "I'll see if I can work it into my busy schedule."

Dr. Tina sighed heavily and closed her eyes for a moment. She looked up at Tommi and stepped to her side. "Tommi, we aren't your enemy. We really do care about you. We all know what you're going through, and we're here to help you; honest."

Tommi listened, and snorted derisively, "Well, you all have a funny way of showing it! Especially her!"

"I know you're hurting inside, and you probably feel like we've betrayed you. But you have to believe that we are your friends."

"Whatever. Can I go now?"

Dr. Tina sighed. "Not quite. I've been wanting to talk to you about your lactation."

"Mooo." Tommi responded angrily.

"Tommi, please! I'm a doctor. I thought I was your friend, too."

Tommi sighed. "Okay. I'll try to be civil." She took a couple of slow, deep breaths to help calm herself and to fight back some of her anger. It helped - a little. "I'm pumping five times a day. I'm averaging around four ounces at each pumping." The anger was mostly gone from her voice - mostly. There was still an edge to her tone, though.

"That's good. Any unusual pain? Any unusual discharge from your nipples?"

"Nope."

"Good."

"Uh, Dr. Tina?" Tommi's emotional barrier came down just a little.

"Yes, Tommi?" Tina's heart leapt with hope that Tommi had initiated a question, and not in a sarcastic or angry tone.

"Uh, how will I, um, stop them? You know, when it's time? How do I stop the milk?"

"Ah," Dr. Tina tried to put on her most pleasant demeanor. "When a mother stops nursing - or pumping - as frequently, the milk production slows. When she stops completely, the production stops."

"Just like that?"

"Um, no," Dr. Tina answered hesitantly. "There'd be a period of time when you aren't removing your milk, but your body is still producing it. It can take a few days for the milk production to shut off."

Tommi wrinkled her nose. "You're saying that my boobs are going to feel full and sore, and that I won't be able to do anything about it."

Dr. Tina nodded. "That's about it. You could pump a little less time each time, you know, like you're trying to slow down production, but that kind of defeats the purpose of trying to stop, and you would still be slightly uncomfortable, only over a longer time."

"Great!" Tommi muttered to herself. "Swollen sore boobs that want to leak until they decide to quit. Whose crazy idea was this, anyway?"

Dr. Tina smiled. "Actually, it was your idea. Once you knew that your breasts were full and sore and leaking, you practically demanded a pump to empty them, to relieve the discomfort. You kept insisting even after we told you what that would entail."

Tommi dropped her gaze, remembering the days in the clinic after the baby had been born. Dr. Tina was correct. Tommi had been most insistent that she pump to keep her breasts from feeling swollen and sore, despite the advice of Dr. Tina and the staff.

Bitter memories were stirred by the recollections. Tommi had hoped that she'd be able to donate her milk directly to the baby she'd carried, but after the outburst from Rachel, Tommi was afraid to pursue the matter further. After Rachel had left, Dr. Tina had told Tommi that she could donate to their milk bank, and that the staff would inquire as to whether the adoptive mother wanted milk from the bank. Tommi's milk might go to the baby she'd carried, or it might go to another baby, but Tommi would never know.

Dr. Tina noticed that Tommi had tensed again from their discussion. She surmised, correctly, that Tommi was still sensitive about the unpleasantness with Rachel. For a few seconds, she pondered whether she should bring it up. She decided against it, figuring that if she mentioned Rachel's outburst, Tommi might take it as more evidence that she was all backing Rachel. Tommi might decide that she had no friends at the clinic. She'd made a start at rebuilding trust with Tommi. She didn't dare do or say anything that would undermine what little progress she'd made.

"Anyway, that's a bridge we'll cross when we get to it, which should be no earlier than mid-September."

"Okay. But I can stop before then if I want to, right?" Tommi asked.

Dr. Tina nodded. "Of course. But I'd like you to think of the baby that's benefitting from your milk. A lot of doctors consider mothers' milk to be vastly superior to formula. You are doing a lot of good donating milk - as long as you can, and you want to continue."

Tommi nodded. "Well, if we're done, I'll just hobble back to my dorm and get back to my studying."

Dr. Tina nodded. "We're done - for now."

"You did what?" The voice on the speakerphone sounded incredulous.

"Katie, please don't yell at me," Tommi implored. Ashley was in class, and for some reason, Katie had called her out of the blue.

"Sorry, but it sounds like your life is going to hell without your big sister to keep you out of trouble," Katie observed. "You know you don't have the strength you used to!"

Tommi winced. "It's not that bad. The MRI didn't show any damage beyond a simple sprain."

"It's still bad enough that you're on crutches!" Katie retorted.

"Only for another week," Tommi defended herself.

"Look, sis," Katie decided to take another tack, "just try to be more careful! I don't want my roommate - and my little sister - crippled next semester!"

Tommi sighed. "Okay, I'll be more careful. Besides, it's not like I'm getting to the gym as often as I was last spring."

There was a hesitation on the other end; after an awkward silence, Katie spoke up again. "Yeah, I heard about that. Did something else happen?"

Tommi's expression clouded. "Are they trying to get you to spy on me again?" Her voice was tinged with suspicion and anger. "Is that why you called?"

"Tommi, I'm not going to lie to you. I never have, remember?" Katie's statement didn't help calm Tommi's suspicion. "Rachel didn't call."

"Yeah, I bet she didn't!"

"She didn't."

Tommi's eyes were narrow slits. "Who called, then? Suzie? Dr. Tina? Ashley?"

Katie's sigh was easily audible through the phone. "It doesn't matter. What does matter is that someone cared enough about you and your depression that they called me so I could talk to you. It sounds like you really needed someone to talk to."

Tommi was truly surprised by that news. "Rachel didn't call?"

"No. And I found out - through my spies - that everyone at the clinic is hurt by how you've shut them out."

Tommi felt herself tensing. "Did your spy tell you that Rachel practically tore my head off right after the delivery? And she did it again in the gym? Did she tell you those parts?"

"Yup."

"Oh."

Katie continued. "The part you don't know is that Rachel is thinking of resigning over how badly she feels that she messed up!"

"What?" Tommi was incredulous at Katie's revelation. "How do you know?"

"That's not important. Apparently, some of the staff let Rachel know - pretty bluntly, from what I gather - that she was way out of line with you."

"Yes, she was!" Tommi said acidly.

"Yeah, well, the discussion was after you had your little temper-tantrum and hurt yourself. Now, apparently, Rachel is blaming herself, and feels like she's failed as a director and lead counselor for the clinic."

Tommi's jaw hung agape. "But ... no one ever told me!"

"Maybe that's because you never gave them a chance!" Katie scolded. "From what I hear, you've been avoiding the clinic except when absolutely necessary, and then only scurrying in, doing what you need to, and scampering out as quickly as you could. And while you're in there, you've been giving everyone the cold shoulder and not talking to anyone."

Tommi felt on the defensive. "Would you feel like hanging out there after what she did?"

"No, I guess not," Katie admitted.

"I just can't!" Tommi complained. "Not after ..."

"Listen," Katie interrupted, her voice firm, "I'm going to tell you this 'sister to sister'. You need to knock off the self-pity and haul your ass down to the clinic. You and Rachel and the staff need to get straightened out on where you all stand. You've got a contract for another baby. How's that going to happen if you won't talk to anyone there?"

"But ..."

"But nothing! If Rachel knows she was wrong, how the hell do you expect her to apologize when you won't even talk to her?"

Tommi realized she was fighting a losing battle. Katie's arguments were - as usual - logical and hard to refute. "But ... how am I supposed to do that? She said some things that were very hurtful!"

"One of the two of you needs to make the first move. I nominate you."

"But..."

Katie wouldn't hear of any objections. "If you don't go meet with Rachel in the next two days, I'm going to take off work, drive down there, personally carry you into Rachel's office, and handcuff you to a chair until the two of you get this settled! Or I'll call Mom, and have her come straighten you out!"

"You're bluffing."

Katie's voice was solemn and unreadable. "Try me."

Tommi padded softly toward Suzie's desk, a small cooler slung over her shoulder. Though her knee still hurt, she'd decided to walk without her crutches. There was something about being on crutches that made her feel weak and vulnerable - more so than usual - and for what she was about to do, she knew she couldn't think of herself as weak and vulnerable.

The cane she was using gave her much more of a sense of control, even while it gave her knee some extra support. She could also wave the cane around like a sword if she needed.

Suzie didn't see Tommi approaching. She was working on her computer, with her back to the clinic entrance.

"Uh, hi," Tommi said softly and hesitantly.

Suzie turned from her computer, already putting on her patient-greeting smile. "Sorry, I was busy and ... hi Tommi!" Her cheerful patient-greeting demeanor changed to unmasked joy as she recognized her customer.

"Is ... Dr. McKnight ... in?" It was still hard for Tommi to say Rachel's name. She was fighting all her conflicting emotions just to come to this meeting.

"Yes, she's in," Suzie answered. She had looked sad when Tommi asked for Rachel by her formal name.

"Can you please tell her that ..." Tommi's emotions choked off her words; she fought to control her anger. "Can you tell her that I need to talk to her?"

Suzie nodded. "She's in a meeting right now," Suzie explained, "but..."

"Oh." Tommi felt her heart sink. It had taken her a long time to get the courage to face Rachel, and now she was unavailable. Tommi didn't know if she'd be able to go through with psyching herself up for another try.

"But she left orders that if you needed to see her, she was to be told immediately," Suzie finished quickly. "I'll let her know you're here."

Tommi started at her words. Rachel wanted to be interrupted, no matter what, if Tommi came by? Did this mean that Tommi was in trouble?

Tommi was so wrapped up in pondering the possible hidden meanings that she didn't notice that Suzie had pressed two additional buttons before she made the call on the intercom.

"Okay, let's go," Suzie prompted as she stood.

"Huh?"

"Let's go back. She's on her way to her office," Suzie explained.

As they stepped back to the office suites, another girl stepped past Suzie toward the reception desk. "Thanks, Claudia. I don't know how long this will be."

"No problem," the other girl answered.

Suzie missed the turn to Rachel's office and kept going straight. "Uh, didn't we ...?" Tommi started to ask.

"Nope," Suzie answered. "Break room." She turned into another room, a small former office that had been outfitted with a sofa and matching chairs, coffee pot, microwave, and refrigerator. Suzie gestured to the sofa for Tommi to sit. "Coffee? Juice?"

Tommi's head swam. This didn't fit the template of what she'd expected. "Grapefruit juice if you've got it."

Suzie poured two cups of coffee, handed a bottle of juice to Tommi, and got herself a bottle of water. The cups of coffee were left on the counter, waiting for someone to claim them.

"What ...?" Tommi started to ask.

"I don't know," Suzie answered curtly before taking a sip of her water. "I'm as much in the dark as you are."

The sound of the door opening startled Tommi. She honestly didn't know what to expect. She certainly didn't expect Dr. Tina to enter, still in her scrubs. Tina went straight for the coffee. She took a long lingering sip and sighed. "This has been one of the busiest days of the past two years!" she exclaimed softly. She sank into one of the fat chairs, practically purring as she luxuriated in the soft padding, and took another sip of coffee. "You know, if you'd have called two minutes later, I'd have been in the O.R." Then Dr. Tina looked at Tommi. "Say, aren't you supposed to be on your crutches for another week?"

Tommi squirmed. "Four more days," she replied defensively. "But today is the first time I've been out without them. In fact," she continued quickly, "I left them in the car. They're pretty uncomfortable to walk with." She saw the start of a disapproving look on the doctor's face. "Besides, I'm wearing the knee brace and using a cane."

Dr. Tina sighed. "Okay, okay. You know what you can handle." A slight grin crept on her face. "But I think I'll add an extra three sessions of PT to your rehab. Consider it penance."

Tommi nodded slowly. "I guess that's fair." Her voice was carefully neutral and devoid of emotion.

The opening of the door interrupted the chit-chat. Tommi felt herself tensing as Rachel walked in, closing the door gently behind herself.

Rachel looked haggard. Tommi guessed that she was under a good amount of stress, and that she was showing every bit of it. Normally, Rachel's hair was very stylishly done, and her makeup impeccable. Her choice of clothing was always professional but cheerfully colorful and feminine. Today, however, it appeared that Rachel hadn't spent more than ten minutes on her hair and makeup combined, and her suit was quite plain and drab. Her normal jewelry was absent. Her eyes looked almost lifeless.

"Hi, Tommi," Rachel began tentatively.

"Dr. McKnight," Tommi acknowledged her tone cautious and emotionless.

Rachel winced; they'd been on a first-name basis, past the formality. Now, the formality was back. The formality hurt her, almost visibly. "I'm glad you came by."

"I was ... persuaded," Tommi replied stiffly. "Katie threatened me if I didn't."

"Katie...?" Rachel asked, confused. "I thought she was home for the summer." She slowly crossed to the sofa and sat down. Even the simple act of sitting seemed agonizing to Rachel.

Tommi nodded. "She was. Someone," she shot a suspicious glance at Suzie and Dr. Tina, "told her what was going on, and she called me." Both of the other ladies seemed surprised as well. Tommi briefly considered whether one of them was merely a good actress.

"Well, I'm glad somebody called," Rachel replied. "I need to start by saying that I'm very sorry. I was reminded - pretty frankly," she glanced at Suzie and Dr. Tina, "that I was out of line."

Tommi nodded mutely. She wasn't quite sure how she should react.

Rachel continued. "I wish I could take my words back." She sounded weak, defeated, and very humble. "I can't, though." She sighed, and seemed to be fighting back tears. "You said a few things to me the day you sprained your knee," she continued softly. "Some things that were pretty blunt and accusatory and ... spiteful."

Tommi stiffened, starting to feel defensive.

Rachel noticed Tommi's reaction and shook her head slowly. "I want you to know that I don't feel like you owe me an apology. I had it coming, and more."

Tommi relaxed a bit. She stared into her half-empty bottle of grapefruit juice, wondering what to say, if anything.

Rachel continued. "I owe you an explanation. You've never heard this before." She glanced around the room. "None of you have."

Tommi's head jerked up, her eyes wide with surprise. She glanced at Dr. Tina and Suzie, who were equally surprised. Tommi looked back to Rachel.

"I was adopted as a baby," Rachel began. "Like a lot of adoptive kids, as I got older, I began to wonder about my birth parents. One summer when I was nineteen, I left home and went to look for my birth mother." Her voice was surprisingly emotionless. "My real mom let me go. Because of the open records laws, I found my birth mother."

Rachel closed her eyes as her mind replayed images recorded in her memory long ago. When she reopened her eyes, she continued. "I wanted to make some kind of connection, to find out something about her. I guess I wanted to feel like she'd really cared about me, giving me for adoption instead of aborting me." She shook her head sadly.

"I couldn't connect. She was resentful, even hateful toward me. She told me to get out of her life and never come back." Rachel sighed. "I went home, and I never told my mom what had happened."

Tommi started to say something, but Rachel's glance told her that she had more to tell.

"A few years later, my mom was killed in a car accident. As I was going through her things, I found her diary." Rachel wiped at the tears that had suddenly appeared. "I'd never quite grasped how much joy I'd brought to her, nor how deeply I hurt her when I ran off to find my birth mom." She bit her trembling lower lip.

"I'd never realized that, and I never got a chance to apologize to her for hurting her." She dabbed at her eyes again. "The day you delivered, the day before I snapped at you, was the tenth anniversary of mom's death. I guess what you said reminded me of my own unresolved guilt."

Tommi sat, silently, as she listened to the story. Dr. Tina and Suzie, likewise, sat without saying anything.

"I let my own grief get in the way of the needs of my client," Rachel added as she wiped more tears, "and my friend. I'm sorry."

"I didn't know..." Tommi began softly.

Rachel shook her head. "Nobody knew," she answered.

Tommi glanced around, and from the stunned expressions on Suzie's and Dr. Tina's faces, realized the truth - even they hadn't known. She saw Suzie meet her eyes, and give a tiny, almost imperceptible head-nod toward Rachel.

Tommi stood, and Rachel's eyes widened in obvious fear that Tommi was going to walk out. But Tommi crossed over to her chair and held out her hand. Not quite sure of Tommi's reaction, Rachel took Tommi's hand and, when she lifted slightly, stood. Tommi wrapped her arms around Rachel in a tentative embrace. "I didn't know," she said again. "I'm sorry I added to your pain," she said simply.

Rachel wrapped her arms tightly around Tommi. "I'm so sorry," she said as she put her head on Tommi's shoulder, crying. "So _very_ sorry." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"You're lucky I still think partly like a guy," Tommi said with a smile that seemed out of place.

"Oh? Why's that?" Rachel was confused.

"From my experience, guys have a lot easier time with the 'forgive and forget' thing than girls do. Have you ever seen two guys fighting like they want to kill each other? Ten minutes later, they're buying each other beer and joking like nothing ever happened. I've heard that girls hold a grudge forever." Tommi bit her lower lip as she thought of how to phrase what she needed to say. "What I'm trying to say is, I think I understand, and I want you to know I'm not one to hold a grudge."

Rachel hugged Tommi more tightly. "Thank you."

After a few moments, Tommi dropped her arms. "It still hurts."

Rachel nodded. "If you're willing, I'd like to try to re-build the trust and friendship we had."

"I'd ... like that. But..."

"I know. I hurt you pretty badly, and it's going to take some time to get over the hurt," Rachel added sadly.

Tommi nodded, her eyes half-closed as if in deep thought. When she opened them, she asked, "Now what?"

Rachel stared at her for a moment, and laughed as she sat back down. "I wish I knew who called Katie. Mind you, I'm glad they did!" she added quickly.

Tommi retrieved the unclaimed cup of coffee and offered it to Rachel. It seemed like the least she could do.

"Thanks," Rachel said as she took the cup.

As Tommi walked back to her chair, Suzie gave Tommi's hand a squeeze. Tommi looked down and saw that Suzie's eyes were also misty.

"I've got a question," Tommi asked as she sat down.

"Okay," Rachel answered.

"Are you going to resign?"

A pin dropping would have sounded earth-shatteringly loud. Dr. Tina's and Suzie's jaws dropped, as did Rachel's.

"Who ... where did you ... how did you ...?" Rachel stammered.

"One of Katie's spies told her that you were going to resign because you felt like you failed me," Tommi answered. "And she told me. She was trying to guilt me into coming in."

"Well, I'm glad it worked," Rachel said hesitantly.

"Well?"

Rachel glanced at Dr. Tina and Suzie. "I ... I've been thinking about it." She looked down, embarrassed. "My conduct was completely unprofessional. If a counselor that reported to me had done what I did, I'd probably have to let her go." She shook her head sadly. "I ... wrote a letter of resignation."

Tears formed in Tommi's eyes. "It's my fault, too, isn't it?" Her head dropped, from both sorrow and guilt. "If I hadn't been so stubborn. If I had talked to you sooner." She wiped at

the tears in her eyes as she looked up at Rachel, her eyes reflecting how distraught she suddenly felt. "I can't do another baby without you!"

Rachel sighed. "It's more than that. It's my professional behavior. It's my conduct," she said.

Tommi interrupted, "You can't leave! You've helped so many people here! You helped me get through my pregnancy! You helped me find a way to get tuition for my sister, Sara! People _need_ you! _I_ need you!"

Rachel saw the concerned expressions on her colleagues' faces. "I said I wrote it. I didn't say I sent it ... yet."

Tommi looked up at Rachel, her eyes widening in surprise. "So you _are_ going to stay?" Tommi asked uncertainly.

Rachel sighed. "It's not that simple. I've got a lot of thinking to do. I realize that I've got some long-forgotten issues that might get in the way of helping my clients," she answered. "And I have to figure out how to keep that from happening."

She took another sip of coffee and abruptly stood. "In the meantime, Tommi, I think you and I need to go to my office to talk. I've noticed that you're having a really rough time with postpartum. We need to talk about how emotional swings are normal after a pregnancy, and see how we can help you with that."

Chapter 13 - The New Semester

"Tommi!"

The greeting, shouted above the regular din of the bus station, was expected, but it still surprised Tommi. She recognized the voice instantly, and turned to find its source.

"Sara!" Tommi ran to her little sister, sweeping her into an enthusiastic, spinning embrace. "It's so good to see you!" Tommi felt her cheeks moisten as she was overwhelmed with joy at seeing her little sister again.

"You too!" Sara echoed. As she disengaged from Tommi's embrace, she took a half-step back, her head scanning up and down Tommi's figure. "You look great! I would have never guessed that you'd had a baby!"

Tommi and Sara didn't notice the elderly couple walking nearby, their jaws agape at the conversation of two young college girls discussing one of them having had a baby. The woman noticed immediately that neither girl had a ring on her left hand. "Hussy!" she exclaimed under her breath, but still loud enough that Tommi and Sara could overhear.

Tommi ignored the old woman and smiled sheepishly. "I've still got a few pounds to lose."

"And you look so ... big!" Sara added, looking at Tommi's bustline. "It's not fair - you're bigger than me!" she feigned a complaint as she thrust out her own chest to make herself look bigger.

"It's not my fault that they get so big when I'm making milk," Tommi explained. "Surely you don't think that I want boobs this big, do you?"

Sara laughed. "Remember, I've got the same genes you do, so I'm gonna be dealing with the same problem someday." She thrust out her chest to emphasize her point. "I'm not sure I want them as big as yours! You're getting to like them, maybe?"

Tommi ignored her sister's kidding and wrapped her arm around Sara's shoulder, pulling her beside Tommi. "It's so great that you're here!"

Sara nodded. "Thank God for that scholarship I got!" she said softly. "If I hadn't gotten it, I couldn't have come. I'd have been"

"... stuck in a hell-hole mining town with no future!" Tommi completed her sentence bitterly. "Let's get your bags and get up to the dorm for check-in."

Sara had a large suitcase, a moderate chest, and a small suitcase in the bus' luggage compartment. In short order, the driver retrieved her bags, and then stood, looking at her. Sara was confused, but Tommi knew the drill. She took a couple of dollars from her purse and handed them to the driver with a sugary-sweet "thank you so much." The man returned the smile as he slipped the money into his pocket. "Y'all have a good day," he said as he turned to another customer.

Tommi stared at the luggage for several seconds, frowning.

"Problem?" Sara asked.

Tommi shrugged. "I don't think we can carry all of them at once to my car. And I'm not sure we can get them all into the car!"

"Tommi?" Another voice, this one masculine, called from across the bus station. Tommi spied the caller, and she waved unenthusiastically to him and sighed.

"Who's that?" Sara asked.

"His name's Brian. He's kind of a nerd - and he finds me interesting," Tommi explained. "He asked me out twice last semester. Always walks me to classes, even when people had to have been thinking that he was the one who got me pregnant!"

Brian bounced through the crowd to Tommi. "Look at you!" he told her. "You look marvelous!" He grasped Tommi's hand and kissed it slowly and affectionately. Then, and

only then, did he notice that Sara stood by Tommi. "And who is this charming and lovely young lady?" he asked.

Tommi ignored the false charm. "This is my little sister Sara. She's enrolled at the U, and she'll be in the dorms with me."

Brian decided to turn on his charm. He lifted Sara's hand tenderly, bringing it near him and he bent forward and delicately kissed her hand in a most gentlemanly display. "Enchante, mademoiselle Sara. It is my delight to find such gems of beauty in this common bus stop. Perhaps that fortune cookie was right when it said I would find two priceless jewels in the most unexpected place."

Tommi faked gagging. "Cut the 'Prince Charming' crap, Brian," Tommi said to spoil the mood. She saw how Brian's words and actions were getting to Sara; if he weren't stopped, he'd have a dinner date with her within five minutes. "And quit hitting on my little sister!"

Brian laughed aloud. "Jealous, eh"

Tommi scowled. "I am not jealous!"

"Perhaps I should give up on you to chase Sara, and see if I can stir your jealousy even more!" Brian countered gleefully.

Sara was amused with the verbal ripostes, but other priorities interrupted. "Can we go? It's been forever since I ate, and I want to get checked in so I can get my meal tickets and get some food!"

Tommi sighed. "Okay, enough of the games. Brian, I have no idea why you're here, unless you're following me, but right now..." She paused, putting her hands on her hips and cocking her head slightly to one side. "Why are you here anyway?" she demanded.

Brian dropped his head. "I heard that your sister was coming in on a bus, and I figured you might need some help with luggage," he admitted.

Tommi rolled her eyes. "So you were following me! Well, never mind. You were right - it looks like we need some help getting Sara's luggage to my car. I know I can't get the biggest one. Sara and I together can get the chest. Can you get the two suitcases?"

Brian sized up the chests and nodded. "I can get the big one. Can you two balance the small suitcase on the chest? How far is it to your car, anyway?"

Tommi shrugged. "I'm not sure how far away we parked. Probably four or five blocks."

"Four or Five blocks?" Unhappily, Brian hoisted the suitcase, having to use both hands to lift the heavy luggage. "Let's get going - before I collapse."

The two girls, one holding each end of the chest, led the way - for all of half a block. "Okay, we're here!" Tommi said cheerfully as she and Sara set down their load beside Tommi's car.

Brian dropped the heavy suitcase. "Five blocks, eh? You're toying with me again," he said.

It took the trio a few minutes to load the cases as best they could. The large suitcase stuck out from the open trunk, secured by two bungee cords. The chest took up the entirety of the back seat.

Tommi let Sara climb in the car, and then she handed Sara the small suitcase to hold in her lap. She walked to the back of the car, where Brian was fixing another bungee cord to hold down the trunk lid. . She gave him a light hug. "Thank you, Brian."

Brian practically melted. "I'm glad I could help," he answered, blushing. "See you at school?"

"Pretty inevitable, isn't it?" Tommi asked. She crawled into the car, while Brian headed off to his own car.

Sara was grinning. "Not interested, eh?"

Tommi frowned, but her blushed cheeks told a different story. "He's a nice guy. Okay to talk with and stuff."

"It sounded to me like you were jealous of the way he was acting toward me," Sara observed with a sly grin.

"I was not jealous!" Tommi countered quickly. She realized belatedly that her response was a little too quick and emotional. "Just hush, or I'll turn around and put you back on a bus home!"

Sara giggled. "You wouldn't, and you know it!"

Tommi tried to frown, but found she couldn't. "You're right. I'm too glad that you're here."

Sara looked thoughtful. "You really like Brian, don't you?" she asked.

Tommi did frown this time. "No, not the way you're implying."

"You have a funny way of showing that you're not interested."

"What do you mean?"

Sara laughed. "You were sending out signals like you wouldn't believe!"

"I was just joking around, like I do with any friend."

Sara sighed. "You've still got a lot of old 'guy' habits. Rules that guys have about joking with friends are way different than for girls dealing with boys."

"Are you saying that I was leading him on?"

"Pretty much. For a girl, you were flirting big-time."

Tommi groaned. "Great. All I need is for him to think I'm interested."

"Are you sure?"

Tommi shook her head. "I'm a girl only so I can pay for college. I am not interested in dating or romance - or young men!"

Sara laughed. "Then I'm going to have to give you some lessons on how to deal with guys."

Tommi nodded at Sara's logic. "That's probably a good idea."

"Funny," Sara continued with a chuckle, "I never thought I'd be giving my big brother lessons on how to act like a proper girl!"

"Okay, where are you at?" Tommi asked as Sara emerged from the housing office.

"Johnson Hall," Sara read from her paper. "You?"

Tommi didn't need to look at her assignment; as an upperclassman, she'd kept her dorm assignment from the year before. "Avery, same as last year."

Sara looked at her campus map and frowned. "That's halfway across campus!" she moaned. "I wanted to room with you!"

Tommi gave her a quick hug. "I know. But you have to make your own friends and have your own life."

"But I want to be around you!" Sara complained again. "I don't know anybody, and, well, I ... I guess I'm a bit scared."

Tommi nodded. "So was I when I came here. But I got over it and fit right in. You won't have any problems."

"I suppose," Sara said in a voice devoid of enthusiasm. "But you were a boy when you came here! It's not the same!"

"Look, why don't you take the car over to Johnson so you can unpack. I'm late, so I can't help right now, but I'll be over as soon as I can to help with the heavy stuff."

"Late?" Sara asked, confused.

Tommi nodded. She glanced around, before continuing in a hushed voice. "I've got to pump."

"Oh," Sara said, understanding. Then she giggled. She leaned close to Tommi so she could whisper. "I never thought I'd hear my big brother saying he had to go use a breast pump!"

Tommi shook her head. "Maybe Johnson Hall is too close!"

Sara took Tommi's keys and headed to the parking lot. Feeling elated at Sara's presence, Tommi practically skipped back to her dorm room.

Katie had moved her stuff in, but was out running errands. Tommi smiled - it was going to be like home again when the gang settled in. As practiced as she was, it took her no time to set up the pump and begin to relieve the pressure in her breasts.

A knock sounded at the door. Out of habit, Tommi grabbed a blanket, ready to cover herself if need be.

"Tommi," a soft voice called, "It's me. Ashley."

Tommi's face brightened as she dropped the blanket. "Come in," she called.

Ashley closed the door behind herself. From rooming with Tommi during the summer, she knew Tommi was pumping, and was trying to help with privacy. "Getting settled in?" She stretched out on Tommi's chair.

Tommi smiled. "It's like I never left."

Ashley nodded. "Yeah. At least I got a week at home."

"I told you to take the whole two weeks," Tommi said, shaking her head.

"And who would take care of you if I had?" Ashley countered.

"I really appreciated your company," Tommi admitted. "Last week I was lonely all by myself."

"I wish I was still your roommate." Ashley's voice was tinged with sadness.

Tommi sighed. "I know, but Katie and I had this planned last spring." She thought for a moment. "Aren't you rooming with Kim? You two get along pretty well."

"Was. Mel isn't coming back, so Kim is rooming with Diane."

"Mel isn't back? Why?"

Ashley shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. But you know she was getting pretty serious about her boyfriend back home."

Tommi frowned. "That doesn't sound like Mel."

"Yeah, I know. But since Kim decided to room with Diane, I'm alone until they assign me a new roommate." Ashley looked unhappy. "Probably get some stuck up sorority-wanna-be snob, with my luck."

Tommi had a brief thought before discarding the idea. "What if ...?" She discounted the thought almost as soon as it came. It was probably too late to change things.

Ashley noticed the expression flit across Tommi's face. "What?"

"Uh, nothing really."

"Out with it!" Ashley wasn't fooled.

"Well," Tommi began hesitantly, "Sara wanted to room closer to me, but they put her in Johnson. I just thought that maybe you could room with her. That way, you wouldn't get a snob, and Sara would be a lot closer." Tommi shook her head. "You know how the bureaucracy works, though. It's probably way too late to make a change like that."

Ashley considered the idea. "Might work. Why don't you go ask?"

"Me? If I asked, Sara and I would probably both end up in the 'Dungeon'," she snorted, referring to the least desirable dorm floor in the least desirable dorm where the Goths and strange girls lived. "You know the Dean hates me."

Ashley stood up abruptly. "Yeah, but what if I asked?" She marched out the door on a new mission.

Tommi was still pumping when Kim and the rest of the girls arrived. Tommi discretely covered herself as the girls spread out on the beds and chairs.

"Look at you!" Diane exclaimed. "There's so much less of you!"

Tommi's face betrayed a hint of sadness, effects of the postpartum blues that she was still dealing with.

Christina continued, "So, tell us, what's it like?"

Tommi sat back, staring at the ceiling for a brief moment. "It's ... unlike anything I've ever done. I ... can't describe it."

"How long was labor?"

"Did it hurt much?"

"Did anyone help you?"

"Was it natural or C-section?"

The flood of questions overwhelmed Tommi for a moment. She held up her hand to signal that they should slow down, and, as she did, the blanket slipped off her shoulder, revealing the cups and bottles of her breast pump. The girls gave a collective "ooh!"

"What's that like?" came the immediate question from Linda. "I didn't think ..."

Tommi shook her head, a tiny smile on her face. "You know, it's pretty ironic," she commented.

"What?" Erica asked, still staring at the pumps milking Tommi's engorged breasts.

"Here we are -all of you natural girls, and I keep having to answer what it's like to have a baby and pump my breasts!" Tommi roared.

The girls laughed collectively at Tommi's observation.

"So, are you going to tell us?" Linda asked as the guffaws died down.

"Tell you what? I had contractions, went to the clinic, and had the baby."

"Come on," Kim interjected. "There's more to it than that."

"Yeah," Erica chimed in. "Give us the whole story."

Tommi sighed and began to recount the tale, starting with the scares of false labor, through leaving class in real labor, and the delivery. She ensured that she mentioned the amount of time she was in labor, and that she'd managed without an epidural. She deliberately neglected the incident with Rachel. Tommi knew she'd have to answer all of Katie's questions in private when Katie finally got back.

"Nineteen hours!" Kim whistled. "Wow!"

"And no epidural? I heard it was really painful!" Linda added.

Tommi shrugged. "My nurse and doctor told me that some are easy, some are hard. Mine was average."

"What about afterwards?"

Tommi felt a brief stab of pain. "To be honest, that was the hardest part."

"Oh?"

"It was" Tommi felt herself choking up, "It was very hard to carry and deliver a baby, and then not even get to see it after I gave birth. I ... really missed ... getting to know the baby."

The girls were nearly speechless. They saw the pain in Tommi's expression, and heard it in her voice.

Tommi realized that the mood in the room had soured. "But it wasn't so bad that I wouldn't do another one. In fact, about mid-semester, I'll get another transfer."

"What?" Erica exclaimed. "That means - you're going to be with us ... as you for the whole year?"

"Yup."

Cheers went round the room. Hugs, though, weren't given, as everyone seemed a bit uneasy by Tommi's pumping.

"Okay," Kim finally said, "what's with the breast pump? I thought..."

Tommi sighed. "I ... just felt like I had to."

"For the baby?" Linda speculated.

Tommi shook her head sadly. The pain showed again for a moment. "It's for some baby in the program. I don't know if it's the baby I carried, though."

The reaction was stunned silence as the girls absorbed what Tommi had told them. It was obvious that they were thinking of what they would do in her situation.

"It has to be that way," Tommi explained softly.

"So ... why pump? Why not just let your milk dry up?" Erica asked bluntly.

Tommi shrugged. "I don't know. I'm going to have to stop in a couple of weeks anyway, to start getting ready for the next baby. Until then, though, I can help someone's baby."

"That's Wow!" was all Kim could manage to say.

Tommi switched off the pump and started to clean up, listening in as the girls told each other of their summer adventures. She guessed - correctly - that none of the other girls would claim to have had the most exciting summer, not after Tommi's story of her delivery.

"At least you got bigger boobs out of your summer," Linda kidded Tommi as Tommi put on her bra.

"Not my fault," Tommi lamented.

"They're a little bigger than a C-cup, right?" Erica asked.

Tommi shook her head. "More than a little. A D-cup is a bit tight." She pulled the straps over her shoulders and reached for her shirt. "Why? Are you jealous?"

Erica blushed. "Maybe a little," she admitted.

Tommi laughed. "Believe me, you're better off with smaller boobs. These things get kind of heavy. But they're supposed to go down a bit once my milk dries up."

Kim sat on Katie's bed, shaking her head slowly. "This is un-freaking believable!" she muttered over and over.

"What?" Diane asked.

"If you'd have told me a year ago that a guy was going to have an ... operation, live in our dorm, carry and deliver a baby, and be lecturing us about breast size, I'd have said you were nuts!"

The girls, Tommi included, giggled at the thought.

Ashley picked that moment to knock and enter. She was a bit out of breath, and looked confused at the mirth around herself. "What did I miss?" she huffed.

Christina laughed. "Just Tommi lecturing us about breast size and nursing."

"Oh, that!" Ashley commented, as if it were no big deal. "I heard plenty of that this summer." She looked at Tommi. "If we can get Sara moved in the next hour, it's a deal."

"What are you babbling about?" Erica asked.

Ashley took a breath. "Sara, Tommi's sister, was stuck in Johnson. I didn't have a roommate. So I went over to housing, and they agreed that if we can get Sara out of Johnson hall over lunch, before they start processing the next batch of freshmen, she can be my roommate." She glanced at her watch. "That gives us a little under an hour."

Tommi's eyes widened at the news, and then she grinned. "Can you guys help her move? Please?" She glanced at the pump and the bottles of her milk. "I've got to take care of this, so I can't go right now! You can't miss her; her luggage is in my car."

Perhaps Kim felt guilty about leaving Ashley without a roommate. Whatever the reason, she stood and stepped toward the door. "Come on, girls," she said in a commanding voice. "We're going to get Sara moved."

"Hey, Tommi!"

Tommi recognized the voice and flinched. "Not again!" she muttered softly to Sara. The two were walking to their first morning classes, which luckily happened to be in the same building. It gave them a little time to together.

Brian trotted to the sisters, falling in step beside Tommi. "Hi," he repeated cheerfully.

Tommi forced herself to be polite. "Hi, Brian. We were just having a little sister-to-sister chat." She hoped that he'd take the hint.

He didn't. "What's your class schedule like?"

Tommi debated telling Brian that they were in a hurry, but decided against it. She stopped and pulled out her class schedule. "I've got the normal sophomore engineering core, plus some A&P - that's Anatomy and Physiology - and chemistry for the bioengineering."

Brian pulled out his schedule. "Hey, it looks like we've got two classes together!" he announced enthusiastically. "Calc Three and Statics!"

Tommi groaned inwardly. That was going to be a major pain. "Lovely," she announced in an emotionless voice.

"Well, I've got to run to my Intro to Circuits class. I'll see you in Calc." Brian practically floated away, buoyed by the knowledge that he'd be sharing two classes with Tommi.

As he left, Sara shook her head. "He is so into you!" she exclaimed softly.

"Yeah," Tommi noted with a sigh. "What the hell am I supposed to do? I don't want him to be head-over-heels over me!"

"Have you told him - everything?"

Tommi shook her head. "No. I'm trying to not call attention to that angle. I'm afraid of how people will react."

"This isn't home," Sara countered quickly.

"Yeah," Tommi agreed, "but the first semester, I had some pretty ... ugly incidents. I'm just scared of how people will react."

"Well," Sara stated bluntly, "you're going to have to do something!"

"So, what happened with Rachel?" Katie sat upright in her chair, which was unusual. Normally, she slumped on her bed in a more comfortable position. It was as if she'd chosen her seating position to demonstrate that this was to be a serious conversation.

Tommi shook her head. "It was just a misunderstanding."

Katie silently shook her head, letting Tommi know in no uncertain terms that she knew better than Tommi's feeble excuse.

Tommi pondered briefly, and came to the conclusion that Katie wouldn't give up until she knew all the details. "Okay. Rachel and I had a big misunderstanding."

"Go on."

"After the baby was born, I made the mistake of saying 'my baby'. Rachel got very upset, and she said some very harsh words to me and kind of stomped out."

Katie frowned. "That doesn't sound like a misunderstanding. What did she say?"

Tommi felt her lower lip tremble; the event was recent enough that it still hurt to think about. "She said, 'It is NOT your baby. Don't you ever refer to it that way again! You read the contract, and you know our policies!'" Tommi paused, "She said more, but by that time, I was in tears and wasn't listening much."

"And she stomped out?"

"Yup."

"Then what happened?" Katie continued her interrogation.

Tommi frowned. "Do we have to go into it? It's ... kind of sensitive."

"Yes," Katie replied solemnly. "It was a very hurtful event - in more ways than one, and my ability to help you, when you need it, depends on knowing exactly what happened."

"And I suppose you're going to talk to Rachel to corroborate my story?" Tommi pouted.

Katie sighed. "Look, it was bad enough that you weren't letting the staff help you with your depression, and then you threw a fit injured yourself in the gym. Of course, I'm going to talk with Rachel."

"It just feels like you're spying on me."

Katie softened a bit. "No, I'm not spying. I'm just concerned about my little sister, remember?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, I know," she said softly. "After Rachel left, Dr. Tina was explaining what I could expect when my milk came in, and what my options were. And I asked her if it might be possible to see if the new mother would like my milk for the baby."

"I take it that's when Dr. Tina got a little upset?"

"Yeah," Tommi confirmed. "She wasn't as rough as Rachel, but it was still rough." Tommi wiped the sudden tear. Why did it seem that these emotional events lingered longer and caused her more pain now? She didn't remember most emotional events when she was a boy, like disagreements with her dad, causing such long-lasting effects.

"And?"

"I guess I felt kind of betrayed," Tommi admitted. "With the postpartum depression, and feeling like the staff had stabbed me in the back, I got into a pretty deep funk. I guess I rejected them."

Katie took a deep breath. "Didn't help, did it?" she asked rhetorically.

"No. So when I went to the gym that, I did something dumb. I was trying to lift weights like ... like I _used to_."

"At least it wasn't serious. You could have torn a ligament ... or worse!" Katie chided.

"Yeah, Dr. Tina told me." Tommi sighed. "I think we got straight, though."

"After I stepped in?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. Say, I'm curious. Who called you?"

Katie smiled enigmatically. "Some things are best kept secret."

Tommi padded across to Katie, bent down, and hugged her. "Well, thank you for interfering - you and whoever told you," she said as new tears seeped from her eyes.

Katie returned the hug. "That's what family is for. Now I have a question for you."

Tommi sat on the edge of her bed. "Shoot."

"What caused the whole thing anyway? That kind of outburst doesn't sound like what I know of Rachel."

Tommi shook her head slowly. "It's something personal about Rachel. I wouldn't feel right telling you. You'll have to ask her."

"That's fair," Katie replied. "Now let me ask you another one, something a bit more ... selfish."

"Yeah?"

"What's it going to mean for _our_ relationship now that Sara is here?" Katie's question had a slightly fearful tenor.

Tommi closed her eyes, letting her head droop as she pondered. "I don't know," she answered after some thought. "You're like my big sister. Sara _is_ my little sister. I feel lucky to have both of you near me - especially with what I've gone through and what I've still got ahead of me. But I don't know if Sara is going to accept you as part of my family, or if she might get jealous instead."

Tommi glanced around herself nervously. She still wasn't comfortable in public places off campus, and she wished that her friend from the support group had picked somewhere other than the mall to meet. Tommi sat on a bench near the entrance, at the designated meeting spot, watching to see if she could spot the girl.

As soon as Dee came in, Tommi jumped to her feet and rushed to greet her. "Hi, Dee," she said as Dee gave her a quick hug.

"You're looking very nice today, Tommi," Dee replied. If anything, Dee was understating Tommi's looks.

Tommi's hair was long and worn in a simply ponytail. She had on a bit of makeup, a habit gained from living with the dorm girls, understated but accentuating her face. Tommi had become accustomed to tight T-shirts with lower necklines; she seemed not to notice or care that her ample bust was accentuated by the shirt, and the low neckline left a visible valley of cleavage. Despite having recently given birth, Tommi's waist was trim, and her hips flared under the mid-thigh skirt she wore. Sandals completed the casual outfit, and showed her painted toe-nails.

"You look pretty nice yourself," Tommi said to Dee. Dee was tall - almost six foot one, and slender, except for her rounded belly, displaying enough curvature to be alluring without seeming like "too much". If Tommi's dress seemed a bit immodest, Dee dressed to accentuate every bit of her feminine charm that she could. Her chocolate skin and her kinky black hair that spilled down onto her shoulders added to her exotic appearance. With her short shorts and long slender legs, Dee was an icon of beauty.

"So you're doing your second one in a couple of months?" Dee asked.

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, and just when I got my figure back," she complained in a mocking tone.

Dee laughed. "The secret, girl, is to keep the pounds off before the baby is born!"

"Don't I know it! Dr. Tina was pretty fanatical about me following a good diet." Tommi glanced around, certain that the pair was drawing much attention. To her surprise, and perhaps disappointment, she realized that people didn't think anything of two women talking in the mall. "So why'd you want to meet here?" Tommi asked.

Dee rubbed her belly. "I need to go to the maternity shop, and a little birdie told me that you were still having some difficulty with being in public. So here we are!"

Tommi shook her head. "I just feel ... weird," she said as the pair started walking. "I feel like I'm out of place." She stopped, grasping Dee's hands and turning her toward Tommi. "How do you do it? How do you seem so ... comfortable?"

Dee laughed. "Girl, I had a lot of adjusting to do at first, and I felt just like you do." Dee looked up and down Tommi's figure. "But from the way you're dressed, I kind of figured you were past the adjusting phase."

Tommi glanced down at her outfit self-consciously. She realized that she looked like an average college co-ed, albeit with a little more bust than average. "I guess it's gotten to be a habit after living with the girls in the dorm for so long. They won't let me make even the tiniest fashion or make-up faux pas."

They resume walking. "This is your third?" Tommi asked.

"Yeah, and I'll probably do another one after this," Dee replied easily. "I like the feel of being pregnant. To tell you the truth, if Ron ever gets up the guts to ask me to marry him, I suspect we'll have a very large family!" she added with a grin.

Tommi felt a twinge of fear. Dee was acting just like Suzie - more comfortable as a woman than as a man, and reveling in her femininity. She sounded like she wanted to be a wife and the mother of her own children. Tommi worried that the same thing was going to happen to her - that she'd lose Tom and be permanently Tommi.

"Don't you miss it?" Tommi asked. "Pun not intended," she added when she realized what she'd just said.

Dee laughed. "No." She pulled Tommi to a nearby bench and sat down. "You don't know my story, do you?"

Tommi shook her head. "I figured it wasn't my place to pry."

Dee smiled. "Not everyone is so respectful of others' privacy. The short version is that I had nothing else. The long version is that, a few years ago, I was a high-school dropout, in a gang, and ruining my life. My posse got in a shootout over a drug deal, and I took three or four rounds from a Mac-10 in the gut and a shotgun round in my groin. Girl, there wasn't nothin' left down there that worked, or that the docs could even patch up."

"I'm sorry," Tommi apologized, not meaning to have caused Dee painful recollections.

"I'm not," Dee rebutted quickly. "I damn near died. They said I was lucky to be alive. When I got out of the hospital I was a eunuch. I didn't have anything to live for, and my homies turned their backs on me because of my injuries. I lived on the street for almost a year, and then I found the clinic."

"Did they offer you a way to get back to normal?" Tommi speculated.

Dee shook her head. "Girl, there was no normal for me. What they offered me was a chance to be a whole person again. Male or female, it didn't matter by then. They gave me a chance to have a life!"

Tommi pondered her words. "Didn't you ... I mean, weren't you planning on having, you know, your parts put back on?"

Dee laughed aloud. "For what? After the way my homies acted, I figured I had nothing to go back to there. The clinic helped me sign up for GED classes, and with the salary they paid, I got tutoring besides. And when I had the baby, and everyone was treating me like I was important, it felt good! When they offered to regrow my man parts, I turned them down. I liked the life I'd gained. I signed up for another baby, and started on an associate's degree. I've got a great job as a medical assistant now. I feel respected and important, and what's more, I like the feeling of bringing life into the world."

"Wow!"

"Wow is right. The program gave me a second chance. I decided I wasn't going to blow it. If I turned back after the first pregnancy, chances are I'd have ended up back in the 'hood and headed for more trouble. By the law of averages, I'd be in prison or dead by now."

"So everything is better for you? No regrets?"

Dee laughed. "There's only one thing that bothers me. When I'm not pregnant, I get real bad cases of PMS. I've been told that I'm a real bitch during that time of month." She thought for a moment. "No, I don't have any regrets. So what about you?"

Tommi sighed. "I'm just doing it to pay for college. After I've got enough saved up, I'm going to have the other operation."

"Oh." Dee seemed saddened by that bit of information.

"I didn't want to do this, but I lost my scholarship, and I couldn't go back to my hometown. I understand when you say there was nothing for you. That's what my hometown has - nothing for me."

"Everyone has to do what's right for herself." Dee stood. "Let's get to the store."

Tommi rose and resumed walking with Dee. She liked Dee; in the group sessions, Dee seemed very self-confident, and carried herself with a very positive attitude and air. Now Tommi understood why. Tommi hoped that some of Dee's confidence would rub off on her.

Chapter 14 - Oops

It had been a long day; between classes, a test, and running back and forth so she could pump, Tommi felt exhausted and her back hurt. The hot hard spray of the shower was like a million little fingers kneading her back, pushing away the fatigue and pain. Tommi was so lost in the pleasant feeling that she'd lost track of how long she'd been in the shower.

"Hi, Tommi," Erica interrupted as she stepped into the shower, taking the shower head next to Tommi's. Avery Hall was an older dorm, and still had the 'communal' showers, with multiple shower heads around one large tiled room. She quickly turned on her own spray and began to wet herself. "Long day?"

Tommi nodded. "That's an understatement. It's been a long week. I'm really looking forward to sleeping in tomorrow morning."

Erica smiled. "Aren't we all?"

"This semester seems so much more intense than last spring," Tommi complained, "even though I was pregnant half of last spring!"

"It's hard to believe you were ever pregnant," Erica complimented. "You really got your figure back quickly."

Tommi laughed. "Except for a few stretch marks and my boobs, I'm back to normal."

"I'd almost kill to have boobs like yours," Erica said admiringly. "Even being full of milk, they look so round and firm. Not saggy at all."

"Gravity hasn't had time to get them yet," Tommi replied. She closed her eyes again and let the shower work. "And I'm hoping they shrink some after I finish pumping."

Erica noticed the fatigue and tension in Tommi. "You need a backrub?" she offered.

Tommi looked blankly at Erica, a little numbed by weariness. She was slowly processing the thoughts - sore back, tired, offer of backrub. It seemed that her brain was operating in slow-motion.

Before Tommi could answer, Erica stepped over to Tommi with her soap and began to wash and massage Tommi's back. Her fingers massaged expertly around the small of Tommi's back. Tommi purred. "That feels good."

"How much longer are they going to let you pump?"

"Another week or two," Tommi answered. "But after this last week, I'm thinking of stopping now."

"Oh?"

"I spent the week running back and forth between the dorms and classrooms so I could pump, get to classes, and then come back and pump again."

"That would make anyone tired." Erica continued to rub Tommi's back. As she pressed harder, massaging deeper, Tommi swayed forward. Erica slipped her arm across Tommi's tummy to steady her.

Tommi's eyes opened slightly in surprise, but she was too lost in the pleasant feeling of having her back massaged to do or say anything. She wondered if it were her imagination, or if Erica's breasts were really pressed against her own body. She figured that it had to be her imagination and went back to enjoying the massage.

"What's it like to give milk?" Erica asked out of the blue, as she continued the backrub.

Tommi sighed, enjoying the massage. "I really don't have anything to compare it to," she answered.

"Do you have to pump, or can you milk by hand?"

Tommi sighed. "This is so ironic. Last year, I was a guy, and now I keep explaining pregnancy and childbirth and nursing to all you girls."

"Sorry," Erica apologized. "I didn't mean"

"It's no biggie," Tommi grinned. "I find it amusing." She turned toward Erica. "You're probably like Ashley. You've never seen anyone express milk, and you're curious, right?"

Erica nodded shyly. "Yeah, you could say that."

Tommi turned so the spray hit her back again, and she purred at the warmth. "It's pretty easy to express milk," Tommi explained, "especially when I'm really full - like I am now. You do it like this." She massaged one of her breasts deeply for several seconds and then slowly squeezed toward her nipple. As she squeezed, a drop of white liquid appeared, followed by another. As Tommi continued to squeeze, more droplets formed rapidly, and then tiny squirts of milk erupted from the many ducts on her nipple. Tommi glanced at Erica, who was staring at her with wide eyes. Tommi squeezed again, producing another flow. Then Tommi got a mischievous grin. As she squeezed, she turned her nipple, with the result that she sprayed Erica.

"Oooh!" Erica cried as she flinched from the unexpected spray. Then as Tommi sprayed again, giggling as she did so, Erica bent down and put her mouth over Tommi's nipple, catching the milk, and then beginning to suckle.

Startled, Tommi gasped and tried to step back, but Erica's arms were suddenly around her, holding Tommi like a vise so Erica could continue to suck her nipple. Tommi stood for a moment, totally confused, but the new feeling of warm lips on her engorged breast, sucking milk from her, clouded her judgment. She allowed Erica to nurse for some time.

Erica stopped and looked up at Tommi, a broad grin on her face and milk dribbling from her mouth. "You're yummy!" she cooed.

Tommi realized slowly what was happening. "We shouldn't," she cautioned Erica. "This isn't right."

Erica sucked some more, moving to Tommi's other breast. She glanced up, a hungry look in her eyes. "Do you really want me to stop?" she asked, confident of the answer. As Tommi tried to fight the intensely pleasurable sensations, Erica resumed her ministrations on Tommi's other nipple.

Tommi, overwhelmed by the pleasure of nursing, felt Erica's hand slipping down her back until Erica was squeezing and caressing her butt cheek. Tommi tried to protest, but Erica continued to suckle. Between her exhaustion and the pleasant sensation of nursing, Tommi's judgment failed her. Slowly, Erica's other hand slid down until it was resting on Tommi's thigh. The delicious heat that Tommi was feeling flowed down to her groin.

"No, please," Tommi pleaded. "Please stop."

Erica sucked once more, and looked up, licking up Tommi's breast as she looked at Tommi's confused face. "You like it, don't you?" Erica said confidently.

"But ... uuuhhh!" Tommi begged unconvincingly, but a wave of ecstasy spread from her crotch, confusing her protests. Her hands had moved up, seemingly of their own accord, and were clutching Erica's head tightly against Tommi's bosom.

Erica's hand slid up Tommi's thigh, and Tommi felt like she was going to melt from the heat growing in her body. Tommi whimpered as powerful sensations rocked her body. "Shall I stop?" Erica asked.

"Uhhhh!" Tommi whimpered helplessly. "We ... can't!" she panted, sounding more like she was trying to convince herself than to dissuade Erica.

"Not here, anyway," Erica agreed, still rubbing and licking at Tommi's writhing, hot body. "Do you want to go back to my room? My roommate is gone for the weekend."

"Uh huh!" Tommi panted weakly, overwhelmed by sensations she'd never experienced.

About mid-morning, Tommi cracked the door of her room and peeked inside. Not seeing Katie, she walked in unsteadily. Her legs were still trembling. She was exhausted, and she had a very distracted look on her face - about half pure pleasure and half fatigue. She flopped down on her bed, and despite her intentions, fell asleep almost instantly.

A while later, some noise stirred Tommi's brain, and she began to slowly stir from her slumber. She pried open her eyes and saw Katie working on homework, as usual. It had probably been Katie moving about the room that had broken through Tommi's sleep. She contemplated closing her eyes and trying to get more rest, but as she turned, her bed squeaked.

Katie lifted her head from her books. "Morning, sleepy-head," she said simply.

"Yeah," Tommi groaned. "Too soon as usual." She levered herself to an upright position.

Katie turned her chair. "Too soon? It's three in the afternoon. Someone didn't come home last night," she observed. Her voice was devoid of accusation or judgment.

"Uh, yeah," Tommi admitted softly.

"Brian?"

Tommi shook her head. "Nope." An involuntary shudder ran down Tommi's spine. "You should know by now that even thinking about being with a guy - that way - creeps me out."

Katie's eyes narrowed as her next guess came seconds later. "Erica." It wasn't a question so much as a statement of fact.

Tommi's eyes betrayed what she thought she could keep secret. She dropped her gaze to her lap, suddenly feeling embarrassed and ashamed.

"Okay...." Katie's verbal hesitance reflected her uncertainty of just how she should talk to Tommi.

"It's not It wasn't" Tommi stumbled for words. "It just happened! I didn't mean for anything to happen!"

"You don't need to be defensive," Katie reminded Tommi. "I wasn't being judgmental."

"I was just taking a shower, and then Erica came in, and she offered me a backrub because my back hurt, and the next thing I knew, we were in her room!" Tommi blurted. "I don't know how it happened!" She started to cry.

Katie moved over to Tommi's bed and put her arm around Tommi. She said nothing as she let Tommi cry on her shoulder for several minutes. Finally, Katie spoke again. "So, what now?"

Tommi looked up, her eyes red from crying. "Huh?"

"What now?"

Tommi shook her head. "I was hoping you could tell me," she sniffled.

Katie let her eyelids droop and shook her head. "You know I can't do that. It's you, not me, that has to decide."

"That's what I was afraid you were going to say."

Katie took a few deep breaths. "I think I can see how this would be confusing. Tell me, if you were a guy, what would you think of Erica?"

"Huh?" Tommi didn't follow Katie's question.

"What would you think of Erica, if you were still a guy?"

Tommi didn't even have to think. "I'd say she's pretty hot," she answered.

"So you'd be attracted to her - sexually?"

Tommi nodded. "I see where you're going," she said softly. "Yeah, I guess so. I think any normal guy would find her attractive sexually."

"Before you had the surgery, you were sexually active, right?" Katie continued. "As a guy, I mean."

Tommi blushed. "Yeah. That's what got me into this mess in the first place, remember?"

"And I know that, while you were pregnant, your hormones had you quite ... aroused at times, right?"

"So?" Tommi said, once again getting defensive.

"So you're a young lady with a body full of hormones that you're not used to, you've been celibate for nearly a year, and you've still got guy thoughts about girls being 'hot'. Don't you get it? It'd be surprising if you didn't end up having a lesbian affair," Katie explained. "Especially with a girl like Erica, who is quite attractive."

Tommi let her eyes close and thought for a second, taking slow steady breaths as she did. "It sounds reasonable," she said, "but" She shook her head. "I should have known better! I should have been able to control myself!"

"Even when Erica, who has been lusting after you practically from the day you moved in, comes on to you naked in the shower?" Katie asked.

Tommi's eyes snapped open. "What? You're kidding, right?"

"She's had the hots for you from the beginning." Katie saw the surprise in Tommi's expression. "Are you telling me that you didn't know? And you didn't know that she's a lesbian?"

Tommi shook her head. "No. I mean, it's not like I know how girls act! I've never had to deal with a lesbian pursuing me!"

Katie shook her head back and forth sadly. "Oh, Tommi! I'm sorry!" she apologized profusely. "I thought you knew! We all know she's a lesbian!" She sighed heavily. "Oh, damn!"

"So are you saying that it's not my fault? That because I wasn't used to female hormones on overload, and was still thinking a little like a guy, that Erica decided that she was going to seduce me?"

Katie nodded slowly. "Not entirely, but at least partly. Especially after the summer you had. I bet if you ask Rachel, she'll confirm that a postpartum woman is most vulnerable emotionally to the desire to feel needed and wanted. It was a perfect storm of emotions. And I didn't warn you because I assumed you knew!"

Tommi looked up into Katie's eyes to try to read what the older girl was thinking. Suddenly, though, Tommi dropped her gaze.

"What?" Katie asked insistently as soon as she saw the motion.

Tommi sniffled again. "I'm ... afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of lots of things. That I liked it too much. Of what you think of me. Of what Sara will think." Tommi shook her head. "I really messed up, didn't I?"

Katie lifted Tommi's chin so she had to look Katie in the eyes. "You should know by now that you don't have to worry about what I think. You're family, and I love you." She let Tommi digest that thought for a few moments. "As to Sara, I don't know. You'll have to figure out if, or how, you need to talk to her about this. You know word is going to get around to her, sooner or later."

"Yeah."

"As far as the other matter goes, that's up to you. Did you like it?"

"What?" Tommi asked, shocked. "What kind of question is that?"

"Did you like it?"

"That's kind of ... personal," Tommi finally replied. "And I don't see how ..."

"If you didn't like it," Katie interrupted, "then you don't have anything to worry about. If you did, then there are more - and more confusing - questions. Was it better than sex as a guy? Was it about intimacy, or just sex? Are you attracted to Erica in a romantic way? You know, questions that will ask yourself what - and who - you are."

"That doesn't sound easy or fun," Tommi said softly.

"And there's one more thing that's not going to be fun."

"Which is?"

"You're going to have to work this out with Erica," Katie said somberly.

"Yeah, I know," Tommi agreed.

"And you need to answer another question from me," Katie continued. She paused, waiting for Tommi to look up at her. "How does it compare to sex as a guy?"

"Katie!" Tommi fussed.

Katie laughed. "You should have known that I'd ask eventually. It's probably been on every girl's mind since you got here." Seeing Tommi's open-mouth expression of shock, Katie continued, "Think of it as helping your big sister understand."

Tommi shook her head in disbelief. "This is so unreal! Not only am I telling girls what it's like to be pregnant, give birth, and pump milk, but now you're asking me to compare male and female orgasms!"

"So compare already!"

Tommi wrinkled her brow in thought for a moment. "You like amusement park rides?" She seemed to be changing the subject.

"Yeah. And..."

Tommi explained. "It's like the difference between a drop tower and a roller coaster. Both give you a big adrenaline rush, but the drop tower is a buildup, a burst of excitement, and then it's over. The roller coaster, though, goes up and down over and over. They're different, but you enjoy both of them."

"Okay, I kind of understand what you're trying to say. They're both interesting but too different to compare, right?" Katie chuckled, "And that's an interesting phallic reference to the drop tower to emphasize which was which!"

On her way to the bathroom, Tommi opened the door just as Erica lifted her hand to knock. Both girls were startled by the unexpected coincidence.

Tommi stepped back into the room. "Come in," she invited, her voice edged with uncertainty.

Erica stepped in, closing the door behind herself, and launched herself at Tommi, wrapping her in a smothering embrace as she kissed Tommi feverishly, her tongue trying to push Tommi's lips apart to dance with Tommi's tongue.

It only took Erica a few seconds to realize that Tommi wasn't reciprocating her enthusiasm. She backed away from the embrace slowly, her arms freeing Tommi. Erica leaned back against the door jamb. "I thought you'd be happier to see me," she said, her expression crestfallen and her tone sad.

Tommi's expression spoke volumes. "I'm" She stopped, shaking her head.

"I thought ..." Erica began.

"Shhh," Tommi interrupted. "We need to talk."

Erica's expression fell. "I think I know where this is going," she said, pain in her voice.

"I thought ... Last night, I thought we had something special," Erica said as tears started to flow from her eyes. "You're so special, and I ..."

"Please, let me explain," Tommi begged.

Erica turned to the door, shaking her head and wiping her face.

"Erica, please, we need to talk."

Erica stopped, touched by the pleading tone in Tommi's voice. She turned slowly, her cheeks stained with tears.

"Last night was special," Tommi began. "You made me feel special and needed in ways that I haven't felt in a long time." She felt tears starting to run from her own eyes. "I've been rejected by my own family. I was almost all alone this summer, scared to death of the prospect of having the baby. I got emotionally hurt by the staff at the clinic. I had to deal with postpartum depression - all alone. You made me feel ... wonderful. You made me feel like I was wanted, desired, important."

"But..."

"But I'm afraid," Tommi confessed. "I'm scared in so many ways that you can't imagine. What happens to the boy part of me if I decide to stay a girl? What happens if I change back? I don't know what I want to do, and I'm not even sure who I am!" She shook her head.

Erica's head drooped. "This is where you ask if we can't just be friends, right?" She sounded bitter.

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know what to do," she admitted, "except that I don't want to hurt you."

"You already did," Erica sobbed. "I'm sorry. I was stupid to hope, I guess." She turned back toward the door, reaching for the handle.

Tommi put her foot out, blocking the door.

Surprised, Erica looked up at Tommi. "You ... I thought that ... yesterday ... you were letting me know that you were interested," Erica said sadly. "I thought" She dropped her gaze again.

A possibility dawned suddenly on Tommi, one that she hadn't considered. "You thought that since I was a guy, I'd still be into girls, and that you had a chance because of that?"

Erica, still looking down, nodded. "Yeah."

"Because I didn't know how to act as a girl, or to recognize your interest and advances?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe part of me still is attracted to girls like when I was a guy," Tommi admitted. "But right now, the only thing I know for certain is that I'm an emotional wreck because of my family and my hormones and ..." She wiped at her tears. "If I were looking for a girlfriend, I don't know how I'd do better than you. You're fun, you're sweet, you make me feel ... sexy."

"You are sexy!" Erica blurted. "You don't know how hard it was for me to keep my hands off you, especially when you had that nice round pregnant belly! You made me so hot!"

"But that's only temporary," Tommi sighed. "It's not me. At least, I don't think it's me." She shook her head again. "I'm sorry if I led you on. I didn't mean to. I didn't think I was attractive or interesting enough for anyone to notice."

"You are attractive," Erica argued. "Attractive and sweet and innocent and sooo sexy!"

Tommi sighed. "Right now, I have to focus on my studies and helping my little sister and the baby I'm going to carry. I can't add anything more."

"I think I understand," Erica said stiffly.

"I wish I did!" Tommi rebutted. "I do know that you made me feel wonderful and special last night. You made this body feel things that I never knew were possible! You were so tender with me that ... I don't know what to say."

Erica listened in silence, afraid to say anything, but her lower lip trembled, and the occasional tear flowed down her cheek.

Tommi reached up and tenderly wiped a tear off Erica's face. "If I decided to stay a girl, and if I was sure that I still preferred girls, and if I didn't have to worry about Sara, you couldn't keep me away from you. You're special. I really like you. I might be starting to love you."

"But that's too many 'ifs', is that what you're going to say?"

Tommi nodded. "If I knew that you wouldn't get attached to me, I'd really enjoy having sex with you a lot. But I just can't ... take a chance." Tommi wrapped her arms around Erica. "I can't stand the thought of hurting you ... more than I already have."

Erica nodded, sniffing. "You're just making me love you even more," she said softly. "I've never met anyone who was so concerned about me!" She turned her head and let her lips brush Tommi's.

"I'd like to say I wish this had never happened," Tommi said, "but you made me feel so good that I'm glad it did. I just wish I knew how to not hurt you."

Erica nodded softly. "Can you answer me a question?"

Tommi nodded. "I'll try."

"If we ... if you were ... if we kept seeing each other intimately, and you knew that I was madly in love with you, would you feel guilty and stay a girl just to keep from hurting me?"

Tommi bit her lower lip. She knew that, if they had a real romance, she couldn't hurt Erica by abandoning her, no matter the personal cost.

Erica understood the answer without Tommi having to speak. "I thought so." She kissed Tommi again lightly. "I could never be so selfish that I did that to you. And if you stayed with me, I'd always wonder, wouldn't I?" Erica reached for the door handle. "I know it'll be hard," she began, "but I do cherish you as a friend. I want to keep that if we can."

Tommi nodded. "I'd like that." She tried to smile, but failed. "Our little secret?"

Erica nodded. "Yes." She opened the door and stepped into the hallway. "If you change your mind..."

Tommi felt the lump in her throat as Erica closed the door behind her. The trickle of tears turned into a steady stream as she realized that she had hurt Erica badly, and might have messed up their friendship. Tommi turned, collapsing onto her bed, the stream becoming a torrent as she sobbed uncontrollably. She didn't know what was happening to her. In her male past, Tom had had several encounters of casual sex. Tom had had girls getting all choked up about 'their relationship' and being hurt, but Tom had never worried about being hurt himself.

But now, she was Tommi. And the encounter with Erica had been more than just casual sex. Tommi felt herself worried about friendship, about being hurt, and about how much she might hurt Erica. She felt guilty thinking that sex had mislead Erica into thinking that they did have a developing relationship. She cried and cried, knowing that she was much more emotional than she should be, and aware that she had no clue or experience at how to handle these foreign feelings.

Chapter 15 -Witching Season

The girl in the student center was making no secret of the fact that she was staring at Tommi. Consequently, Tommi felt uneasy by the intensity of her stare. What was more unnerving was that the girl staring at Tommi was Jillian Brown, the Dean's daughter.

Tommi took one last bite of her salad and glanced up. She felt relief when she saw that Jillian was no longer at her table.

"Excuse me." A familiar voice sounded to Tommi's right.

Tommi started at the unexpected interloper and was startled to see Jillian standing next to her table, still peering intently at her. "Uh, yes?" she managed to stammer. She hadn't seen Jillian moving from her table, but then again, she'd been distracted with trying to read her textbook between sips of coffee.

"I'm absolutely sure that I know you from somewhere," Jillian said confidently.

"Uh, are you sure? I don't think we've met." Tommi tried to sound hesitant and uncertain.

Uninvited, Jillian slid out a chair and sat down. "I'm sure," she repeated. "And I think you know me, too."

"You're probably mistaken," Tommi replied nervously. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need ..."

Jillian sighed. "Maybe I am mistaken," she admitted. "It's just that you looked so familiar, and I usually never forget a face."

"Hey, Tommi," Diane called, as she paused beside Tommi's table, "we're going to go out for pizza tonight. Wanna come?"

Tommi glance up at Diane. "Sounds like a plan." She looked back at Jillian. "As I was saying ..."

"Tommi. Tommi," Jillian repeated to herself over and over several times as her mental gears turned. "Tommi? Tom?" Her eyes widened. "I knew I'd seen you before! Isn't that right, Tom Wilson?"

Tommi's eyes widened with fright. "Shhh!" she said insistently to Jillian. "Please keep your voice down!" She glanced around, terrified that someone had overheard Jillian. Fortunately, the din of the dining area had worked to Tommi's advantage.

"You are Tom Wilson!" Jillian exclaimed softly. "I knew I'd seen you before! Holy shit! What happened to you?"

Tommi grimaced. "Can we go somewhere a little less public?" she pleaded.

Jillian stared at Tommi. "What the heck did you do?" she asked again.

Tommi glanced around nervously again before she decided to take matters into her own hands. She stood and gently clutched Jillian's forearm, tugging and encouraging Jillian to stand. Still holding Jillian's arm, Tommi led her one-time paramour out of the dining area and out of the student center. "I'll tell you all about it, but in private," Tommi hissed, still glancing around nervously.

Tommi and Jillian walked to a small bench under some trees, a quiet area that was, at present, devoid of students. Tommi sat down, and Jillian sat beside her.

"Okay, now, what's going on here?" Jillian demanded softly, her curiosity raging within her. "Last time we talked, we were," she grinned mischievously, "you know."

Tommi sighed. "It's a long story."

"I'm dying to hear it," Jillian replied. "I wondered what happened to you. I figured Daddy just arranged to kick you out of school, like he usually does." She sounded unhappy, even a touch remorseful, at what she thought her Dad had done.

Tommi felt her stomach knot at the mention of Jillian's dad. "He tried," Tommi admitted. "He got my scholarship taken away."

Jillian's face fell. "I'm sorry," she said softly. Surprisingly to Tommi, Jillian sounded genuinely remorseful. After a moment, curiosity got the better of her. "I don't get it. Are you disguising yourself as a girl to stay in school? That sounds kind of extreme!"

Tommi shook her head. "No, I'm not disguising myself. I am a girl - at least for my job." She saw the confused look on Jillian's face. "You ever heard of the Morris Foundation?"

"No."

"It's an anti-abortion adoption organization," Tommi began. "They arrange for babies to be saved from abortion, carried to term, and placed in loving families."

Jillian frowned. "So how does that affect you? You're not a girl!"

"The Foundation has a donor mother carry the baby to term, and then it's given for adoption."

"They can do that?" Jillian asked, surprised. Her features clouded with confusion again. "What does that have to do with you and ... this?"

Tommi sighed. "When I lost the scholarship, I needed a job. I applied for a job as an adoption facilitator. I thought it was something clerical. Turns out it wasn't. The job is to carry an unwanted baby to term. The Foundation gives a generous stipend, and it helps with school expenses. There's just one problem."

"Carry to term - that sounds like having a baby. And you're not ... " Jillian's eyes widened as realization dawned. "So you had a sex change so you could get the job?"

"Well, yeah, but not the old way. You know about cloned organs, right? The Foundation developed that technology. They used that process to grow female parts based on my DNA, so I could carry babies."

"So you are a girl? Really? Completely?" Jillian asked, astonished.

"Yeah, completely. Head to toe, inside and out, I've got all the right parts."

Jillian glanced at Tommi's large breasts, neatly outlined by the tight polo shirt Tommi wore. "Including ...?"

"Everything. Including ... that time of month," Tommi blushed as she spoke.

"Really? Wow!" Jillian exclaimed softly. "That would explain some of the odd things I heard Daddy saying on the phone after"

"Yeah," Tommi nodded.

"Damn," Jillian began, her voice cracking a bit. "I never intended for you to lose your scholarship, let alone to end up like this, too?" She had a pained expression from what Tommi guessed was guilt. "I'm so sorry, Tom."

"Tommi," Tommi interjected. "Tommi Sue. The girls christened me Tommi Sue."

"Tommi Sue? The girls?"

Tommi nodded. "I'm living with a great bunch of girls in Avery Hall," she explained. "They've helped me a lot with adjusting to this."

"You're living in the girls' dorm?" Jillian rolled her eyes as she realized what she'd said. "Duh!, Of course you are! You're a girl! That was a stupid thing for me to say!"

"I've heard a lot worse."

Jillian looked back at Tommi, her eyes a bit sad. "I'm so sorry," she repeated. "I feel like this is my fault. That and Daddy's being an asshole again!" The last part had a tone of resentment that surprised Tommi. "You're - you were - a nice guy. One of the nicest I ... dated. I'm so sorry."

Tommi noted that Jillian's eyes were misted; she was either a damned good actress, or she was genuinely sorry.

"I wish I could undo this," Jillian continued. "It wasn't fair of Daddy!"

"Well, it's too late now. And at least I get to finish my college education," Tommi said unenthusiastically.

"And then what?"

Tommi smiled. "Once I finish my ... contracts, I'll have another surgery to change back to normal."

Jillian looked up and down Tommi's body, pausing noticeably at Tommi's ample breasts. "In a way, that's kind of a waste," she said with a sly grin.

Tommi noticed Jillian's appreciative glance. "I've heard that once or twice already," she admitted. "But I'm still a guy inside."

Jillian laughed at Tommi's comment. "Are you sure? From what I've seen in just the last half-hour of the way you walk, talk, and dress, you're more of a girl than some life-long girls I've known!"

"I doubt that," Tommi protested weakly, but her blush at the implied compliment belied her words.

Jillian's curiosity seemed to explode. She began to grill Tommi on the entire process; what it was like to be pregnant, to have a baby, how the process worked - everything. Tommi was grateful that the topic had shifted from her own personal situation; it was still unnerving to Tommi to have other girls saying she was feminine and attractive - especially after the recent debacle with Erica. So Tommi was only too happy to shift the subject to the process. Still, it was yet another girl who was curious about pregnancy and childbirth, and she, Tommi, former guy, was giving lessons from first-hand experience.

Suddenly, Jillian glanced at her watch. "Damn! I didn't even notice the time!" she exclaimed. "I'm late for class!" She practically leapt to her feet and scooped up her backpack. "Gotta run!" She bent over and gave Tommi an awkward hug. "I'd like to get together again. I'll call you. Unless you changed your cell number, I still have it in my contacts list." She scampered off, glancing over her shoulder and smiling at the confused girl still sitting on the bench.

"Call me paranoid," Katie snorted, "but she's the one who got you in this mess in the first place. I don't trust her!"

Tommi leaned back against her pillow. "I don't know. She seemed sincere."

"I don't trust her," Katie said again, even less charitably. "She's up to something."

Sara, reclining on Katie's bed, nodded. "I agree with Katie. You shouldn't trust her."

"Why are you two so suspicious?" Tommi asked. "She was nice. She was pleasant to talk with. She apologized for what her dad did to me."

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation. "Come in," Tommi replied, eyeing Katie and Sara warily. She hoped, not so secretly, that the newcomers would distract her little sister and "big sister" from hectoring her about Jillian.

Diane, Ashley, Erica, and Kim walked in and helped themselves to seats. Tommi made a point of giving Erica a smile, but was rewarded with a very icy look.

"Look, Tommi, just be careful," Katie cautioned. "She's got a reputation as being a manipulator as well as being a slut! You don't want your reputation ruined by hanging out with the likes of her!"

"You guys must be talking about Jillian," Kim noted as she stretched out in Tommi's chair. "Sheesh, what a whore! From what I've heard, she does two or three different guys every week!"

"Yeah," Diane echoed, lazed on Katie's bed with Ashley. "The way she gets around, she's probably had bunches of STDs, and maybe even an abortion or two!"

Tommi ignored the biting comments, lest she add some impoliteness of her own. Instead, she noted that Erica was still standing uneasily. "C'mon, Erica," Tommi prompted, "have a seat." She scooted up her bed, making room for Erica to sit.

Erica visibly stiffened. She glanced around, and realized that everyone was staring at her. Bowing to the inevitable, she sat on the edge of the Tommi's bed. It was enough that she sat, but her initial unwillingness to sit next to Tommi and the awkwardness of her position hinted at a story she and Tommi wanted to keep secret.

"Sheesh, Katie," Tommi grumbled. "You sound like a mother hen!" She saw the stubborn look on Katie's features. "Okay, okay," Tommi sighed. "I'll be careful."

"Good. That's all I wanted to hear."

"So," Sara changed the subject, "are you going to the costume party at the end of the month?"

Katie shook her head. "Nah. That's not my type of thing. Besides, that's weeks away!"

"It's never too early to start planning, especially when costumes are involved. And it'll be a blast!" Kim disagreed. "And it's not just a 'date only' party."

"Yeah. There are prizes for best costumes, too!" Ashley added. "And it's a lot safer than a frat party!"

Sara perked up. "I heard the frat parties were pretty good."

Katie laughed. "If you're a 'little sister' sorority brat, or if you're an easy girl. Those guys are nothing but horn-dogs, and they'll do anything to get laid - whether the girl is cooperative or not!"

"Yeah," Kim agreed. "They usually spike the guests' drinks! The girls get drunk, and then the guys have their way with them."

"But ... that's against school policy and illegal, since most students are under the legal age!" Tommi was shocked that the guys would do such a thing.

"It could be worse," Katie cautioned. "When I was a freshman, one frat lost their charter and was kicked off campus because they were using date rape drugs. A couple of the guys were expelled and wound up in jail."

Sara's eyes were wide with fear at the stories she was hearing. "Wow! I didn't realize."

"That's why the student center party is the place to go," Ashley said. "It's a lot safer."

"But ... what about costumes?" Kim inquired. "Are we going as a group, or individually? It's a lot harder to come up with a group theme for costumes!"

Erica glanced at Tommi. "You know," she said wistfully, "you should go as Tinkerbell!" It was the first comment or glance that Erica had directed at Tommi.

Tommi's eyes widened. "You're kidding, right? Me? As Tinkerbell?"

"Why not? You've definitely got the figure for a sexy Tinkerbell, and it'd be easy to style your hair to fit the 'sassy Tink' look perfectly!"

Tommi tried to picture herself in a tight-fitting very short Tinkerbell costume - and didn't like the resulting mental image. "I don't think so," she answered. "I don't have the legs for it. I hate short skirts. And I'm not sure I'm even going to go!"

"Sure you are," Sara argued. "It'll be fun! I've always wanted to go out on Halloween with my sister, and this year, I'm gonna do it!"

Kim grinned. "You'll be the best-endowed Tinkerbell anyone has ever seen!"

A momentary dreamy look flitted across Erica's features. "That'd be a sight!"

"Tinkerbell was blonde, if I recall," Tommi protested, hoping to find at least one thing to slow the momentum of the brewing conspiracy.

"That's easily fixed," Katie joined in the fun. "Haven't you ever heard that blondes have more fun? Don't you want to find out if it's true?"

"You guys are going to push me until I say yes, aren't you?"

"Um," Kim stammered, not sure how to reply. "We just want you to come with us." Her lie was transparent.

"Yeah," Ashley added.

"Yes, we're pushing you," Sara said bluntly. "You haven't really done anything social since you had the baby! You're done pumping, so it's time to have a little fun before you have your next procedure. And this will be fun!"

Tommi glanced around, seeing the expectant faces of all the girls. "Okay," she relented. "I suppose I'll go."

Sara's face brightened. "I'll pick out your costume!" she offered.

"No," Tommi countered quickly. "I'll get my own."

Sara's expression fell. "But ... I wanted to do something for my big sister!" she complained.

Tommi saw Katie's warning glance and knew what the answer was. "Oh, all right," she finally agreed, "but nothing too racy or revealing, okay?" Sara's grin and the sly glance she exchanged with Erica made Tommi nervous. "Okay?" she prompted again, more insistently. She got no answer.

"Donut or cookie?"

Tommi gazed longingly at the pastries, cookies, and other sweets in the student center coffee shop. They seemed to call to her, seducing her with their promises of sweetness and, in the case of the eclairs, their sweet creamy filling. Tommi fought the impulse to indulge her sweet tooth. "You're killing me, Jillian," she whined. "My diet won't let me."

Jillian laughed. "So have an extra-large diet Coke to make up for it."

Tommi gave Jillian one of those stares. "Yeah, and we both know it doesn't work like that!" She turned back to the counter. "I'll have a small, whole-wheat blueberry muffin? Hold the butter, please. And a small decaf."

Jillian shook her head. "Here I am treating you to a mid-morning snack, and you go for something plain and," she made a show of shuddering, "healthy!" When the girl behind the counter rang up the total, Jillian plopped down her debit card.

"Out by the fountain?" Tommi suggested.

Jillian smiled pleasantly. "Yeah, it's such a nice day. That sounds perfect." The two girls gathered their food and walked toward the doors.

"I don't get how you can stick to that diet," Jillian observed as Tommi took a bite of her muffin.

Tommi laughed. "If you knew Dr. Tina and Rachel, you'd understand. They can be tyrants about my health! If I put on even one extra ounce, I'd get sentenced to extra time in the gym working with a trainer who's a reincarnated Nazi!"

Jillian chuckled. "It can't be that bad!"

"Well, maybe I'm exaggerating - a little!" Tommi joked. "But, since my transfer is in a little over four weeks, I've got to work extra hard now to avoid weight problems later."

Jillian did a little mental math, and her face clouded. "That's mid-terms week! How are you going to work around that?"

Tommi's eyebrows shot up. "Damn! I forgot about mid-terms!"

"I suppose you'll have to get a medical excuse to postpone them - unless you want to take them early."

"I'll have to talk to my Profs and see what I can arrange." Tommi took another bite, relishing the sweetness of the blueberries.

"What do your parents think of you doing this?"

Tommi about choked. "Uh," she stammered, "not much." Tommi looked down. "Ma and my older sister hate it. I've been practically disowned."

"I'd imagine this was pretty hard for your dad, too."

Tommi felt her eyes misting. "Dad's ... gone," she said very softly, fighting back tears. "He died ... a few years ago."

Jillian reached out and put her hand on Tommi's. "I'm so sorry," she said slowly. "I didn't know." Tommi noted a strangely sympathetic sadness in her voice.

Tommi wiped at the tears. "The hardest part," Tommi continued softly, her voice a bare whisper, "is that nobody understands how hard it is."

Jillian's lip trembled, and tears started streaming down her cheeks. "I do. Two years ago, my mom ..." Her voice choked, and she began to sob. "She had cervical cancer," Jillian finished through tears.

Tommi felt a sudden bond with Jillian; each had lost a parent and each was still hurting from that loss. Not quite knowing why, she leaned to Jillian and pulled her into an embrace, so the two girls could cry on each other's shoulder. "I'm sure your dad..." Tommi got no further.

Jillian reared back, and her eyes flashed despair. "He's an asshole!" she cried, not even trying to hide her tears. "He never has any time for me! He doesn't care how I feel, or how I hurt!" The tears continued streaming down Jillian's cheeks as she slowly sank back to Tommi's shoulder. "I'm all alone now!" she sobbed bitterly. "Just like you are."

Tommi gulped. Jillian was more lonely than Tommi was; Tommi had a loving little sister and Katie, her "big sister." Tommi had caring staff at the center. It sounded like Jillian was completely alone in her pain and grief. Tommi couldn't help but wonder if her loneliness and pain was behind Jillian's need to feel wanted by someone, anyone, in any way, even if it was just a one-night stand.

"I am not going to the party!" Tommi snarled. "Not like this!" She stood in a skimpy costume in her dorm room, and her expression was not happy.

"Aw, c'mon, Tommi," Sara pleaded. "You said you'd go!"

"And I also said I wouldn't wear anything skimpy!" Tommi countered angrily. "Look at me!"

"What's wrong with your costume?" Erica asked, her eyes giving Tommi an appreciative once-over.

As threatened, the girls had gotten a Tinkerbell costume for Tommi. Time in the gym, her genes, and the strict diet of the clinic had given her very shapely hips and waist, and her bosom was more than ample enough for a classic hourglass figure. If anything, she stretched the top of the costume well beyond its designed C-cups and threatened to defeat the built-in strapless bra. The skirt ended barely below Tommi's hips, flaring out as if to emphasize the roundness of her bottom. With the fake wings fastened to the back, Tommi felt absurd. To top it off, her hair was now blonde, and done in a classic Disney Tinkerbell style. She looked adorable.

"I'm ... indecent!" Tommi cried. "Look at how much cleavage I'm showing!" Tommi wasn't exaggerating her exposure.

"I am looking!" Erica said enthusiastically. Erica's costume was a sexy, busty nurse in a very short white dress, though, even with a bit of padding, she didn't get nearly the same effect that Tommi got naturally.

"This isn't funny!" Tommi complained. "I look ... ridiculous!"

Sara shook her head. "Not at all! You look really good! In fact, I wish I looked like you!" Kim had dressed Sara as a nun. Sara resented the costume's implication that she was an innocent little girl. In retaliation, Sara had gotten a 60's go-go-girl getup for Kim, with a skirt hem that barely covered her panties.

Tommi stamped her foot in frustration, and it only made her look more like a petulant oversized fairy. "And I hate being blonde! Aaarghhh!"

Katie looked up from her books. "You look nice. Go and have fun, but be home early!"

"Katie," Tommi complained, "look what they've done to me!"

"I did. Have fun. Now go, so I can get my studying done!" She sounded like she was quickly running out of patience for the costume arguments.

"Let's go," Diane and Ashley called from the doorway. Diane was a cave-girl, complete with a fake animal skin dress and mussed cave-girl hair, and Ashley had made herself up as a zombie.

With a final withering glance toward Katie that Katie didn't even see, Tommi stomped out the door with her friends and little sister.

As they came to the stairwell, Shelly emerged from her own room, and nearly collided with Erica and Kim. She wore a Roman toga. She glanced over the group and gave the girls a sneer.

"Going to the student center dance?" Ashley asked, trying to be pleasant.

Shelly snorted. "That dance? Don't be absurd! I'm going to the Gamma party!"

"Figures," Erica muttered under her breath. "You're their type."

"What?" Shelly snarled, turning angrily and glaring at Erica.

"I said, 'have fun'," Erica said with a faux smile, her voice dripping with sugary false pleasantness.

Shelly turned and stormed out, barging in front of the other girls into the stairwell.

Erica laughed once Shelly was out of range. "Slut! She'll get what's coming to her at the Gamma party!"

The student center was only a few minutes away, and as the group neared, they couldn't help but hear the sound of a dance in progress. From various dorms, a slow march of students was converging on the student center, drawn to the social event like flies to honey. Small and large groups of students were milling about outside the center. The girls weren't inside for more than a few seconds before Tommi began to attract attention, as she'd feared. Before the girls were twenty feet inside the auditorium, Tommi had turned down three offers to dance. She glared at Sara and Erica as the two giggled at her plight.

"This isn't funny!" Tommi yelled to be heard over the music. "I knew this was a mistake!"

"Oh, knock it off!" Kim yelled back. "Just enjoy yourself."

In short order, Kim, Ashley, and even Sara were out on the dance floor, while Tommi had turned down several more offers. Tommi glanced around to say something to Erica, only to discover that Erica wasn't present. Tommi frowned, and started looking around. Eventually, she saw Erica on the dance floor with a girl in a scanty witch's costume.

Tommi wasn't quite sure what she felt, but it was unpleasant. For a moment, she wondered if she was perhaps jealous of Erica dancing with another girl. Almost as soon as the thought formed, Tommi pushed it from her mind. It couldn't be true that she was jealous of Erica, because that would mean she had feelings toward Erica that were stronger than just friendship. Tommi rationalized that she was unhappy because she'd been abandoned by the other girls to fend off would-be dance partners. It didn't quite seem fair that the other girls were enjoying themselves while she stood on the sidelines like a wall-flower.

"Punch?" Tommi turned, half-expecting to see another guy making an unwanted pass. Instead, it was Diane, holding out a cup of punch for her.

"Thanks," Tommi answered with some relief. After having to yell to be heard above the band, Tommi's throat was a bit sore, and the punch was just what she needed.

"I'm going to circulate and see who I know," Diane shouted. Before Tommi could answer, she disappeared into the crowd.

Tommi waited for the other girls to return from the dance floor. This was her first major social appearance since the surgery almost a year earlier, and she felt quite self-conscious. Her skimpy outfit didn't help; if anything, it made her imagine that even more guys were staring at her. Given her appearance, however, it was natural that guys were staring. Tommi didn't realize just how sexy she looked in her Tinkerbell outfit.

Tommi decided to wander to the refreshments area and get some more punch. It didn't look like the girls were returning from the dance floor anytime soon. As she walked, she felt like many of the guys were looking directly at her cleavage. By the time she got to the punch, Tommi was fuming. She was more than just a good figure and a large pair of breasts! But the guys were treating her as a sex object!

Eventually, Sara came off the dance floor and found Tommi. "Are you going to dance?" Sara asked cheerfully.

Tommi shook her head. "I knew this was a bad idea. All the guys are staring at my chest!"

Sara laughed. "You're just imagining that! C'mon, lighten up and go dance."

"I'm not going out there with some guy who can't take his eyes off my legs or tits!" Tommi replied defiantly. "And that rules out just about every guy here!"

"Don't be so self-conscious. Guys can't help it - they're genetically programmed to notice girls' assets! Now go dance!"

Tommi glared at her little sister. She was definitely not going to go bump and grind with some hormone-stimulated guy who couldn't see past Tommi's cleavage.

"This is a dance," Sara insisted again. "So dance!"

Tommi sighed. She noticed that, coincidentally, Erica had just come off the dance floor and was headed their way. "Okay," Tommi replied sternly. "I'll go dance." She walked up to Erica, took her hand, and told her, "Let's dance."

Erica's eyes widened with surprise. "Okay," she said hesitantly. Hand in hand with Tommi, she went back to the dance floor.

It was Tommi's bad luck that the next song the DJ played was a slow song. Tommi felt herself being drawn close to Erica, held tightly, as the pair started swaying to the slow

rhythmic music. The intoxicating aroma of Erica's perfume was like an aphrodisiac to Tommi, and the feeling of Erica's sexy body pressed against hers gave rise to powerful feelings of sexual desire. Memories of their intimacy made Tommi feel warm and sexy as they continued to dance.

"I thought we were going to try to keep it to friendship," Erica whispered in Tommi's ear.

Tommi nodded. "We are."

Erica laughed softly. "So why are you dancing with me instead of any of the guys who are interested in you, and why are you so close?"

"Not that I'm objecting," she added quickly. "I love feeling your body so close to mine."

Tommi started. She honestly didn't know why she'd chosen to dance with Erica. "Uh, force of habit?" she asked hesitantly as her mind searched for an excuse. Was it because Erica was safe, and she didn't want to dance with a guy, or was it because she really did have strong feelings for Erica?

Erica laughed. "That's good enough for me." She continued to hold Tommi tightly, losing herself in the intimacy of the dance.

Too soon for Erica, the music ended. Before Tommi could back away, Erica gave her a quick kiss on her cheek. "Thank you," she said softly in Tommi's ear.

Tommi's eyes widened. "For what?"

"For dancing with me." Erica released her embrace, and walked slowly from the dance floor, a sad smile on her face.

Tommi stood momentarily, wondering what had just happened. As a new song started, she shook her head and moved back to where the girls were. "Okay," she announced defiantly to Sara, "I danced. Good enough?"

Sara sighed. "What am I going to do with you?" she asked rhetorically.

"You said dance, and I danced." Tommi noticed that guys were still glancing her way, but their expressions were different.

"All you did was announce to every guy here that you're not interested in them," Sara sighed.

"Good," Tommi countered smugly. "Mission accomplished."

Sara tilted her head back and rolled her eyes. "Sheesh!" she exclaimed in frustration. "Kim, would you try to talk some sense into Tommi? She won't listen to her little sister!"

Kim laughed. "I've known her long enough to know that she won't listen to anybody - except maybe Katie and Rachel." She paused a moment. "I need a quick break."

"I'll go with you," Diane volunteered quickly. Tommi knew, from the past year of being educated in girls' code words, that they were taking a restroom break - and that girls never went alone, a fact which still confused Tommi as impractical..

"Hi, Tommi." The voice, though loud enough to be heard over the music, was still familiar.

Tommi turned, a little too quickly she realized, as her boobs bounced in the inadequate bra. She recognized the newcomer at once. "Hi, Brian," she replied unenthusiastically.

"Wow!" Brian exclaimed. "You look ... wow!"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, I've heard a lot of that tonight," she said simply. "You look ... interesting."

Brian smiled. He looked like Captain Hook, with a scarlet coat, knee-length pants and long socks, a curly wig, and three-cornered hat. His "hook" was a piece of plastic painted to look like steel, with a cup that hid his hand. The only way it could have been a better match for Tommi's outfit would have been if he'd have been Peter Pan. "Thanks. You wanna dance?"

"Uh," Tommi stammered, "I'm not ..."

"Sure, she wants to dance," Sara interjected. "Tommi has always loved to dance!"

Tommi shot Sara a warning look, but Sara just smiled sweetly. "Just a sec. I've got to have a little chat with my sister."

Tommi grabbed Sara's elbow and pulled her away from Brian. "What's going on?" she hissed. "You're trying to set me up, aren't you?"

Sara glanced at Ashley and Erica, and then back at Tommi. "No." Ashley and Erica flanked Sara to present a united front against Tommi's anger.

Tommi glared at the other girls. "I don't believe that! This can't be coincidence that he's dressed like Captain Hook and you guys pushed me into a Tinkerbell outfit!"

"Honest," Ashley swore, holding her right hand up, "we didn't talk to him to coordinate costumes or anything!"

"Yeah," Sara continued. "We just want you to have some fun. That's why we're trying to get you to dance. Brian is a nice guy, unlike some of these creeps, so we figured you'd be safe dancing with him."

Tommi sighed. "Well, you've got me trapped now, don't you? I guess I'll have to be polite and dance."

Sara smiled. "Oh, and one more thing." She quickly pulled a small vial from her pocket, and before Tommi could react, spritzed a little perfume on Tommi's both sides of Tommi's neck.

"What's that for?" Tommi practically screamed. "I didn't need _that_!"

"A girl's not only gotta look pretty, but should also smell pretty!" Ashley replied sweetly. "Now, off you go!" She pushed Tommi toward Brian, who was waiting expectantly.

Brian graciously offered Tommi the crook of his arm to escort her to the dance floor. Feeling awkward, and knowing that many guys were staring at her, she took his arm.

Tommi quickly forgot her trepidation about dancing with a guy. Brian was keeping a respectable distance from Tommi. For her part, Tommi realized that she couldn't dance quite as enthusiastically as she had as a boy. She worried about her skirt lifting too high and her breasts bouncing out of the inadequate cups. Still, she had to grudgingly admit that it _was_ fun to dance again.

The song ended, and Tommi stayed out on the floor to dance more. She was relaxing, and Brian was being a gentleman so she didn't feel uncomfortable. When the second song ended and Brian gave her a quizzical look to see if she wanted to dance more, she nodded.

Tommi was surprised when the third song started. It was another slow number. She hadn't expected that, and having already indicated that she wanted to dance more, she was trapped.

Brian noticed her uneasy look. He moved closer, and wrapped his arm around her, holding her close, but also making it obvious that he was keeping a respectable distance.

Tommi knew how most guys acted during slow dances, and she feared that Brian would have his paws all over her, grinding in a very sexually suggestive manner with their dance partners. In fact, she'd done the same sort of thing when she'd been Tom, and Erica _had_ been all over her while _they_ had danced, but that was different somehow, Tommi reasoned. To her surprise, Brian kept his hands properly placed, not even down on her hips, but at her waist, while he allowed space between the two of them. It was close, but not uncomfortable.

As the music continued, Tommi found herself enjoying dancing with Brian. She felt comfortable and warm, and most surprising of all, safe and protected from the predatory guys in the auditorium. Brian was close, but not too close, and he didn't seem threatening at all. As they danced, Brian whispered that her perfume smelled very nice, to which Tommi blushed. As the dance ended, she found that she was closer to Brian than when they'd started, and she realized, to her shock, that _she_ was the one who'd pulled him closer rather than the other way around.

"Another dance?" Brian asked hopefully in the temporary lull in the music.

Tommi head swirled. This wasn't what she'd expected when she'd agreed to come to the dance. "I need to take a ... break," she muttered, hoping she sounded convincing, even when she herself wasn't convinced she wanted the dance to end.

Brian nodded graciously and escorted her from the floor back to her friends. All the girls were watching her as she drew near.

"Okay, I danced." Tommi shot them a warning glare. "I need a little break." She glanced in the direction of the restrooms, hoping the girls would take the hint.

Kim noticed her glance and read her intent. "Okay," she agreed cheerfully. With Tommi at her side, she strode lightly through the crowd to the rest room.

No sooner had the door shut than Tommi turned on Kim, her visage angry. "You set me up!" she hissed.

Kim drew a breath to respond, but thought better of trying to deny it. "Okay, so I did. So what?"

"You know I don't like getting attention from guys!" Tommi rebutted angrily. "What did you do, call him to let him know I'd be here? Did you coordinate costumes?"

Kim felt herself getting defensive. "It wasn't like that! I bumped into him between classes, and he asked if you were going to the dance. To be honest, I think he wanted to ask you on a date, but you'd been the 'Ice Queen' so long he was afraid of being rejected. But the costumes were a coincidence, swear to God!"

Tommi glared at Kim, her nostrils flared and her lips pressed tightly together. After what seemed an eternity, she turned and stormed out of the bathroom.

Kim followed Tommi long enough to see that she was leaving the auditorium. She debated following Tommi, and when she saw Sara hot on Tommi's tail, Kim decided she should follow - just in case. Tommi was very angry, and her reactions were apt to be unpredictable.

Sara hurried to catch up to Tommi. "Wait up!" she cried to her sister.

Tommi paused, not turning toward Sara. Tommi's fists were clenched, and she was breathing very deeply.

"Are you going already?" Sara asked innocently.

Tommi wheeled on her. "Yes," she replied. "What do you expect after my so-called friends set me up?"

Sara recoiled from Tommi's outburst. "I ... I thought you were having fun," she stammered innocently. "I thought you were enjoying dancing ... like you used to!"

Tommi closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. "That's not the point!"

"Yes, it is!" Sara argued. "I just wanted you to have fun."

"So, you want me to experience everything as a girl?" Tommi shook her head angrily. "I think you're trying to get me to like being a girl so I'll stay one! What's next? Are you going to arrange a sleepover with some guys so I can experience sex, too?"

Sara stared wide-eyed at her for a moment. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes as her lip trembled. "That's not fair!" she complained in a trembling voice. Before Tommi could react, Sara spun and ran back toward the dance sobbing audibly.

Tommi stared after her sister for several seconds, wondering what she just done. She was confused by her feelings from the dance, and from the anger at being set-up, and at how she'd lashed out at Sara without really meaning to.

"That was mean." The voice was somber and emotionless.

Tommi turned toward Kim. She hadn't seen Kim follow her and Sara from the dance. "You're on her side, aren't you?"

Kim stood her ground. "No. I was your friend before I was Sara's."

"But..."

Kim shook her head, refusing to permit Tommi to interrupt. "The point is that Sara had good intentions. She wants you to be happy and to have fun. Maybe subconsciously, she wants to keep her big sister, but can you blame her? She's felt all alone for most of her life, and suddenly she has a caring, loving big sister."

Tommi started to reply, but Kim's words sank in. "I ... "

Kim looked at her friend. "You're confused, aren't you?" she asked, her voice shifting from being chiding to sympathetic. "I think we all saw the look in your eyes when you came off the dance floor. You enjoyed dancing, but you're confused by that."

Tommi started to give Kim a defiant glare as a response, but instead she dropped her gaze. "Yeah," she finally stammered.

"Maybe I did push a little bit too much," Kim admitted softly, "just like we pushed you last year with the makeover. But we all know you're confused right now, and it's taking an emotional toll on you. I just thought it might help you to confront some of your feelings."

Tommi looked up at Kim, her eyes glistening with tears. She abruptly hugged Kim. "I know you guys mean well," she said softly. "Sometimes, though, I think you go a little too far."

Kim nodded. "Yeah, maybe. Now go find Sara. You two need each other. You're the only loving family she's got, and vice-versa. Right now, she's pretty upset."

Tommi nodded. "Thanks." She gave Kim a quick hug, letting Kim know that Tommi wasn't angry, before turning and scurrying back into the student center and the ballroom.

Inside, Tommi wondered how she was going to find Sara. The crowd seemed larger than when she'd left only a few minutes before, but Tommi realized that might only be her perception, since she was now looking for one specific person in the throng. She stopped in the doorway, scanning the crowd for her little sister. A girl in a nun costume _shouldn't_ be that hard to spot, she thought hopefully.

"Are you okay?"

Tommi turned, startled, and saw Brian looking at her, concerned. "Uh, not really. My sister and I had ... an argument. She's pretty upset, and I need to find her."

"I'll help," Brian offered immediately.

Tommi was grateful for the assistance. "Thanks." She looked around again. "Why don't you go that way," she suggested, "and I'll go this way. We'll meet back here."

Brian nodded. "That makes sense. We can cover twice as much ground." The two split up, walking purposefully through the crowd, searching for Sara.

When they returned to the starting point, Tommi was disappointed that Brian hadn't found Sara, because she hadn't either. Tommi felt her heart sink. Brian read her distressed expression. "Maybe she's in the restroom?" he offered hopefully.

"I'll go check."

"I'll wait here and keep looking, in case we missed her."

Tommi nodded and went to the restroom. She returned without having found Sara. Brian was waiting, and he hadn't found her either.

"Maybe she went back to the dorm?"

"I hope so," Tommi sniffled. Her eyes were red and teary. "If anything happens to her" She was too upset to continue.

"She'll be okay. She's not a kid," Brian tried to be helpful.

"I know," Tommi said softly. "But she's all I've got." She looked up at Brian. "Thanks for helping me look."

"I wish I could have been more helpful."

"I'll see you in class Monday?" Tommi wasn't sure she wanted Brian's company at that moment, and hoped he'd take the hint.

Brian nodded as he walked with Tommi. Outside the building, he felt the unexpected chill of a change in the autumn air. "It's getting cool," he offered. "That cold front must have come through early."

Tommi was holding her arms tightly across her chest, feeling the cool air against her arms and legs. "Yeah. Wish I'd have brought a jacket."

Brian quickly doffed his scarlet costume jacket and held it out to Tommi. "Here. Take this."

Tommi looked at him, bewildered at his chivalry. "But ... you'll catch cold!" she protested. "Besides, it won't exactly fit over my wings."

Brian laughed and wrapped his coat around Tommi. Her wings were framed with flexible springy wire, so they crushed a bit without being damaged. "I'll be fine. I've got more clothes on than you do," he explained. Immediately, he blushed at his implication that Tommi was scantily dressed.

"But..."

"Besides, it'll give me an excuse to walk you home so you'll be safe," Brian added generously.

Despite the jacket keeping her arms and torso warm, the chilly air on her exposed legs caused Tommi to shiver. Brian noticed. He edged a little closer and wrapped his arm around Tommi's waist. Tommi looked up at Brian, surprised, but she didn't object. Slowly, as they walked, Tommi's head leaned to the side, until she was resting against Brian's shoulder.

In front of Tommi's dorm, she straightened, up as Brian dropped his arm. "Thanks," she said softly. "It's been a pretty trying day for me," she explained. "But I enjoyed dancing." She took his jacket off her shoulders and handed it back to him.

"I hope everything will be okay with your sister," Brian offered. He reached out to take the jacket, but surprisingly, Tommi didn't let go.

Tommi nodded. "I owe her a big apology."

"You're a pretty caring sister," Brian observed. Slowly, as he let his arms drop, the jacket lowered and Tommi was drawn a little closer because she hadn't let go either. "She's lucky."

Tommi looked up at Brian as they got closer together. Slowly, he lowered his head toward hers. To her, the world began moving in slow-motion. She let her eyes drift shut as her lips turned up toward Brian. She felt like she was a passenger in her own body, driven by desires that were foreign to her, as his lips pressed against hers. She found herself letting go of the jacket and reaching her arms up until they were encircling Brian's neck. At the same time, she found herself wrapped in Brian's arms. The kiss, though it only lasted a few seconds, seemed to go on forever, as Tommi felt warmth spreading inside her, making her feel happy and safe, and making her temporarily forget about all her troubles.

Abruptly, Tommi broke the kiss and turned her head, looking down. "I ... can't!" Tommi said softly but firmly.

Brian let his arms drop. "I don't understand," he said. There was confusion on his face and in his voice at her sudden mood change.

Tommi shook her head, feeling the tears flowing again. "I'm ... I'm not who I seem to be! There's so much about me that you don't know! I ... can't ... get involved!" she cried. She looked up at Brian again, and then turned and fled into her dorm with tears streaming down her cheeks, leaving him standing outside, still holding his costume jacket and thoroughly baffled by what had just happened.

Tommi walked up the stairwell, and suddenly felt overwhelmed. It had been a trying day; Tommi felt like she'd been through a turbulent white-water ride. She still didn't know where Sara was, or whether she'd hurt her little sister beyond forgiveness. She'd danced with Erica, and in the process, had reignited her internal debate about whether she loved Erica. How much additional pain had she caused Erica? She'd danced with Brian, and then had let him kiss her - and she enjoyed it! Tommi leaned back against the railing as the trickle of tears turned into a torrent, and she cried aloud and buried her face in her hands.

"Hi," the soft familiar voice called from beside her.

Tommi started; she hadn't even heard the door or the footsteps on the stairs. She looked, eyes red and cheeks tear-stained, at Sara. "Hi," she said tentatively.

"Are you okay?"

Tommi shook her head. "No," she cried. She turned and buried her head on Sara's shoulder, tears still flowing.

"I'm ... sorry," Sara said softly. "I shouldn't have pushed you like I did."

"No," Tommi replied, "I'm the one who needs to apologize. I said some things that were pretty mean. I'm really sorry! I didn't want to hurt you!"

Sara felt her own eyes watering. "Maybe you were right," she said softly. "Maybe I was trying to convince you stay my sister. I'm just ... scared of what will happen when you go back to being a boy! I don't want to be alone again!"

Tommi hugged Sara tightly. "I don't want to lose you," she sobbed, "but I'm scared myself. I feel like I'm losing who I am, like I don't know myself any more. I felt like you were pushing me somewhere that I don't know if I want to go!"

Sara nodded. "I'm sorry. I know it's your decision."

"I'm so confused," Tommi sobbed. "I want to feel ... special and loved and ... held tight! But I don't know what to do." She lifted her head and looked into Sara's eyes. "I ... had ... an affair ... with another girl," she admitted slowly, watching for a reaction from Sara.

"Yeah, with Erica," Sara finished nonchalantly. "I know."

"You ... know?"

Sara laughed. "There have been rumors. And it's pretty obvious from the way you two have been acting. She adores you, and you show hot-and-cold feelings toward her. Like when you two went dancing tonight. It was very obvious to anyone watching that you're attracted to her."

"It's supposed to be a secret."

"Some secret," Sara snorted. "And you seemed to enjoy dancing with Brian, too," she added.

Tommi felt her cheeks redden. "I" She dropped her gaze, ashamed. "After we looked for you, he walked me back here. He let me use his jacket because I was getting chilly. I let him wrap his arm around me. And I let him ... kiss me."

Sara's eyebrows shot up. "And?"

"I liked it," Tommi admitted softly. "Part of me did, anyway." She shook her head. "Just like with Erica. Part of me liked it, and part of me didn't. I feel like I'm stuck between two worlds. I'm a guy in a girl's body, but I'm afraid I'm losing the guy part of me."

Sara laughed. "As long as you find Erica hot, I don't think that 'guy part' is gone."

Tommi stared, and then blurted out a laugh even though her cheeks were still moist from crying. Then she shook her head. "The only thing I know is that I'm confused, and that I'm going to carry a second baby, and that all I can do is go from day to day."

Sara grasped Tommi's arm and turned up the stairs. "And I'll be here beside you, day by day."

Chapter 16 - Once More Unto the Breach

Tommi fidgeted in the chair, waiting. She felt very nervous. She needed permission from the Dean to allow her to postpone her mid-terms. For the most part, her professors had no sympathy for her because of her scheduled medical procedure. She knew that the professors had the discretion to allow rescheduling on their own; the fact that only one had allowed it led her to believe that the Dean was still following her like a predator, waiting for an opportunity to deprive her of her dream of a college education.

"Miss Wilson," the Dean's secretary announced, "the Dean will see you now."

When Tommi arrived for the appointment, she had hoped that the matronly secretary would be cordial, polite, and possibly even friendly. However, when Tommi introduced herself, the

woman's demeanor was distant and formal. Tommi felt a dread that her name was still on the Dean's "shit list".

Tommi rose and smoothed her skirt. "Thank you," she said politely, even though she knew any response would be icy. Without prompting, she walked nervously through the open door into the Dean's office.

Without turning his chair away from his computer, the Dean spoke, "Please close the door."

Tommi gulped; it was standard policy to leave an open door when meeting with students. A few years ago, a co-ed had made an accusation of sexual harassment against a faculty member, and the resulting ugliness had prompted "preventative measures". She shut the door and turned back to the Dean's massive and imposing desk.

"Sit down," the Dean ordered.

Tommi cautiously sat in the large leather-covered chair opposite the Dean. By now, it was habit for her to smooth her skirt as she sat and to keep her legs crossed in a modest position. She'd been doing that for so long that she was no longer aware of these feminine gestures.

The Dean spun his chair toward her. "Miss Wilson," he said, with undue emphasis on the word 'Miss'. "I see you have requested a delay in your mid-term exams."

"Yes, sir," Tommi gulped. "I have a medical ..."

"I didn't ask for your excuse," the Dean interrupted. He picked up a paper from his desk and scanned it briefly. "Your grades are acceptable, and I see your instructors rate you as diligent and studious."

He smiled, a cobra staring down a mouse. "But they wouldn't grant you extra time, would they? You know the policies. Mid-terms are not to be rescheduled, except for serious problems. Failure to complete the mid-term exams on time, unless there is an approved excuse, results in failure of the course and potential dismissal from this University. You understand that, do you not?" He sounded threatening in his tone and choice of words, particularly when he emphasized the consequence of dismissal.

"Yes, sir." Tommi gulped again.

"I presume you are asking for approval for a legitimate reason?"

Tommi nodded weakly. She felt much more intimidated by the Dean now than she had only a year ago in the earlier confrontations. For a few seconds, she considered whether being a woman really made a difference in feeling weaker and more easily intimidated. "Yes, sir. I have a pre-scheduled medical procedure that I must complete. It has to be scheduled around ... certain biological timing constraints," she added, feeling herself blush slightly as she tried to euphemistically indicate her period.

"Is this procedure associated with a life-threatening medical condition, or is it an elective procedure?" From the tone of his question, the Dean already knew the answer, but was enjoying his exercise of power.

"I have a contract that I must fulfill," Tommi began.

"I asked if it was necessary or elective," the Dean interrupted.

Tommi swallowed. "It is necessary to fulfill my contract."

The Dean leaned forward, steepling his hands and glaring at Tommi. "So it isn't a procedure to correct a life-threatening condition."

Tommi felt her anger rising. She took a deep breath to try to stay calm. "It's life threatening to the baby who will be aborted if I don't have the procedure done," she said defensively.

The Dean scowled menacingly. "But it isn't life-threatening to you, correct?"

"No," Tommi admitted sheepishly, looking down at her lap, cowed by the Dean's tactics of intimidation.

"Mister Thomas Wilson," the Dean began, accentuating each word.

Tommi looked up sharply, surprised, but yet not completely. Even though she had hope otherwise, she realistically expected that the Dean would know who she was, and more importantly, who she used to be.

"Yes, Mister Wilson. I know your background as a troublemaker. I remember you quite well." The Dean glowered at her. "I find nothing in your request that would merit granting a waiver."

Tommi stiffened. She expected this outcome. "If I don't have the procedure during the week mid-terms, a baby may die. I will be in violation of my contract, and could lose my stipend. I know you can grant exceptions..."

"Very noble, Miss Wilson," the Dean said, with a mocking emphasis on the gender term. "But it is of no concern to this University whether a baby is aborted or not, and your private contractual obligations do not override this University's policies and procedures. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," Tommi responded, bitter defeat in her voice.

"Very well. This meeting is over. Good day." He turned back toward his computer in a display of arrogant superiority and dismissal.

Tommi rose and walked out of his office, feeling her lip trembling. Whether out of anger or sadness, she wasn't quite sure; both emotions raged within her at the Dean's arrogance and unwillingness to consider her plight.

As she walked past the secretary, the older woman looked up at Tommi. "I'm sorry, dear," she whispered.

Tommi started - it was the first display of humanity from anyone in the Dean's office. She looked down at the older woman, her expression impassive as she struggled with containing her emotions. "Thank you," she whispered in reply before walking stiffly from the outer office.

As she walked, she realized that what she'd dreaded was the truth. The Dean had made sure that every one of her professors was informed that she was to get absolutely no leeway on anything. She was still in his crosshairs.

"I'm sorry, Tommi, but we can't do that!" Rachel said emphatically.

Tommi turned to Dr. Tina. "But it is possible, isn't it?" She sat in the small conference room at the clinic with both Rachel and Dr. Tina. She'd explained her predicament, and was hoping to find a solution.

Dr. Tina winced and glanced uneasily at Rachel. "Well, yes," she began hesitantly, "it is possible to slow things down a bit."

Tommi felt a surge of hope. "Can we do it?"

"I know what the medical literature says. I know it's technically possible." Dr. Tina shook her head. "It's very unorthodox, and the process has some very serious risks. I really don't recommend it."

Rachel nodded her agreement. "I'm sorry, Tommi."

Tommi shook her head. "But I have to! Don't you see? If I can't delay the transfer, I'll get kicked out of school!"

Rachel sighed. "Tommi, I've told you before that the Foundation is more than willing to support a legal challenge against the University."

Tommi shook her head. "Yeah, I know. But how long will that take? Months? Years?"

Rachel lowered her gaze, nodding sadly. "Unfortunately, yes. Legal actions like that tend to take time."

"I don't have time," Tommi countered. "I have to stay in school!" She glanced back and forth between the two women. "Do you have any other alternatives?"

Rachel glanced at Dr. Tina, who was frowning. Rachel sighed. "No, I don't," she replied softly. She looked at Dr. Tina again. "I know you don't want to do what Tommi's suggesting, but can we try?"

Dr. Tina closed her eyes in thought for a bit. "When did your last period start?" she asked Tommi.

Tommi felt a hope resurging. "Four days ago," she answered. In the back of her mind, Tommi felt like laughing. A year ago, after her first confrontation with the Dean, and later, after her surgery, she found discussion about menstruation and other woman's issues highly embarrassing. Now, these topics seemed routine.

Dr. Tina nodded. "I'll have to go study up on the process, because I've never done it on a human being." She glanced at Rachel. "I'd love to have Isabel down here from the main lab to help me out on this."

Rachel touched her iPad and made a note. "I'll see what I can arrange. At the very least, I'll set up some teleconferences for you with the Foundation researchers."

Dr. Tina turned back to Tommi. "As soon as you're done menstruating, we're going to start a series of daily shots. The hormones will delay the start of your cycle for a few days. Following that, once we have the timing down, we'll change hormones and nudge your cycle to where we need it." She frowned. "This is going to be uncomfortable," she cautioned Tommi, and you'll be here twice a day for monitoring. We'll have to very closely monitor your endometrium to make sure everything is normal."

"I understand," Tommi began.

Dr. Tina shook her head. "I really don't want to do this," she added. "You're going to be very uncomfortable and moody. There is a small chance of uterine hemorrhaging or other reproductive system damage. The procedure has some real dangers."

Tommi gulped. The information she'd gleaned from the medical textbooks hadn't said much about the potential serious consequences. All she'd learned is that it was theoretically possible to delay her cycle, and thus avoid missing her mid-terms.

"Now we've got the other problem," Rachel sighed. "I've got four potential donors that I've got to see if I can juggle to get their schedule revised. That is, if we can be sure that we'll have hosts ready for an altered transfer timeline." She looked at Tommi. "No promises, understand? But I'll see if I can work things out."

"I understand."

"Good." Rachel tried to give Tommi a hopeful smile, but she failed. She really didn't like the idea of using this procedure and didn't want Tommi to undergo it, but she had to weigh the other concerns. "It'll be good to know how to do this for the future," she said to Dr. Tina, trying to persuade the reluctant doctor that it was really a good thing.

Rachel glanced back at Tommi. "Oh, and Tommi?" Rachel began.

"Yes?" Tommi wasn't expecting any more discussion.

"I think you looked better as a brunette," Rachel said with a smile, to which Tommi blushed.

"I wish they didn't run mid-terms like finals week," Tommi sighed as she leaned back and stretched. She hadn't taken a break from her books for hours.

"Don't we all," Katie said the obvious.

"Yeah," Tommi countered, "but you're not all cramped up!"

"True. Speaking of which, don't you think you better scoot to get down to the clinic for your evening checkup?"

Tommi glanced at the clock. "Oh, crap!" she muttered. "I almost forgot about that!" She leaped to her feet and grabbed her purse. "I'll be back in a few."

As Tommi strode quickly through the halls, she met Sara, who was returning to her room. "What's up?" Sara asked lightly.

"Gotta run. I've got my checkup, and I almost forgot about it."

Sara turned abruptly. "I need a break. Can I come along?"

Tommi paused and glanced at her. "I suppose," she replied, "but it's pretty boring. There's not a lot to do in the waiting room."

"At least we'll have a few minutes to talk on the way there and on the way back." Sara sighed. "College tests are a lot harder than high school ones."

Tommi nodded her agreement. "Yeah. And it'll get a little harder every year. The good thing is that you get used to it."

"Gee, that's something to look forward to," Sara said sarcastically.

When they arrived at the clinic, Tommi was sent straight back to the lab area, while Sara was kept out front because of privacy rules. Tommi noticed that Sara quickly engaged in lively conversation with Suzie. Tommi smiled; Suzie was very friendly and quick to win over people.

"You're almost too late," Deb chided as Tommi stopped at the nurse's desk. "Dr. Tina was about ready to leave, and then we'd have had to call her back in, and she'd have gotten upset!"

"I was studying and lost track of time," Tommi admitted sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Well, no harm today. Let's get your weight, and then we'll get you back for your checkup and shot."

Already familiar with the procedure, Tommi was already on the scale.

"You've put on another pound," Deb reported, disapproving of Tommi's weight.

"What do you expect?" Tommi retorted. "I'm retaining a ton of water! I feel like a whale!"

"Room three."

Tommi marched down the hall, following Deb, even though she was familiar enough with the clinic to not need directions. As soon as Deb closed the door, Tommi began to undo her blouse, so she could slip into the gown that Deb handed her. "I know - change and wait for the doctor."

Deb grinned. "My job is so much easier once I get the patients trained."

As soon as Deb closed the door, Tommi kicked off her shoes and pulled off her jeans and panties. Her bra came off next, and she pulled on the examination gown, not even bothering to tie it. She knew the procedure. If she tied the gown, she'd only be unfastening it in a minute or two. Lastly, she arranged her clothes neatly on one of the chairs and sat on the table, waiting. It was another gesture of femininity that she was unconsciously doing, a new habit that she'd picked up over the past year.

Dr. Tina entered moments later. "You're late," she said, echoing Deb's words from minutes before.

"Yeah. Studying."

Dr. Tina smiled knowingly. "You don't need to say more. I had way too many years of late nights and weekends studying in college and med school." She swung out the stirrups. "Okay, let's have a look."

Tommi swung her legs up on the table and into the stirrups. "You know, it's kind of funny," she commented, "a year ago, I was scared to death and felt humiliated by these exams. Now, they don't bother me."

Dr. Tina laughed. "I'll take that as a sign that you're psychologically healthy and that we're doing a good job and helping you adjust."

Tommi suddenly looked lost in thought, with a small frown.

Dr. Tina noticed. "What?"

Tommi tried to dismiss her concern. "Nothing."

"Not buying it. What?"

Tommi sighed. "Because I feel ... normal getting a gyno exam, does it mean that I'm losing my male self? Am I getting too comfortable being a woman?"

"That's not my specialty," Dr. Tina answered honestly. "You'll have to discuss that with Rachel."

She turned her attention to the exam. When she completed the intimate inspection, she let Tommi drop her legs, and wheeled out the ultrasound machine. Again, Tommi knew the routine and opened her gown. Tommi flinched when Dr. Tina squirted on the cold ultrasound jelly. "Sorry. I grabbed the wrong bottle," she apologized.

"You did that just to get back at me for making you stay late," Tommi laughed.

"No, but that's not a bad idea!" Dr. Tina said playfully. For several minutes, she moved the probe around Tommi's belly, watching the screen intently, and occasionally interacting with the keyboard and trackball. Eventually, she lifted the probe and wiped it. "Okay, all done."

"And?" Tommi asked nervously.

"Everything looks good," Dr. Tina replied. "Better than I'd hoped, actually." She pushed the cart back out of the way. "Go ahead and get dressed, and then Deb can take some blood and give you your hormone shot."

"So things look good for Saturday?"

Dr. Tina nodded. "Yes. In fact, if your hormones are still at the levels we saw yesterday, you'll be in better shape this time than you were for your first."

"Do you want to do another check of my," Tommi glanced down at her exposed breasts, "girls?"

Dr. Tina laughed. "You wouldn't have said that last year, either! No, I think we can skip that today."

"Okay," Tommi said nonchalantly. "I don't think they've grown much lately, so hopefully they're as big as they're going to get. But I wish they'd have gone down a little more after I stopped pumping."

"It's hard to tell if they're still growing, since they were engorged for lactation, and that size is being lost. They might still be growing, and we don't know. Unfortunately, your genes have a lot more to say about your final size than I do. And your genes said you are going to be a ... healthy girl. Now, I want to review a new protocol with you. The Foundation researchers have a new way to do anesthesia, so this time, you can be fully asleep without any risk to the baby."

For a few minutes, Dr. Tina gave Tommi a quick overview of the new way they could do anesthesia. Once all Tommi's questions had been answered, Dr. Tina asked, "So, do you want the new protocol, or to do it the way we did last year?"

Tommi shrugged. "Maybe I should try the new way. That way, if I were to stick around and do a third, I'd know which way was best!" she said with a grin.

Dr. Tina laughed. "Okay. Go ahead and get dressed, and Deb will be with you in a couple of minutes." The doctor ducked out the door, closing it behind her.

Tommi slid out of the gown and paused a moment to look at herself. She marveled at the difference a year had made. Dr. Tina wasn't kidding; Tommi had very healthy breasts. She was a little bigger than a D-cup, even after losing a size. The diet and exercise had toned her stomach such that, apart from the faint stretch marks, she didn't look like she'd had a baby. Tommi's waist was nicely narrowed, but not overly so, and her hips widened enough to give her a good figure without being too "broad in the beam," as she used to say. Tommi felt mostly content with her body, but a small part of her mind found that contentment to be upsetting. Had she lost her male self? She didn't know.

Even as Tommi pulled on her pants, she continued to have nagging thoughts about who she really was. Her panties were lacy and daring, something that she'd have been shocked by only a year ago. Her bra was similarly feminine, and as she pulled the straps over her shoulders, she couldn't help noticing how her bra did nothing to minimize her assets, but instead pushed them up and together, emphasizing her generous curves and creating a luscious valley of cleavage. Tommi had to wiggle to get into her tight jeans, with the result that they clung to her hips and rear and displayed her feminine curves. She pulled on her knit top, noticing how it stretched over her breasts but clung tightly to her waist, and how the neck scooped low to show the tops of her boobs.

Tommi pulled her long hair from her neckline, flipping it out behind her in a graceful and very non-masculine motion. Even as she noted these movements and details, she didn't seem too concerned.

After Deb drew the blood sample and gave her a painful injection of hormones, Tommi strode down the hall toward the reception area. She had to admit that she was feeling pretty good about how things were moving toward the procedure. True, the extra hormones made her feel extra bloated, and there was an occasional twinge that wasn't pleasant, but Dr. Tina was very satisfied with her health. She'd dodged the Dean's latest attempt to get her out of school. She was going to get her next baby on Saturday. Sara was at school with her. As she considered things, Tommi felt content with how her life was going.

Sara wasn't in the waiting room. Tommi frowned, looking around again. She turned to Suzie. "Where's Sara?"

Suzie looked up from her computer. "I think she's talking to Rachel. Let me page Rachel and see." She picked up the phone and pressed a button. "Is Sara with you?" There was a brief pause. "Tommi's done." Another pause. "Okay, I'll tell her." She put down the phone. "She'll be right out."

"Why...?" Tommi began, concerned about why Rachel would want to talk to Sara.

Suzie laughed. "You're too suspicious," she observed. "You know, your sister is very bright, and very curious. And she's a really nice kid."

Tommi smiled. "She's the best sister in the world."

"That's so sweet," Suzie commented. "You two are lucky you have such a good relationship. Not all families do."

Tommi nodded her agreement. "Yeah, I know. My older sister doesn't get along with either of us. She's just a ... bitch."

"She's probably jealous," Suzie replied quickly.

"No. I think she was born that way," Tommi laughed.

Sara and Rachel emerged into the waiting area, both smiling and laughing. Tommi was immediately curious, and a little suspicious, of what they found amusing.

Sara noticed the expression on Tommi's face. "Don't worry," she said, still smiling. "We weren't talking about you."

Rachel took Sara's hand. "It was very nice to meet you," she said warmly. "I hope you'll come by from time to time with Tommi. And I'm glad Tommi has someone else to help look after her. We've found out that she sometimes doesn't listen to us, so we're happy for all the help we can get!"

Tommi scowled, but it was obviously playful. "I do too pay attention!" she complained.

"When you want to," Suzie added, joining in the kidding.

Tommi turned to Sara. "See what I have to put up with! Let's get back to the dorm. I've got some studying to do before the test tomorrow." She turned quickly back toward Suzie. "I forgot - I've got a seven a.m. test tomorrow! Can you please tell Dr. Tina that I'll be in as soon as my test is done, but I can't make it first thing?"

Suzie was already typing on her keyboard. "Consider it done. See you in the morning."

Sara and Tommi walked silently back to the car. For Tommi, it seemed odd that Sara was chatting with Rachel; she knew Rachel kept close tabs on her and would love to have Sara as an extra set of eyes and ears. She hoped that Sara wasn't going to be another spy.

For her part, Sara realized that Tommi was uncomfortable that she'd been visiting with the staff. After all, this was Tommi's clinic, her experiences, her friends and doctors. She understood that Tommi might think she was moving in to Tommi's territory. Despite how close they'd gotten, Sara knew that Tommi needed her own space.

Once in the car, Sara could hold her tongue no longer. "Tommi," she blurted out, "I'm sorry if I was intruding on your space. I know how important the staff at the clinic is to you, and I know you have a relationship with them. I didn't mean to be pushing my way in."

Tommi waited for her to finish. "It's okay. I shouldn't feel so possessive," she admitted. "I know you're curious, and you want to help take care of me, so I'll try to be less ... selfish."

If Tommi hadn't been driving, Sara would have wrapped her arms around her sister in joy. "I just want to be part of your life," she explained. "I'm curious about what you're going through. Maybe I figured subconsciously that if I knew more, I'd be able to help you - you know, with emotional support."

"I appreciate it," Tommi said with heartfelt conviction. "And I need to not be so closed. I need to learn to let people help me." She shook her head. "It's hard. It's not how I spent my first eighteen and a half years." She smiled. "Anyway, Suzie already thinks the world of you. She said you're smart and sweet, and hopes you'll visit more."

Sara blushed. "I just wanted to be nice, so they wouldn't think badly of you because of me."

"But you better watch it," Tommi warned playfully. "Give them an inch, and Suzie and Rachel will be trying to persuade you of the nobility of their cause, and to get you to sign up as a volunteer host mother!"

It was a good thing it was dark outside, because Tommi couldn't see the expression on Sara's face.

"Ready?"

Tommi smiled weakly as she lay on the gurney. "Is this déjà vu? Seems like I just did this."

Suzie smiled as she held Tommi's hand. "And I seem to recall that I promised that you'd do well. And I will again. I know you'll do super!"

Tommi glanced to her other side. "I'll be okay," she said to Sara.

Sara was fighting back tears. "I know," she sniffled. "But ... I'm scared for you. You've been through this, but I haven't."

"I know. Suzie will help you understand what's happening, so you don't worry so much. I'll be fine."

As Tommi squeezed Sara's hand, Rachel trudged into the pre-op suite. She glanced around quickly. "Where's Tina?" she asked, not bothering with pleasantries.

Tommi glanced up, and noticed that Rachel looked haggard, like she hadn't slept for days. She'd left her suit coat somewhere, and her blouse and skirt were a bit rumpled. "She was here a minute ago."

"Okay." She turned to leave, but turned back a moment. "Sorry," she apologized. "I forgot to say hi and to ask how you're doing. I've been a bit distracted."

"I'm doing fine," Tommi reported. "But Sara is a nervous wreck."

Rachel smiled, a tired expression on her face. "We'll help calm her nerves," she promised. She turned and spied Dr. Tina in the corridor. "Tina!" she called out as she scurried from the room.

Tommi frowned as she watched Rachel leave. It wasn't like Rachel to be so stiff and formal, nor to look so worn out. She saw the two women engage in conversation in the hall. While Tommi couldn't hear, she noted that the conversation seemed quite animated. Rachel was very insistent about something, and Dr. Tina was objecting pretty strenuously. They weren't shouting at each other, but it was obviously an intense discussion. Finally, Dr. Tina dropped her head, nodding slowly, and accepted whatever Rachel had been insisting upon.

Dr. Tina walked into the pre-op suite, putting on a happy face. "How are you doing?" she asked pleasantly, but her eyes betrayed that she was still a bit rattled by the conversation.

"I'm ready," Tommi said warily, "but I've got a question."

"Okay."

"What's up?"

Dr. Tina's eyes narrowed suspiciously, even though she was trying to feign innocence. "What do you mean?"

Tommi shook her head. "C'mon, Dr. Tina. I saw that Rachel looked pretty tired, and then the two of you had a rather ... intense discussion. What's up? Is it something about my transfer?"

Dr. Tina tried to act normal, but she wasn't an actress by any stretch of the imagination. "Nothing really." She looked at Suzie, and mouthed the words, "Get Rachel now!" so Tommi wouldn't see.

Suzie walked quickly from the room, and as soon as she was in the hall, she ran to the nurse's station and the intercom there.

Dr. Tina continued. "We might have to delay your procedure a bit because of the donor's readiness."

In moments, Rachel was back in the room. She glanced around. "I'd like to talk with Tommi and Tina privately," she said in a commanding voice. "It won't take but a minute."

Sara looked nervous, but Tommi squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I'll be right outside," Sara said as she left.

When Deb also left, Rachel closed the door.

Tommi swallowed nervously. This was not normal. "What's going on?"

Rachel sighed. "I probably look like hell. I've been in conference calls with the Foundation for the past twenty hours." She paused, contemplating how she should tell Tommi what she had to say. "We got a request - a very specific and very unusual request. It's so far outside our guidelines that we had to run it past management."

"I assume it's got something to do with me," Tommi said as he glanced back and forth between Dr. Tina and Rachel.

Rachel nodded. "A girl contacted me. She's pregnant and quite afraid. That part's normal. What isn't normal is that she made a very specific request that you carry her baby to term."

Tommi's eyes popped open in shock. She glanced at Dr. Tina, who nodded. "But ... how?"

Rachel bit her lower lip. "Our policy is that we never let the donor and the host know each other's identities. We do everything we can to prevent what this girl asked."

"Wow!" Tommi mouthed softly.

"Wow is right. We had to talk to the highest levels of management on this one. The girl was quite adamant that she'd abort the baby if you didn't carry it."

Tommi let her head drop on her pillow. "Holy shit!" she muttered. Then a thought occurred to her. "How would she know ...?"

Rachel and Dr. Tina shook their heads. "We don't know," Rachel said quietly.

"So we have to rework the schedule today."

"I take it management said okay?"

Rachel shook her head. "Management decided that it wasn't their call. It's okay with the Foundation if you decide to go along. It's your choice. It could get ... interesting for you, since the donor obviously knows you."

Tommi looked up at Dr. Tina, her eyes filled with uncertainty. She wanted advice, badly.

Dr. Tina shrugged. "'I'm sorry. I can't offer advice this time. It's all your call," she said simply.

Tommi closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. When she opened them again, she looked up at Rachel. "Okay, let's do it."

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure?"

Tommi nodded. "It's a baby. It deserves to live. And some girl trusts me to take care of it and deliver it to a 'forever family'. How am I supposed to say no to her?"

Tommi woke up slowly. She moved her eyes to one side and then the other. She tried to smile when she saw Sara.

"She's waking up," Sara called out to a nurse. Sara turned her attention back to Tommi. "You did great. Dr. Tina said everything went perfectly."

Tommi nodded. "Thirsty," she croaked. Her throat was raw from the breathing tube, and she wanted something cool and wet to take the edge off the irritation.

Deb hovered into view opposite Sara. "How are you feeling?" she asked as she glanced at the monitors.

"Tired," Tommi croaked. "Thirsty."

"You can give her some ice chips," Deb instructed Sara. "Start with a couple to see how she does, first."

"Okay." Sara reached for Tommi's mouth, giving her small bits of ice. "Open up."

Tommi let the ice melt in her mouth, savoring the wetness and the chill as it seeped down her tortured throat. "More," Tommi mouthed. Even whispering hurt. "Tell Dr. Tina I liked the old way better," she whispered hoarsely.

Sara gave her a couple more ice chips. "I got to watch," she said, excitedly. "They have a viewing gallery in the operating room, just like in the movies, and Rachel let me watch your procedure!"

"Your little sister is very interested in medicine," Deb said. "It wouldn't surprise me if someday she's the doctor doing those procedures."

Sara blushed. "I don't know if I want to be a doctor," she said meekly. "But it was really interesting. And it looks so complicated!" She gave Tommi a couple more ice chips.

Dr. Tina appeared in Tommi's view. "Everything went well," she said with satisfaction. "The baby appears to be about eleven to twelve weeks, so we're going to keep you an extra day just to be on the safe side." She looked up to Sara. "We normally prefer babies from fourteen to twenty weeks. Smaller babies are a bit more ... fragile. But Tommi's procedure

went well. Her uterus is almost perfect for the transfer, so the placenta should vascularize quickly. Tommi should be up a little faster than her first procedure."

Sara gave Tommi more ice. "Thanks for letting me watch," she said, sounding a bit awestruck by the experience.

Dr. Tina shrugged. "Thank Rachel. I hear you were asking more questions than she could answer, and pretty detailed questions at that." She smiled. "You must have been a good student in biology."

Sara blushed again. "I just pay attention."

Dr. Tina smiled. "I think it's more than that." She glanced once more at Tommi's monitors. "We'll give her another half hour or so before we transfer her back to her room. Since she'll be pretty sleepy, you might want to go back and get some rest yourself."

Sara shook her head. "I'm going to stay with my big sister as long as she needs me," she said as she squeezed Tommi's hand.

Deb glanced at Dr. Tina. "Better put a cot in Tommi's room," Dr. Tina suggested. "I have a feeling that Sara's going to be spending the night."

Sara glanced up at Dr. Tina and smiled. The doctor had practically read Sara's mind and had given her permission to stay.

A knock interrupted Tommi's reading. She looked up and saw Rachel in the doorway. "Hi," Tommi greeted cheerfully.

"Hi, Tommi," Rachel replied. "How are you doing?"

Tommi shrugged. "Dr. Tina says I'm doing well. She said I might get to go back to the dorms in a couple of days."

"And?"

"Another week of bed rest in the dorms before I'm cleared to go back to classes," Tommi added.

"Are you having any problems keeping up? Is there anything else we can do to help you?"

Tommi smiled. "Thanks, but I've got everything I need. In fact, everyone is being too helpful!"

"Oh?" Rachel seemed surprised.

"Yeah," Tommi answered. "I don't have any excuses to not do my homework!" she laughed.

"Well, you're going to all this trouble to stay in school, so we want to make sure you succeed," Rachel replied with a smile.

"There is one thing that's hard, though."

"What's that?"

Tommi sighed. "I know Dr. Tina has to do regular checkups to make sure things are okay, and that the baby is properly settled into my uterus," she said, "but it's hard to do the internet classes when I keep getting interrupted for still another ultrasound or checkup or shot." She closed her eyes momentarily. "I wish they'd do a better job of scheduling the checkups and shots and examinations."

"I'll let the staff know," Rachel said quickly. "Not all our clients are students, so we probably weren't sensitive enough to that issue. I appreciate you bringing it to my attention so we can fix the problem."

Tommi grinned. "Sara would say that complaining is what I'm best at."

"She's a sweet girl," Rachel offered. "You're lucky to have a sister like her."

"And Katie," Tommi added quickly.

"True. Katie is a good friend."

Tommi shook her head. "She's more than a friend. We're like sisters. She considers me to be the little sister she never had, and I think of her as the big sister I wish I had."

"They're very good for you," Rachel commented. "I know, when you started, you didn't have much of a support group. Now, you've got family and friends close by to help you."

"Yeah." Tommi turned to look at Rachel. "So, what's on your mind?"

Rachel feigned innocence. "What? What makes you think something is on my mind?"

Tommi laughed. "Because you have that look in your eyes."

Rachel sighed heavily. "I must be losing it, if I can't hide my ulterior motives from you. Okay, there is something I need to talk to you about."

Tommi closed the book in her lap. "You've got my attention," she said lightly.

Rachel pulled up a chair and sat beside Tommi's bed. "You know that this transfer was ... irregular. The donor very specifically requested you as the host." She shook her head. "That never happens. Well, at least until now, it had never happened."

"Yeah," Tommi agreed. "But I'm okay with it."

"The donor knows you. And you probably know her," Rachel added cautiously.

"Yeah."

"You've probably figured out that she may want to meet with you," Rachel asked. She sounded uncertain, even nervous, about bringing the topic up with Tommi.

Tommi nodded slowly. "Yeah. I already figured that might be a possibility."

"I've had a lot of discussions with management," Rachel continued. "Everyone is on eggshells about this."

Tommi lowered her head slightly. "I didn't mean to be such trouble."

"You're not," Rachel countered quickly. "This situation would have come up someday anyway. You just drew the short straw."

"Lucky me," Tommi said without enthusiasm. "What did you and the brass decide?"

Rachel bit her lower lip for a moment. "They passed the buck to me. The problem is, I don't have the power to stop the donor from contacting you. Even if I did, I don't know that I have the right. It really should be your decision. Unfortunately, that's not even true. The donor can do what she wants to do."

"That's what I figured," Tommi agreed.

"So you're going to have to be prepared for an encounter that could be unpleasant. It could get ugly. Or it might never happen."

"Knock, knock!" The girl at the door called rather than rapping her knuckles.

Tommi was resting on her side, her back to the door. She barely stirred at the greeting.

"Hello?" the girl called again.

Tommi rolled over, groggy, and looked toward the noise. "Huh?"

"Maybe I should come back later when you're not napping," the girl suggested.

Tommi clawed at the control and lifted her bed so she was sitting. "No, it's okay. I get plenty of naps around here. C'mon in."

Jillian pulled a chair beside Tommi's bed and sat down. "I thought you might like some company."

Tommi smiled. "Yeah, that'd be nice. With everyone's class schedules, I don't get a lot of visitors."

"How are you doing?" Jillian asked, curious. "The nurse wouldn't tell me anything."

"Yeah, it's health regulations and laws and stuff," Tommi grumbled. "I had to sign a ton of papers, so my _sister_ could get information about me. And it was worse to get my roommate, Katie, access, because she's not a relative!"

"So?"

Tommi smiled. "I'm doing okay. I get to go back to the dorm tomorrow."

"I bet you're looking forward to that!" Jillian said.

"Yeah. But I'll still be on restrictions for a week, so I won't be able to get out for a while. And I don't think the girls are too anxious to wait on me, unlike the staff around here. The staff is super. If I need anything, they'll jump to take care of me."

"How's the ... baby?" Jillian asked hesitantly.

Tommi smiled. "This isn't as bad as the first one, even though there were some delays and extra treatments before the surgery."

"Yeah, I heard Daddy was a jackass to you again, and wouldn't let you postpone or advance your mid-terms." Jillian sounded angry about her father's interference.

Tommi scowled at the memory. "Yeah, well, he doesn't like me much. But it all worked out."

Jillian smiled. "I'm glad."

Tommi nodded. "But I'm probably going to have another round with your dad around delivery time. They figure the baby is about eleven to twelve weeks along, so if you count to when I'll be due, it's going to be right around finals week next semester."

"Ten weeks." Jillian sounded very certain of herself.

Tommi started. "No, Dr. Tina said it was about eleven to twelve weeks." She looked at Jillian's sad expression, and Tommi's eyes widened, as she slowly realized what Jillian had said. "You're ..."

Jillian nodded slowly and sadly. "Yeah. You're carrying my baby."

"But ... why? How?"

Jillian sighed. "I got careless. And when I got pregnant, I panicked. I couldn't tell Daddy. I was almost ready to have an abortion, even though it would have meant excommunication. But I got scared of that, too."

Tommi leaned back into her pillow, staring at the ceiling, her expression sad. "So when you were being friendly ..."

Jillian's eyes went wide with shock. "You think I was scoping out a host mother?"

Tommi nodded sadly, unable to look at Jillian. She felt used.

"Oh, no!" Jillian cried. "No! I wasn't! Even if you weren't doing this, I'd still want to be your friend!" Tears formed in the corners of her eyes. "You're one person who understands what I've been going through! You care! When we started having coffee and stuff, I didn't even know I was pregnant yet! Please believe me, Tommi! I wasn't just planning to use you!"

Tommi turned back to Jillian and saw how distraught she was.

"Please believe me," Jillian begged. "I wouldn't do that to you!"

Tommi didn't know why, but she wanted to believe Jillian. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just ..."

Jillian nodded. "A little too coincidental? Yeah. But ... I need you as my friend! I don't have anyone else!"

"Is that why you ...?" Tommi halted, not knowing quite how to continue the question.

Jillian looked down, embarrassed. "Maybe. I don't really know. I just needed someone to make me feel wanted and needed and cared for."

Tommi sighed. "I know the feeling."

"But since we started hanging out, I ... haven't ... " Jillian dropped her head. "I've got a reputation as a slut, don't I?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah."

"I probably deserve it, too," Jillian said sadly. "But ... having someone who understands - I don't feel like I have to sleep with someone to feel wanted."

Tommi looked into Jillian's eyes. Perhaps she was being naive, but she trusted Jillian. Her other friends didn't, but Tommi did. "You are my friend," she said to Jillian softly.

Jillian stood up, leaned over the bed, and wrapped her arms around Tommi. She was crying almost uncontrollably. "Thank you," she said over and over.

"You know this might get ... interesting," Tommi said softly. "Knowing that I'm carrying your baby?"

Jillian nodded. "But I also know that my baby will be well cared for."

Chapter 17 - Ma

"Sorry, Tommi," Dr. Tina said sadly. "This happens sometimes."

Tommi shook her head. "You're sure?"

"You felt the symptoms. You know how you reacted. You tell me that I'm wrong."

Tommi sighed and let her head droop. "Okay ... okay, you're right. Now what?" She felt defeated - again.

"Well," Dr. Tina began hesitantly, "medically, there are a few options. But this is more than a medical issue. It's personal, too. Maybe we should go talk with Rachel."

Tommi slowly nodded. "I guess that's probably the best thing." She rose, following Dr. Tina out of the exam room, and down the hall.

After a few turns in the corridor, Dr. Tina stuck her head in Rachel's office. "Got a few minutes?"

Rachel nodded. "Sure. I was about to check out early, so I know my calendar is open." She saw Tommi following Dr. Tina into the office. "What's up?"

Dr. Tina sank into one chair. "Tommi had an allergic reaction to her last dose of 'Beard Stop'," she said simply.

Rachel glanced quickly at Tommi, who had taken another chair. "Oh?"

Dr. Tina nodded. "Pretty severe reaction, too. One of the drugs we gave her to slow down her cycle must have over-sensitized her to the 'Beard Stop'."

Rachel winced. "Not good."

Tommi nodded her agreement with Rachel's assessment. "That's an understatement! Without the 'Beard Stop', I'll have facial hair growing again. In fact, it's already started a little."

"What are Tommi's options?" Rachel asked Dr. Tina. She was pretty certain that she already knew the answer.

"There are only three." She ticked off the choices on her fingers. "First, you can go back to shaving. Second, there's electrolysis, either electrical or laser. Third is the new chemical depilation."

Tommi wrinkled her nose. "Shaving every day won't cut it," she observed, ignoring her own pun. "And electrolysis is permanent?" She saw the confirming nod from Rachel. "What's the chemical depilatory? Is that like Nair or something?"

"Something like it, but it's a one-shot treatment."

"That sounds better than the other two," Tommi said hopefully.

"It's a one-time treatment because it's permanent," Dr. Tina continued.

Tommi's face fell. "So you're telling me that I don't really have any good options?"

Rachel nodded. "Depending on what you call good. From your point of view, though, no, there aren't any."

Tommi sank back in her chair, drawing a deep breath. "What about just using Nair every so often? Won't that work?"

Dr. Tina shook her head. "No. Some of the chemicals will be absorbed through your skin, and enter your bloodstream. Repeated use could be harmful to the baby."

"Great," Tommi said bitterly. "So I either shave, or I permanently lose my facial hair, right?"

"I'm afraid so," Dr. Tina confirmed.

"Okay, I've heard that conventional electrolysis takes a long time and is very uncomfortable. True?" She looked at Rachel and Tina for an answer.

Rachel nodded. "True."

"That one is out. Shaving is out. The remaining choices I have are laser electrolysis and the chemical?"

Dr. Tina nodded. "Laser electrolysis is less uncomfortable, but might take a couple of repeat treatments. The new chemical depilation is much quicker, but we'd have to check for sensitivity first."

"And if we go the chemical route? What about effects on the baby?"

Dr. Tina shook her head. "The Foundation's main lab developed the formula. They test everything for fetal toxicity. We're pretty proud that anything from our labs is the safest thing on Earth for babies in utero."

"But I'll be permanently hairless, right?" She shook her head. "That's like ... jumping off a cliff. There's no going back."

Dr. Tina stood. "You probably want to talk with Rachel some about this." She left Tommi and Rachel to talk.

Rachel watched Tommi, sitting slumped back in her chair, with her head hanging low. "This isn't what you were expecting today, is it?"

Tommi shook her head. "No," she said softly. "This is ... kind of overwhelming."

"Because it's permanent? Because it feels like you're taking another step toward becoming irrevocably female?" Rachel asked.

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. That's exactly it. Just like so many things that have happened so far."

"I know lots of men who'd love to not have to shave every morning. No more nicks, no more blades or shaving cream, ten minutes less of chore to get ready."

"Yeah," Tommi countered, "but they can grow a beard or moustache if they want to. If I go through with this, I'll never be able to grow one."

"And what's wrong with that? Is your manhood is measured by your facial hair?" Rachel asked.

"In some cultures, it is, yes," Tommi rebutted.

"But not ours."

"No, not ours." Tommi shut her eyes and took a few long slow breaths. When she opened her eyes again, she bit her lower lip. "Okay. Let's go ahead and get it over with. Let's go with the chemical treatment."

"Are you sure, Tommi?" Rachel asked. She could see that this was a huge step for Tommi. "You don't have to decide right this minute."

"Yes, I do. The last treatment is wearing off, and I'll be a hairy ape in a couple of days. Let's do it."

Katie glanced over at Tommi as Tommi clicked off her cell phone. Tommi was white and her mouth hung open in shock. "What's wrong?" Katie asked immediately.

Tommi shook her head back and forth slowly, as if she didn't comprehend.

"Tommi," Katie repeated, more insistently, "what's wrong?"

"Liz called." Tommi slowly turned toward Katie. "It's Ma."

"What's happened?"

Tommi continued shaking her head sadly. "She ... had a heart attack. She's ... she's in pretty bad shape."

"She's still alive, then?"

Tommi nodded. "Barely. She's in critical condition." She rose slowly. "I've got to go find Sara."

Katie shook her head and stood. "I'll go find her," she offered. "You aren't supposed to overdo things." She gently pushed Tommi back down on her bed.

Tommi nodded slowly. "Okay." She let herself fall onto her side and curled up into a fetal position.

A knock sounded, and before Tommi could say anything, the door opened, and Jillian came in. "Hi," she said in a chipper voice. She noticed Tommi lying on her bed. "Are you okay?" she asked immediately, her cheerful disposition changing instantly to concern.

"It's my Ma," Tommi said in a barely-audible voice. "She had a bad heart attack."

Jillian sat down beside her on the bed. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she whispered. "Is there anything I can do?"

Tommi shook her head. "No." She sighed heavily. "I" She paused, biting her lip. "Ma and I never got along. She ... hates me for not living up to what my Dad wanted, and she hates me more for what I'm doing now."

"That's pretty tough to deal with," Jillian said. "Are you going to go see her?"

Tommi sighed. "I'd rather not, but with Sara here ... I'll probably have to."

"I understand."

The door opened and Katie entered, followed by Sara. As soon as Katie saw Jillian, she gave her a withering glare. "Jillian," she said simply in acknowledgement of the presence of the girl.

Jillian looked up at Katie and frowned. "Katie, Sara," she said, sounding a little hurt by the animosity being displayed to her. She turned back to Tommi. "I've got to run, and your sister is here. Let me know if there's anything I can do for you." She stood, ignoring the continuing glares directed her way, and walked out with as much dignity as she could muster.

Katie didn't wait for the door to close behind Jillian. "I found Sara," she announced.

Sara looked down at Tommi, who was uncurling herself to sit up. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

Tommi nodded slowly. "Ma had a heart attack."

"When?" Sara was shocked by the news.

"A few hours ago. I just got a call from Liz."

"How is she? She's all right, isn't she?"

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know. Liz said she's in pretty bad shape. She's in the hospital. That's all I know." Tommi glanced up at Katie. "It's not a big hospital. It's not good for critical cases like heart attacks."

Sara stared at Tommi for several seconds. "When are we going?" she finally asked.

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know if we can."

"We've got to go."

"But ... classes and homework and ..." Tommi said hesitantly.

"She's our mother!" Sara said, frustrated that Tommi seemed to be hesitating.

Katie nodded. "Tommi, you have to go."

"But" It was clear that Tommi really didn't want to go home. "My car isn't in good shape, and besides, I have a calc quiz every Thursday."

Katie moved over to sit beside Tommi. "Tommi," she began soothingly, "I understand how you feel. I was there with you last Christmas, remember? How many times have we talked about your family and how much they hurt you? I know. But you still have to go."

"But..."

"But you have to try! You have to reach out. What happens if she doesn't make it? Will you feel guilty for not trying to mend fences with her?" Katie pleaded with Tommi.

Sara added her voice. "Tommi, please. We have to go!"

"But ... my car won't make it!"

Katie solved that problem. "Take mine. You can leave Thursday after your quiz."

Tommi glanced back and forth between Katie and Sara. "I don't think it's going to do any good," she mumbled. "But I'll go."

"Call if you need me," Katie reminded the two girls. "And be careful."

Tommi nodded morosely. "We will." She rolled up the window and put the car in gear.

As they rolled through town, Sara seemed nervous. "My driving's not that bad," Tommi joked.

Sara tried to smile but failed. "I got chewed out by Liz last night for not being there already," she explained.

"Yeah. She ragged on me, too."

"She said the doctors aren't very hopeful because Ma is so overweight and smokes so much."

"Sara," Tommi started, but she stopped abruptly.

"What?"

"You may find that there's nothing there for you anymore," Tommi finished her thought. "And if you do, it's going to be ... painful."

"Tommi, how much have I talked about home since I got to college?"

"Uh, not much I guess."

"How many times have I asked about going home?"

"None?"

Sara nodded. "Liz was so vicious to me that I don't really want to see her. And Ma - well, Ma wasn't nice to me ever!"

"But ... you were the baby of the family!" Tommi protested in surprise. She couldn't believe the words she was hearing from Sara.

"I overheard Ma and Dad arguing once," Sara confessed. "Dad blamed Ma for not giving him, quote, a bunch of strong, strapping sons, unquote. I was Ma's last chance. I think she took Dad's frustration with her out on me."

"I know I was a disappointment to Dad," Tommi admitted softly. The old wound had been reopened, and she felt misty-eyed.

"So was I," Sara added. "You couldn't hear, because of where your room was, but sometimes, late at night, I could hear them arguing a lot."

Tommi said nothing, trying to fit these new pieces into the puzzle that was her parents' lives. Slowly, she was realizing that the family she thought she knew wasn't anything like reality.

"Ma blamed both all of us for her not being able to go back to school and get her associate degree," Sara continued.

"I never knew that."

"Dad always said she didn't have time to go off to school. You remember when Rufe Johnson died?"

"I remember," Tommi said softly.

"After the funeral, Dad went out with the guys and got really drunk. When he got home, Ma and Dad had a real big argument. She said he was keeping her from bettering herself. She said that she could have been a bookkeeper or even a nurse's aide. She didn't want him working in the mine, because she was afraid it'd kill him, just like it did Rufe. Dad got really mad at that. You know that the mine was his life. He told her that she wasn't capable of that sort of job, since she wasn't even capable of giving him strong sons. She threatened to leave him and prove him wrong."

"I didn't know that."

"Dad beat her pretty bad that night," Sara said sadly. "Remember how she claimed she fell down the stairs?"

"Yeah."

Sara shook her head. "It wasn't the stairs. It was Dad."

"I ... I suspected something like that happened," Tommi admitted very softly. "I guess I never wanted to admit it to myself." She sighed. She hadn't wanted to confront the awful truth of her home.

"I think Ma started hating us both that night. Up to then, I think she just resented that we weren't the big strong boys Dad wanted. She resented how much time we took so she couldn't go back to school. Mostly, she was jealous of her best friend, Marlene, who did get an education and had a good job in the hospital." Sara sighed. "But after that night, I think she started actually hating us."

Tommi sat silently, trying to accept confirmation of what she'd always tried to deny. "But ... Liz? She and Ma ..."

Sara sighed sadly. "Liz and Ma were both angry and resentful, and they fed off each other's hate. They still do."

"But, why would Liz feel so angry and hateful?"

"She hated you from the day you were born. She was the first-born, and was special for a while. And then you were born." Sara shook her head sadly. "Sometimes, late at night,

when she thought I was asleep, I used to lie quietly and listen to her curse you and the day you were born. She cursed me, she cursed Dad. Basically, she hated all of us - all but Ma."

"I don't get it. I thought she hated Ma."

Sara nodded somberly. "She probably does, in a way. I think she blamed Ma for getting pregnant with you and spoiling her place in the spotlight as the only child. She blamed Ma for getting pregnant with me and spoiling her role as Daddy's little girl. She blamed Ma for not getting an education before she had Liz in the first place so she'd have had a more privileged life. But in a way, she identifies with Ma, because that validates her self-pity. The one she really hated was Dad."

Tommi was thoroughly confused. "That doesn't make sense. Why?"

"Because he turned his back on his precious little daughter when you were born."

"She always had to blame someone else, didn't she?"

"Yup. And she's just like Ma in that regard." Sara sighed. "I was right when I thought she was pregnant. She was. She got married right away and moved out."

"Just like Ma did when she was Liz's age?" Tommi speculated.

"Uh huh. And she's smoking now, too. Just like Ma."

Tommi shook her head. "And I bet she's blaming everyone but herself."

"Funny thing is, every chance she got after she moved out, she'd come over, and she and Ma would sit around, watch TV, smoke like chimneys, and bitch about how everyone else had ruined their lives."

Tommi sat silently, thinking. She felt pity for Liz and for Ma. They could have had more, if they'd accepted responsibility for themselves. Instead, Liz was following the same dead-end path that had trapped their mother.

"Why?" Tommi asked simply.

"Why, what?" Sara was perplexed.

"Why were you so insistent that we go back? If everything is as bad as you remember, then why go back?"

Sara sat back and closed her eyes, lost in thought. She turned toward Tommi after a few moments. "Because I have to prove to myself that I'm better than their hatred. I have to forgive Ma, so I know I'm not going down the same path of anger that consumed her and Liz."

Tommi glanced at Sara, wide-eyed with surprise. "You sound wise beyond your years," she finally said. "I ... can't forgive them. Not after what they did."

Sara shook her head. "But you have to, Tommi. You have to let go of the anger." She sounded like she was both begging Tommi and warning her.

Tommi stared at her and started to laugh. "You sound like Yoda!" she guffawed.

Sara giggled. "Anger leads to hate," she said in a high, gravelly voice. "Hate leads to the Dark Side."

Tommi drove in silence for several miles. "Maybe you're right," she finally said to Sara. "Maybe I _do_ need to let go of my hate." She drove in silence for a long time, with only the background music of the radio playing. Sara had given her a lot to think about.

"How do you know all this?" Tommi finally asked when curiosity got the better of her.

Sara laughed. "Sometimes, Liz told me things just to try to hurt me. Sometimes, she wanted to get me on her side against you. Some of it, I overheard from Ma and Dad. And some of it - well, I overheard a few phone conversations that I shouldn't have."

"Bout time you two got here!" Liz snapped as Tommi and Sara hurried into the hospital.

Tommi ignored Liz's ill temper. "How is she?"

"Not good, thanks to the two of you!" Liz continued her rant.

"Can it, Liz," Tommi snarled. "We're here to see Ma, not fight with you."

Liz glared at Tommi for a few moments. Without further word, she turned and walked to the elevator. Tommi and Sara followed. The elevator ride was mercifully short, as the tension between Liz and the other two girls was palpable. As soon as the doors opened, Liz led the way to the nurse's station.

"We're here to see Mrs. Wilson," Sara said quickly, as she stepped around Liz.

The duty nurse looked up, and upon recognizing Sara, smiled. "Hi, Sara," she said cheerfully. "She glanced at the chart, and her features clouded. "Your mom is in the Intensive Care Unit, room forty-two."

"Thanks." Sara turned in the indicated direction.

"Um," the nurse cleared her throat as she looked at the trio. "Because she's in the ICU, only immediate family members are allowed to visit." She was looking directly at Tommi.

Sara glanced at Tommi, suddenly worried. This was a complication that she hadn't expected.

Tommi patted Sara on the shoulder. "Go ahead. I'll be right in." She turned to the desk, fishing in her purse as she did so.

"Okay," Sara said hesitantly. She hurried down the hall to Ma's room.

The nurse looked closely at Tommi. "The records list two daughters, Liz and Sara, and one son Tom." She shook her head. "And you don't look anything like a son."

Tommi smiled. "I have here a letter from my doctor that explains everything." She handed an envelope to the nurse, who took it warily. Inside were a typed letter on the clinic stationery and a couple of pages of medical information, progress reports, test results, and the like.

"And my doctor reminded me to tell you that you are now looking at medical records, so you're bound by HIPAA regulations against disclosure, under penalty of law." Tommi was grateful that Dr. Tina and Rachel had anticipated this and had given her the letter and material.

The nurse read the letter, glancing at the other pages as she did so, her eyes widened. She looked up at Tommi, then back at the letter, and then up at Tommi again. "You're ... you mean ... this is"she stammered.

Tommi smiled and took back the pages. "Google 'Morris-Henderson Organ Cloning' or 'Morris Foundation'. I think that'll answer all your questions. Now, may I go in?"

The nurse, still wide-eyed, nodded mutely.

Tommi followed the direction Sara had taken, and came into the room.

Ma was lying in bed, her eyes closed. Nasal tubes were delivering oxygen, while overhead, monitors displayed information about her status. Sara was standing beside the bed, holding Ma's hand, while Liz sat in a chair in the corner, glaring at the two of them.

"How is she?" Tommi asked.

"She's not awake right now," Sara answered.

"She comes and goes," Liz commented acidly. "She's unconscious most of the time." She sneered at Tommi. "I wondered how you were going to get past the nurses, since they were expecting a _man_!"

Tommi decided to ignore the biting comment. "I'm going to talk to the nurse to see what I can find out." She turned and strode back down the corridor. In a few minutes, Tommi returned.

"What did you find out?" Sara asked, anxious for some news.

Tommi shook her head. "She couldn't tell me a lot, but she did page the on-call doctor to come to talk to us."

Almost ten minutes later, the doctor entered the room. "Hi, I'm Doctor Schmidt," he said by way of introduction. "I understand you would like some information about your mother."

Tommi and Sara nodded, while Liz just sat in the corner glaring. "Yes," Tommi replied politely.

"We admitted your mother for a ..." The doctor stopped, and narrowed his eyes as he gazed at Tommi. "The policy is for immediate family members only in the ICU," he said carefully.

Tommi sighed and pulled the envelope from her purse again, handing it to the doctor.

"Um, hmm," he said as he read the contents. "I'm familiar with the process, but not the foundation." He looked at Tommi. "Interesting," he commented as he handed back the letter. "Very well, I understand who you are. Your mother had a massive coronary infarction, which is ..."

"A major heart attack," Tommi finished for him.

The doctor glanced at Tommi again, before continuing. "We've stabilized her, but that's about all we can do right now."

"Don't heart attack patients usually have a coronary bypass?" Sara asked.

The doctor nodded. "That's correct. However, we found a complication, a significant complication that has weakened your mother. Right now, she very likely wouldn't survive the stress of bypass surgery. She has a large tumor on the right upper lobe of her lung, almost exactly where the bronchi enters the lung. It has grown to the point that her right lung is, effectively, blocked."

"Have you done a biopsy?" Tommi asked quickly.

The doctor eyed Tommi warily. "Yes, but we don't have the results yet."

"But ... you suspect the tumor is malignant?" Tommi sounded certain of the answer.

The doctor glanced at the girls, and nodded somberly. "Yes. It is near the juncture of the right primary bronchus and her trachea, which means that it will most likely spread to her left lung, if it hasn't already."

"Her chances are ...?" Tommi prompted.

The doctor grimly shook his head. "There's nothing we can do. Her heart isn't strong enough for surgery to remove the tumor, let alone chemo or radiation to try to stop it. On the other hand, the cancer has weakened her so much that she wouldn't survive bypass surgery." He winced. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing we can do."

Tommi nodded. "I understand," she said softly. She wrapped her arm around Sara, who was sobbing softly. "How long?"

The doctor shrugged. "I don't know," he said simply. "The tumor is very large, and she's had massive heart damage. It could be hours, it could be weeks."

"Is she in pain?"

The doctor shrugged again. "We're giving her what we can for pain."

"I understand." Tommi hugged Sara more tightly.

"Do you have any other questions?" he asked. When they shook their heads, he added, "If you think of any, please let the nurse know." The doctor turned and left.

Tommi felt strangely devoid of tears. She knew her mother was dying, but she didn't feel any pain, no sense of loss, no need to cry. But there was something that needed to be done. Tommi turned to Liz. "You realize that what Ma needs right now is a hospice, not this hospital room. But there isn't one anywhere close."

"A hospice is where people go to die," Liz said angrily. "Ma needs the hospital."

"Weren't you listening?" Tommi asked, incredulous. "Haven't you heard anything the doctors have said for the past couple of days? Ma is dying! She's not going to get better! She had a heart attack, and she's got lung cancer!"

Liz glared at Tommi. "I'm not dumb," she snarled. "I heard them say she's got a tumor and had a heart attack. They need to operate to remove the tumor, and then they can fix her heart."

"They can't operate! She's too weak for either surgery! She's dying!"

Liz stared at him for several long and uncomfortable seconds. Finally, she dropped her gaze, and the fire seemed to go out of her defiant posture. "I ... know," she mumbled.

After a bit, Liz looked up. "I suppose you two need the key to Ma's house so you've got a place to stay," she said, not disguising the bitterness in her voice. "I'll have to run home and get it for you."

"No need to bother," Sara said simply. "We've made other arrangements."

"Okay," Liz replied. She stood abruptly. "I've got to go home. I've got to take care of my little Jason," she said firmly. "He's a strong, growing little boy, you know." She walked out of the room.

"She just had to get in a last dig, didn't she?" Sara asked.

"Yeah. But it doesn't bother me. She's just a bitch."

"It's late. Are you hungry, too?"

Tommi nodded. "And we've got another twenty minute drive to the motel."

"Pizza?"

"Sure. Let's go." Tommi turned, and with one last glance over her shoulder at her Ma, left the hospital room.

"How did you get past the nurse? And what was in that envelope you showed the doctor?"

Tommi smiled. "Rachel and Dr. Tina wrote a letter, with records documenting who I am."

Sara's eyes widened. "You realize that the whole town is going to know by morning?"

Tommi shrugged. "There's a little law about protecting patient privacy. Dr. Tina put it together so that it qualified as a medical record. And she wrote a little reminder that disclosure of patient information, in this case mine, is an act punishable by law."

"Clever, but that won't stop the rumor mills in this town."

Tommi nodded slowly. "I know. But it might slow it down some." She looked at her sister. "You handled it better than I thought you when the doctor was giving the rundown on Ma's condition."

Sara shrugged. "I guess I expected it. During the summer, Ma started coughing and hacking a bunch. She said it was nothing but allergies."

"Smoker's cough?"

Sara nodded. "Yeah. I tried to get her to go to the doctor, but she wouldn't."

"I can believe that."

Sara leaned back, resting her head on the wall, and closed her eyes. She took a few slow breaths and shook her head. "So what do we do? Go home now?"

Tommi sighed heavily. "I think we should try to see Ma tomorrow, at least. Maybe she'll be conscious for a bit."

Sara shrugged. "If she's doped up on pain meds, what good would that do?"

"Aren't you the one who lectured me that we had to try to talk to her?"

"Touche."

A soft moan sounded from the bed. Tommi and Sara both started, and they spun toward the noise.

Tommi was the first at the bedside. "Ma?" she asked hopefully. "Can you hear me, Ma?"

Sara, too, was at the bed, and she grasped her mom's hand. "Ma, it's me, Sara. I'm here, too."

The old woman in the bed moaned again, turning her head slightly from side to side. Slowly, her eyes opened a crack. "Sara?" she whispered hoarsely. "Is that you?"

"I'm here, Ma," Sara answered quickly. "Tommi's here, too."

"Tom's here?" Ma turned her head, peering through her barely-open eyes. "Where's Tom?" As she moved, she moaned in pain.

"Ma, it's me, Tommi. Remember?"

"Uhhh," the old woman grunted. "Sissy-boy Tommi!" For a weak, dying old woman, she managed to get significant contempt into her words.

Tommi shook her head sadly. "Ma, I know you don't like what I did. But I'm still your child."

"Hmmpf! Sara? I hurt. Make them give me something."

Sara glanced at Tommi, who nodded. Sara turned and left the room, heading toward the nurse's station.

"Ma, I need to tell you something," Tommi continued.

"Hmmpf!" the old woman grunted again.

"Ma, you've always been mean to me. But I forgive you."

"Hah! _You_ forgive _me_?" The old woman paused to cough. "After what you did to me?" She coughed again. "After you disappointed me and your father?"

Tommi shook her head sadly. "I'm not you, and I'm not Dad. I never was, and I never will be."

"That's for sure."

"Why couldn't you ever accept me for who I am? Why did you always compare me to Dad?"

"You're a disappointment," she coughed. "Never measured up."

"Are you mad now because Sara and I found a way out, but you didn't?" Tommi asked softly.

The old woman coughed badly. "I need something for pain," she said again.

"Sara went to get the nurse," Tommi explained. She gazed down at the old woman, and felt nothing but pity. "Ma, the doctors can't do any more. You've got cancer."

"You know it all now, too?" Ma wheezed.

"The doctor told us. You're ... dying."

"Eh? Dying?" She coughed again.

"Ma, you're my mother. I know you did your best trying to bring us up. I know it wasn't easy. But I want you to understand. I'm not Dad!"

"He was so damned disappointed in you," the old woman repeated. "Never let me forget it." She got into a coughing spasm that frightened Tommi.

The nurse rushed in with a syringe in hand, with Sara close behind. She looked at the monitors, then pushed Tommi aside and injected the medicine from the syringe into the IV line. After disposing of the syringe, she turned to Tommi and Sara. "She should get some relief in a few seconds. She'll probably fade to sleep again in a bit, though." She glanced at the monitor again, turned, and padded softly from the room.

Tommi spoke again. "Ma, I don't hold any grudges against you and Dad. You did your best. Can you try to understand?"

"What? That you never lived up to what Ron wanted?" She coughed again, less violently this time. "You kids cost me my chance."

Tommi sighed and shook her head toward Sara. "It's no use," she said to her sister. "She's never going to understand." She glanced at Ma, and then back at Sara. "You want to try to talk to her?"

Sara sighed and nodded. "If it will do any good."

Tommi nodded and stepped out of the room. She slumped into a chair by the nurse's station. She'd tried, but Ma had rejected her attempt at reconciling. They'd spent a day and a half at the hospital, waiting for Ma to regain consciousness, if only for a bit, so they could talk to her.

Tommi was aware that the nurses were giving her the eye. By now, the nursing staff must know that Tom Wilson was now Tommi Wilson, and that she was home to see her dying mother. She wondered how long the secret would last in this town. Privacy rules didn't seem to matter much here. Tommi knew that sooner or later, the town was going to find out, and there'd be trouble.

Sara came out of the room, a sad expression on her face. She shook her head as Tommi stood. "Nothing," she said softly.

"So now what?"

Sara sighed. "Let's go home." It was more than obvious from her comment that "home" was the college and their friends.

"Okay. Liz is here, and she was at least civil enough to not barge in while you were talking."

Sara looked around. "Where is she?"

"She went out for a smoke," Tommi said. Despite the anger that Liz had directed her way, she felt sad for Liz. "I wish she'd stop before she ends up like Ma."

Sara nodded. The two girls walked to the nurse's station.

"The doctors tell us there's nothing anyone can do," Sara said matter-of-factly, "so we're going back to college"

The nurse looked up at them and nodded sadly. "It's out of our hands, now," she said compassionately. "All we can do is to wait."

"Thank you for all you _have_ done," Tommi acknowledged. "I know you'll keep her as comfortable as possible."

The nurse looked up at Tommi. "I still can't believe you're little Tom Wilson," she said softly. "I would have never guessed!"

Tommi sighed. "It saved two babies' lives, and it pays for college," she answered simply. She turned, and with Sara beside her, walked to the elevator. As they exited the hospital building, Tommi spied Liz to one side, in a small covered smoking area. She turned toward her older sister.

"There's nothing more we can do," Tommi said simply. "We're going back to school."

"I see," Liz replied coldly. "You're going to dump it all on me?" She took a drag on her cigarette.

Sara sighed and shook her head. "There's no pleasing you, is there? If we do anything, you get mad for us interfering. If we leave it alone, you get mad at us for dumping it on you."

"Why, you little ..." Liz fumed. She exhaled the smoke angrily. "I should ..."

"Drop it, Liz," Tommi snapped. "We came up here to see if there was anything we could do for Ma. There isn't. It's not worth us fighting over. That won't help Ma."

"There's one thing I need to ask of you," Sara interjected."

"What?" Liz seemed put off that Sara would dare ask _anything_ of her.

"Look at Ma. She's in her mid-fifties, right? Lying in that bed, she looks like she's seventy or eighty. She can't breathe. She's dying." Sara shook her head. "Please, stop smoking so you don't end up like her."

Tommi nodded. "Liz, I know we've never gotten along, but you're still family. Please stop. Please don't pass up the chances that Ma missed."

Liz stood, too shocked by the sincerity of their request to answer. It was obvious that she'd expected a confrontation, and was stunned by their concern for _her_.

Tommi and Sara turned and walked slowly toward the car. Without saying a word, they both knew that they'd never come back, probably not even for Ma's funeral. This town no longer had anything for them.

Chapter 18 -- Dealing with Grief

"You aren't going back for the funeral?" Rachel seemed stunned by Tommi's decision.

Tommi shook her head. "Why? There's nothing for me there." She leaned back casually in the stuffed chair in Rachel's office, but even then, her legs were properly crossed because she was wearing a skirt. "Besides, everyone back home knows who I am now, and what I'm doing." She shook her head. "It's not safe."

Rachel noted Tommi's posture. Tommi's habits were a lot more feminine than Tommi even realized. It would be something for Rachel to bring up later. Maybe she'd suggest that Dee get together with Tommi and discuss the subject; after all, Dee was Tommi's new mentor. Besides, Tommi still hadn't opened completely up to Rachel after their 'incident' the past summer. Even though they were making progress, Rachel knew she had a long way to go to re-establish that trust with Tommi that Rachel had shattered.

In the meantime, Rachel had more pressing issues to discuss with Tommi. "I understand that you had issues with your mom, but it seems a little disrespectful."

"I had a chance to talk with Ma, to let her know that I forgave her," Tommi said, sounding a bit defensive.

"How'd that go?"

Tommi snorted. "She was pig-headed and stubborn to the end. Sara said the same thing happened to her."

"How did Liz react to your trip home?"

Tommi shook her head. "She's just as angry as Ma was, and she seemed to be extra-bitter towards both Sara and me." Tommi sighed heavily. "She's just like Ma, in too many ways." As Tommi recollected the weekend, a tiny laugh escaped her.

"Something about the trip amused you."

Tommi nodded. "You should have seen the look on Liz's face when both Sara and I pleaded with her to not follow the same path Ma took."

Rachel's was thoroughly surprised. "That sounds ... very charitable of you, considering. How did she react?"

Tommi laughed. "It was the first time in our lives that we saw her speechless. Sara even told her that, even though she'd been mean and spiteful toward us, she was still family, that we still cared about her, and we really wished that she'd quit smoking so we didn't lose another family member."

"All things considered, that's a lot more than I'd have been able to do." Rachel glanced at her notes. "You don't feel any grief?" she asked, almost incredulous.

"Nope."

"No sense of loss?"

Tommi looked evenly at Rachel. "If you were in my shoes, would you?"

"I don't know. I'm not in your shoes."

"Good point." Tommi sighed. "Look, I know you're concerned about my mental health," Tommi explained, "but I'm okay. It's hard to explain, but I feel like I lost Ma years ago, not just three days ago. She was so distant and angry and resentful, I never felt any closeness. Does that make any sense?"

Rachel nodded. "Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. You mourned that loss years before."

"When Liz called to tell me that Ma was on a breathing tube, Sara and I knew that she wasn't going to last very long."

"How did she go - if you don't mind me asking?" She was probing a bit, hoping that if there was any grief, her questions would draw it out. It wouldn't be healthy for Tommi - or the baby - for her to carry unresolved emotional issues.

Tommi closed her eyes momentarily, biting her lower lip as she did so. There was some emotion there. "After we left home, before we even got back here, they had to intubate Ma. She was having a lot of trouble breathing. On Monday, she was fighting the tube whenever the morphine didn't have her knocked out. Monday night, when she was conscious, apparently she indicated to the nurse that she didn't want more pain meds, but she did want to talk to Liz.

Liz said that she asked Ma if she wanted the tube out, and Ma agreed. The doctor told Liz that Ma would die without the breathing tube. Liz told Ma, and Ma agreed again." Tommi paused, and wiped at the corner of her eye.

"They took out the tube Monday night, and only then did she let them give her more morphine. Within a couple of hours, she was gone."

"It sounds like it was peaceful for her."

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. Liz said she wasn't in pain. She just faded away in her sleep."

"How is Sara doing?"

Tommi's eyebrows rose when Rachel mentioned Sara. "She's doing okay, I guess." Tommi couldn't shake the feeling that Rachel's concern for Sara meant something more than just concern about how Sara could help Tommi.

"You two have been talking about your mom's death?"

"Yeah. But mostly about arrangements, you know." Tommi sighed. "Liz already had Ma's power of attorney from us so she can handle the estate, or what little Ma had that would pass for an estate. And I sent her some money so she could rent a storage space to put Sara's and my personal things in until we can get up there to move them."

Rachel sighed. "You sound a little too ... clinical. You know, detached, unemotional."

Tommi scowled. "What do you expect?" she retorted quickly. "Even on her death bed, she rejected me." Tommi sounded bitter.

Rachel scribbled some quick notes. There was emotion about the death, as she'd suspected. Now that it was out in the open, she could help Tommi get past her hurt feelings. "But you did expect that, didn't you? As I recall, you really didn't want to go, right?"

"No, not really."

"Perhaps you were clinging to an illusion that things could be made better? Were you hoping that, perhaps, your mom and you could reconcile?" Rachel speculated.

"Maybe."

"And maybe you were afraid of finding out that things were never going to be better, and that your feelings of rejection were real?"

Tommi cocked her head slightly and gazed at Rachel. "Do you know what it's like to be rejected by your own family?"

Rachel shook her head slowly. "No, I don't. I'm not going to pretend that I understand what you went through. I do know that you're hurting because of it."

"I've been rejected by my whole town," Tommi reminded her. "Not just my Ma, but everyone I knew growing up." Tommi sighed heavily. "After we left the hospital, Sara and I stopped for a bite before we hit the road. We ... bumped into Amanda, an old girlfriend. She'd heard the gossip and rumors, and she was pretty quick to figure out it was me." Tommi closed her eyes, shaking her head sadly. "She said some pretty mean things. It was pretty clear that everyone was going to reject me the same as she did."

"But not your little sister, Sara," Rachel reminded her. "Not Katie. Not your friends in the dorm. Not Erica. Not Brian. In fact, there are a lot of people who haven't rejected you, but have accepted you and love you."

"I suppose," Tommi said, not sounding convinced.

"What you need to understand is that the problem was theirs, not yours. Your mother rejected you because of her issues, not yours. She was bitter because she felt that you had gotten in the way of her success. She felt that she'd been blamed by your dad for you not measuring up. She felt that you and Sara took away her chance to escape. She probably resented you for finding a way out, because it reminded her that she hadn't. It sounds like she was very selfish, and that was her problem."

"That sounds too easy," Tommi said softly. "And it seems so hard to do."

Rachel laughed. "Often, we overlook simple solutions to complex problems because we think the solution has to be complex."

"Maybe."

Tommi was just opening the door to her dorm when she heard her name being called. She paused, glancing in the direction the shout had come from. "Hi, Jillian," she yelled back when she saw the source of the interruption.

"How was your trip?" Jillian asked as she ran to catch up with Tommi.

Tommi shook her head. "Not good." Tommi held the door for Jillian to enter, and followed.

"Hey, I should be doing that for you," Jillian chided.

Tommi laughed. "I'm pregnant, not crippled."

Jillian looked slightly chastised by Tommi's words. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "It's just that, well, you know."

Tommi smiled and lightly grasped Jillian's hand as a gesture of friendship and support. "I know. To you, this is very special, and you want everything to be perfect."

"I'm glad you understand."

"So what's up? You aren't going to convince me that you just happened to be in the area," Tommi said with a smile. "Not this late in the afternoon."

Jillian laughed. "I'm not even going to try." The merriment left her voice. "I ... well, I heard that your mother passed away, and I wondered if you might maybe, you know, want to talk."

Tommi abruptly stopped mid-stride. She looked down, biting her lip.

Jillian noticed that Tommi had stopped, so she turned toward her friend. "Are you okay?"

Tommi shook her head, still looking down. "I know you mean well," she said hesitantly, "but this is ... personal."

Jillian nodded mutely.

Tommi continued. "I never got along with Ma." She looked up, directly into Jillian's eyes. "I don't feel much of a sense of loss. I know it sounds cold, but I just don't feel the way people expect me to."

"I didn't mean"

Tommi nodded, a thin smile on her lips. "I know. You're concerned about me, and I appreciate it. But I'm okay. Honest."

"All right."

The two girls walked up the stairs toward Tommi's room. "Do you feel much morning sickness?" Jillian changed the subject.

Tommi laughed. "Not this time. The first one, I had it bad. But this one is a lot easier."

"I felt awful -- before the transfer!" Jillian commented. "After the transfer, I kept praying that you wouldn't feel as sick as I did."

"I guess I got the lucky break this time. They tell me that it varies from woman to woman, and from child to child." Tommi paused to unlock and open her door. "Wanna go get some pizza?"

"Pizza? Does your diet allow pizza?"

Tommi grinned. "I've earned a treat. My doctor is very happy with my weight this week, and I got to do a light workout for the first time since the surgery, so I figured pizza would be a good celebration." She grinned. "As long as nobody tells Dr. Tina!"

Tommi dropped her purse on her desk. "I've got to change from my workout clothes. Shouldn't take but a minute. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable." She began to gather fresh clothes from her dresser and closet.

Jillian sat in Tommi's chair. "What's it like, living in the dorms? I'd guess you don't have much privacy."

Tommi laughed as she pulled off her spandex top. "Not really, but it's no big deal to me. I take it you live at home?"

"Yeah."

The door opened, and the sound of many happy girls exploded into the room, followed closely by "the gang."

Sara was the first one in. "Hey, Tommi," she called out and then froze when she saw Jillian.

Behind Sara, Katie, Ashley, Christine, Erica, and Diane came in, and they also stopped short when they recognized Jillian.

"Hi," Jillian said nervously, knowing that her presence had dampened the girls' spirits.

"Jillian," Sara said curtly.

Katie nodded toward Jillian, and made a show of turning toward Tommi. "We were just talking about going out for a bite. You wanna come?"

Tommi pulled her T-shirt over her head and pulled her hair free. "_We_ were just talking about pizza. That sounds like a great idea."

Jillian noticed the way the other girls were looking askance at her. "Uh, I think I'll take a pass tonight," she said half-heartedly. "Meet at the bake shop after your nine o'clock class?" She rose and started toward the door.

Tommi intercepted Jillian, wrapped her arm around Jillian's shoulder, and turned on the girls. "Why don't you just drop it?" she demanded of them. "Jillian is my friend. I don't understand why you're so down on her?"

Erica frowned. "In case you don't remember, it's _her_ fault that you're in the situation you're in," she said caustically.

"So? It's my life. If I've accepted it, why can't you?"

"I know Tommi's your friend," Jillian said tentatively, "and I know you think I'm to blame for what she's going through. But think of it this way - if Tom and I hadn't been caught ... being intimate, then you all wouldn't have Tommi."

The joke fell flat. Katie stood, arms crossed and staring stern-faced at Jillian. "I'm sorry, Tommi," she said while frowning at Jillian, "but I'm having a hard time with trusting her. How do you know she's not using you again to get her out of trouble with her dad?"

Tommi started to speak, but Jillian put her hand on Tommi's arm. "I deserved that," she said sadly. "I can't make you like me, or even accept me. We didn't exactly start out on the right foot." She sighed. "What will it take for you to believe that I've changed? That Tommi helped me by being a friend and believing in me?"

She turned toward the door again. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said to Tommi. She sounded defeated and sad.

Tommi hurried over to block the door. "You're not leaving," she said firmly. "I've know what guys do in situations like this. It's a showdown. Someone forces the issue, there might be words or even a fight, and, by the end of the night, the guys are all drinking buddies."

"I also know that girls are a lot different. From what I've seen, girls aren't nearly as willing to forgive and forget, or let bygones be bygones." She shook her head. "I don't know all the girl rules, so we'll play it by rules I do know."

"I want this to end now. I want you all to accept that I trust Jillian, and I know that I'm the one who'll get hurt if I'm making a mistake in my judgment. I don't expect you all to be best buds with her, but I want you to give her the same break you gave me when I first came here last year. I was a former guy, and none of you knew me, and you had no reason whatsoever to trust me. But you gave me a chance. I want you do the same for Jillian."

When Tommi finished her short speech, the girls were all looking down at the floor, except for Katie. She stared at Tommi for a few seconds, glanced at Jillian, and turned her head back toward Tommi. "You're right, Tommi," she said. "That's not how girls do things. But you've got a good point." She turned to Jillian, and reached out her hand. "If Tommi trusts you, then I can too."

The other girls stared in shock at the exchange, before, one by one, they nodded their agreement.

"Yeah," Ashley added. "If Tommi can be friendly after Jillian made her get pregnant, I guess we should be able to as well." She giggled. "Damn, that sounded weird!" The girls guffawed at Ashley's strange comment.

Jillian glanced at Tommi briefly before wrapping her arms around Katie. "Thank you," she said, knowing her eyes were misting. "All I want is to be friends with Tommi."

"But if you hurt my little sister," Katie added menacingly, "I will make sure you regret it."

Jillian nodded. "Deal, because if I hurt her, I'll deserve whatever I get."

One by one, the other girls gave Jillian a quick hug.

"Okay, now who wants pizza? I got my monthly check, so I'll buy!" Tommi announced. Tommi's offer rekindled the mood of joviality, as she hoped it would.

Kim and Linda had been in the gym working out and had missed the confrontation. They joined the rest of the girls at the pizza parlor. For a few seconds, it was awkward, until Katie filled them in. Though there was still some distrust of Jillian, the tension was greatly lessened, and the girls enjoyed a break from their studies.

Even though it was a treat for Tommi, Katie and Sara were watching what Tommi was eating. Tommi had a small, plain salad with no dressing before she ate any pizza, much to her dismay, after Katie reminded her that Dr. Tina would be unhappy if she totally blew her diet.

Much later, as the girls walked back into the dorm, Jillian paused at the door. "I have to go home," she said, sounding less than enthusiastic. "But I had fun. Thank you."

Tommi gave Jillian a quick hug before following the other girls into the dorm. She didn't notice that Sara had held back and was still outside.

Jillian did notice. "I guess you want to talk to me," she said bluntly to Sara.

Sara nodded. Without warning, she launched herself at Jillian, wrapping her arms around the stunned girl in a massive bear hug. "I wanted to say thank you," Sara said as she laid her head alongside Jillian's. "Thank you for giving me a loving, caring sister. Tommi means more to me than anything in the world, and if it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have her."

Jillian gingerly returned the hug. "You're welcome," she said slowly. "I guess."

Sara backed off the hug. "I need to warn you of something, though."

"What's that?"

"I love my sister more than anything. If you hurt her, you ... will ... pay!" Sara's words had a menacing edge that made it clear just how much she loved her sister.

Jillian smiled. "I want you to know that I could never, ever hurt Tommi again. Not after what she's doing for me. As good a sister as she is for you, she's that good a friend to me."

Tommi rounded the corner of the classroom building, holding her books in front of her chest, and not really focusing on where she was going. Without warning, she bumped squarely into another person who was coming from the other direction.

Tommi halted awkwardly, and looked up. "Sorry, Stephanie," she said as soon as she recognized the other person.

Stephanie glared at Tommi, before she started to shove her way roughly past Tommi. "Out of my way," she snapped.

"Please don't shove, Stephanie," Tommi insisted firmly as she tried to dodge the physical shoving. "You might hurt the baby!"

The effect on Stephanie was unexpected. She stopped, frozen, her eyes widening with shock. "Baby?" she stammered.

Tommi nodded slowly. "I'm pregnant. I don't want anything to happen to the baby, so please don't push and shove me." Though her words were polite, she was very firm about her request.

Stephanie took a half-step backward, and collapsed against the wall. She looked shell-shocked at Tommi's revelation. Without warning, tears gushed from her eyes. "I'm sorry," she bawled. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know." As her face fell into her hands, she turned and bolted away from Tommi, crying aloud as she ran.

Without knowing why, Tommi found herself following Stephanie. "Steph," she called, "wait up! Are you okay?" She caught up to Stephanie in the stairwell, where Steph had collapsed onto a step, bawling.

"Steph, I'm sorry! I didn't mean anything!" Tommi repeated. She sat down beside Stephanie and hesitantly put her hand on Stephanie's shoulder. She expected Steph to rear up and snarl at her. Instead, Stephanie leaned against Tommi, putting her head on Tommi's shoulder as she continued to cry uncontrollably.

After the tears slowed, Stephanie muttered between sobs, "Are you really pregnant?"

Tommi nodded. "Yup. It's my second one."

"But ... you were a guy!" Stephanie exclaimed, confused.

Tommi nodded slowly. "I ... changed so I could pay my tuition. I work for a clinic that provides surrogate wombs for babies that would otherwise be aborted."

Stephanie's tears broke out anew, and her wailing increased in volume.

Not knowing what else to do, Tommi let Stephanie cry on her shoulder for some time, all the while wondering why Stephanie was reacting the way she was.

Through the tears, Stephanie muttered over and over, barely audible, "I'm so sorry!" Eventually, her tears slowed.

"It's okay, Steph," Tommi said soothingly. "I didn't take it personally."

Steph looked up at Tommi, her cheeks tear-stained and her eyes red and puffy. "Not you," she said softly. "_My_ baby!" She broke out in uncontrollable tears again as she spoke the words, collapsing onto Tommi's shoulder.

"I don't understand."

Stephanie lifted her head, looking at Tommi. "No one does," she said as she wiped at her continuing stream of tears. "No one understands."

"Steph, are you okay?" Tommi asked, trying to sooth the distraught girl.

"No, I'm not," Steph countered, her voice tinged with despair. "I'm not okay, and I never will be again!"

"No, Steph," Tommi countered, trying to buoy the girl's spirits, "you're..."

"I'll never be okay!" Stephanie rebutted sharply. "Don't you get it? I got ... pregnant ... and I had it aborted!" She started bawling again.

Tommi's mouth dropped open; she had no idea how to respond.

For some reason, Tommi's condition prompted Stephanie to bare her soul. "I was a freshman," she began, still crying. "I ... thought I was in love with one of the seniors. He ... we " She dropped her head on Tommi's shoulder again. "I think I was trying to trap him. I got pregnant. I was terrified when I found out." She sobbed more. "He ... told me to get it taken care of. Then he never spoke to me again!"

Tommi held her arm around Stephanie. "Oh, Steph, it happens."

"It wasn't supposed to happen!" Steph cried. "Are you Catholic?"

Tommi shook her head. "No. Why?"

"Then you don't know what this meant to me!" Stephanie sobbed. "I can never receive the sacraments again! Abortion is ... automatic ... excommunication."

Tommi stroked Stephanie's head as she cradled the sobbing girl. "I didn't know."

"I grew up in a good Catholic family. We went to Mass every week. Mom and Dad sacrificed so much so I could go to Catholic grade school and high school. And then I did something stupid!" She shook her head sadly, still crying. "I ... can't tell my parents! They'd be too disappointed in me! I don't even go to Mass any more, and it's causing problems in my family!" She started to cry again. "I'm all alone!"

Tommi suddenly wished that she knew more about the Catholic faith so she could help Stephanie. "Don't you have confession or something that you can go to?"

Stephanie shook her head slowly. "You don't understand. I'm ... I can't," her head sank, "Not after what I did!"

Tommi lifted her chin and looked Stephanie in the eyes. "Last year, I was a womanizing guy, and I got in trouble. Was I worthy of a second chance? Someone thought so, or I wouldn't be here! Isn't that a kind of penance?"

Stephanie sobbed. "I ... can't!"

"You have to!" Tommi insisted. "I'm guessing that you've never told anyone, right?"

Steph shook her head, affirming that Tommi's guess was correct.

"Right now, I can tell you're hurt and you feel lost. You need to regain your footing. I think you should try to talk to a pastor - or priest, or whatever they're called. You won't know the answer unless you try!"

Stephanie looked at Tommi, her eyes questioning. "Would ... you come with me?" she asked softly, uncertainly. "Please? I need someone to ... help."

Tommi knew she had homework to do, but she felt compelled to try to help Stephanie, despite how Stephanie had treated her in the past. "Okay. Where do we go?" She stood and helped Stephanie get to her feet.

"There's a Newman Center on campus," Stephanie said. "It's close by."

The two women set out across campus, with Tommi keeping her arm around Stephanie for moral support. Steph seemed uncertain in her steps, hesitant, and she was leaning heavily on Tommi for courage to continue the journey. Tommi wondered why Steph had decided to unburden herself with Tommi. She replayed the conversation in her mind over and over, until Tommi slowly realized that the key words were 'pregnant' and 'abortion'. It struck Tommi that Stephanie's emotional breakdown was inevitable, and that she just happened to be the one who had triggered it.

As they neared the Newman Center, Stephanie hesitated. "I ... can't" she sobbed.

Tommi gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "Yes, you can, Steph," she said soothingly. "You can do this. You need to do this."

Stephanie swallowed hard and looked to Tommi for reassurance. "I'm ... scared," she admitted softly.

"You can do it," Tommi repeated. "I'm here with you."

The pair walked slowly up the sidewalk toward the building. Tommi felt nervous because she'd never been in a Catholic church. In fact, the anti-Catholic bigotry in her home was strong, even if she didn't realize its effects on her. It was with a little trepidation that Tommi opened the door leading into the church.

The noise of a music group rehearsing was unexpected; Tommi flinched slightly. She'd grown up with the stereotype of nuns and somber older folks doing chants in Latin, so the

modern sounding music and the contemporary look and feel of the worship space confused Tommi. With her arm still wrapped around Stephanie, Tommi looked around, wondering who or what she was actually searching for.

One of the singers, a perky young girl, noticed them come in, and noticed that both girls seemed lost and confused. She practically skipped from the choir space to where Tommi and Stephanie stood. "Hi," she said in a cheery greeting. "Can I help you?"

Tommi swallowed nervously. "My friend needs to talk to someone about ... a problem."

"Oh," the girl replied. "Do you need a priest, or would you like to talk to one of our youth counselors?"

Tommi shrugged, her mouth open in uncertainty, and she looked to Stephanie for guidance.

"A priest," Stephanie said softly, almost inaudibly.

"Okay. Father Bill is probably in his office. If not," she added, "I can call him." She led Tommi and Stephanie across the back of the church, down a corridor, and into what looked to be a mix of office and living area.

"Oh, good, Father is in his office," she said when she saw a light in another room. She led the girls to the door and peeked in. "Father Bill?" There was a brief pause before she continued. "A couple of girls came by and said they need to talk to a priest."

The priest met Tommi and Stephanie at the door of his office. "Come in," he invited warmly. "Come in. Have a seat." The office was mostly informal, with a couple of small sofas and some stuffed chairs, and a small desk near one wall. The entire wall behind the desk was shelves filled with books and a few religious items.

The girl smiled at Tommi and Stephanie. "Good luck," she said in a hopeful voice before leaving to go back to the singing group.

"Thanks," Tommi replied. She sat down beside Stephanie in one of the sofas, grasping her hand for support.

"How can I help you?" the priest asked simply as he eased himself into one of the chairs.

Tommi was surprised by the priest's appearance. She'd expected a Bing Crosby type of priest, or a formal and stern old man. Instead, the priest was in his mid-thirties, and his eyes sparkled with energy. He wore his beard and moustache neatly trimmed, and he was a bit portly. The first impression Tommi had was a young Santa.

Tommi glanced at Stephanie, who seemed almost frozen with nerves. "My friend has a problem, and she needs to talk to someone."

"Oh? And what's the nature of the problem?"

Steph bit her lip, hesitating. Tommi prompted her. "Come on, Steph. You need to do this."

"I ... had ..." Steph's eyes started watering as she tried to continue. "I had ... an ... abortion," she sobbed as she buried her head in her hands.

"I see," the priest said, his voice even, devoid of judgment, and even a bit sympathetic. "And ...?"

Stephanie didn't look up. "I ... can't take the sacraments," Stephanie bawled. "And my parents don't know."

"Don't you do like some confession forgiveness thing?" Tommi blurted.

The priest smiled sadly at Tommi. "I take it you aren't Catholic?"

"No."

"It doesn't work that way," he explained patiently.

"I'm ... excommunicated, aren't I?" Steph asked through her sobbing. "I'll never be able to take the sacraments again, will I?"

Father Bill sighed. "Abortion is a mortal sin," he said, not mincing his words. He glanced at Tommi. "That's the most serious type of sin," he explained for her benefit before he turned his attention back to Stephanie. "But excommunication and permanent exclusion is more of a myth than reality." Stephanie looked up at his last words.

"Any sin, no matter how serious, can be forgiven, under the right circumstances," he continued. "You aren't automatically condemned because of one sin." He saw the hopeful look in Stephanie's eyes. "You do remember that our Lord taught that all sins can be forgiven, right? But to receive forgiveness, you must first be truly penitent, and then you need to do penance to atone in some way for your sin. For a mortal sin like abortion, it will need to be a significant penance."

"Maybe like ..." Tommi started, but she stopped.

"Go on," Father Bill urged, curious as to what this non-Catholic girl might suggest.

"Well," Tommi was hesitant, "I'm in a program with the Morris Foundation. They help save babies by providing a 'host womb' for a baby that would otherwise be aborted."

Father Bill nodded. "I've heard of the program."

"Well," Tommi continued, "wouldn't that be penance, to help prevent an abortion?"

Steph looked at Tommi, eyes wide with surprise. "But ..." She was hesitant about Tommi's suggestion.

The priest nodded. "That might be one way to do penance, although I would have to check to see if the Church approves of that ... process. There are other ways as well. It's really more for formal Reconciliation." He looked directly at Stephanie. "Would you like me to get my stole so you can do a confession?"

Stephanie glanced uneasily at Tommi before nodding slowly.

Father Bill seemed relieved that Stephanie wanted to reconcile. He looked at Tommi. "The sacrament of Reconciliation is a very private, personal matter," he said solemnly. "You will need to leave while Stephanie has this sacrament."

Tommi nodded slowly. "Okay." She patted Stephanie on the arm. "I'll be out in the church waiting," she said.

Tommi sat in the back pews, trying to stay comfortable and innocuous to the singing group. Surprisingly, as she looked around she found so many things that she didn't understand. Yet the church had a 'homey' feel to it. The music seemed warm and relaxing, but it had a spiritual message that reminded her of her home-town church. Tommi found it a comfortable place to rest.

After a while, Stephanie emerged, beside Father Bill. She looked a little less uncertain, but there was still sadness in her eyes. She thanked him, and he gave Stephanie a blessing.

Tommi rose and met Stephanie at the main door. Then Father Bill surprised Tommi, by asking, "Are you carrying a baby now?"

Tommi nodded.

"Would you like a blessing, for you and for the baby?"

Tommi's eyes widened, and she glanced at Stephanie. "I ... I guess."

Father Bill smiled. "Don't worry. It won't hurt." He said a prayer for both Tommi and for the unborn baby she was carrying.

As Tommi and Stephanie walked back into the cold evening air, Tommi asked, "How did it go? Are you okay?"

Stephanie sighed. "Yes. No." She shook her head. "I don't know." She sighed again. "Father Bill helped me understand that, no matter what, I'm never going to be the same. I'll probably always feel a sense of loss. But there is a way for me to obtain forgiveness, and to be reconciled with the church."

"That sounds good," Tommi said hesitantly.

"I guess." The two girls walked in silence for over a block.

"Tommi," Stephanie finally said, breaking the silence.

"Yes?"

"Can you take me ... to the clinic? Maybe tomorrow?"

Tommi felt a surge of relief. Stephanie had been so distraught that Tommi had feared for Steph's safety. "Of course, I can."

Steph turned and wrapped Tommi in her arms. "Thank you - for listening, and for helping."

Tommi hesitated at the front door. The sorority house was fancy, like most of the Greek houses on campus, and the Betas had a reputation of being world-class snobs. She remembered the nasty things these girls had said to her, how they'd mocked her, and mistreated her. She felt very unsure about even being here.

The door opened before Tommi could turn away. "Can I help you?" the girl at the door asked in a none-too-inviting tone.

"I was supposed to come by and pick up Stephanie," Tommi said, working to control her anger at the rude manners of the girl.

"Oh," the girl said, sounding almost disappointed that she'd just lost her excuse to continue practicing rudeness. "I see. Do you want to wait inside?" she asked, managing to make her invitation sound like she thought Tommi was beneath the Sorority's station.

"No," Tommi said evenly. "Please tell Stephanie that I'm waiting in my car."

"Okay." The door shut in Tommi's face.

Tommi shook her head in disbelief at the incredible lack of civility the girl had just displayed toward her. It was no wonder that this sorority had the reputation of being a bunch of bitches.

In only a minute or so, Stephanie emerged from the house. She trudged toward Tommi's car, and in that moment of watching her, Tommi realized that Stephanie's body language looked a lot less arrogant than she'd ever been. Perhaps even humbled? Without a word, Stephanie climbed in the passenger seat, and the two drove in silence down to the clinic.

Inside, Suzie greeted Tommi as usual - like a close sister. "You here for your checkup, right?" Suzie asked after the greetings and hugs.

Tommi nodded. "First, though, I have an appointment with Rachel." She turned toward Stephanie. "I promised Stephanie that I'd introduce her. She might be interested in the program."

"Oh, good!" Suzie said happily. "I'll let Rachel know you're here."

The girls didn't even have a chance to sit before Rachel came out into the lobby. She walked directly to Tommi and wrapped her in a warm hug. "You're looking well."

Tommi smiled, but faintly. "Can you put in a good word with Dr. Tina, then? She's going to complain that I'm cheating on my diet!"

Rachel stepped back and gazed up and down Tommi's figure. "It doesn't show, so it can't be that bad!" She laughed. "But I know what she's like." She shook her head, still smiling. "You're on your own. I'm not going to get caught between the two of you!" She gave Stephanie a curious glance. "And you are?"

"This is my friend, Stephanie. She's interested in learning more about the program. Stephanie, this is Dr. Rachel McKnight, the director of the center." She grinned. "But she won't let us call her anything but Rachel!"

Rachel grasped Stephanie's hand. "I'm pleased to meet you," she said warmly.

"Likewise," Stephanie replied, sounding nervous.

Rachel picked up on Stephanie's hesitancy. "Why don't we go back to my office and get to know each other? I'm sure you have a lot of questions about the clinic and the program." She turned and started walking with Stephanie toward the back.

"And I'm going to see Dr. Tina for my checkup," Tommi said before they disappeared. "I'll probably be done first, Steph, but if I'm not, I haven't abandoned you." She saw Stephanie's nod of affirmation before Rachel and Stephanie vanished into the back.

"I bet there's a story behind her," Suzie observed softly as she watched the two go into the back.

Tommi nodded. "Yup. But I can't talk about it." She turned and walked back herself, turning toward the clinic instead of the offices, as Rachel and Stephanie had.

"So?" Tommi asked, breaking an awkward silence, as they drove back to her sorority house.

Stephanie sighed. "Dr. McKnight thinks that I'm not ready to be a surrogate," she said softly. "She said that I need to do this for more than just penance. I have to have a need in my heart to help others, not just myself."

"Oh," Tommi said softly. "I'm sorry."

Stephanie shook her head. "No. She's right. I can't just do this to get quick forgiveness. I'm not sure I want to do this. She told me what's involved, and she said that if I wasn't one hundred percent sure, it would be the wrong thing to do."

"So what are you going to do?"

Stephanie leaned back against the headrest. "Father Bill said it would need to be a serious penance," she explained to Tommi. "He said it might not be easy. I guess he was right." Stephanie tried to smile. "Rachel set me up a volunteer position helping around the office. She also asked me to meet with the 'prospective donors' groups to talk about what my abortion meant to me, as part of a program to help women understand that deciding to have an abortion is a life-changing decision."

"That sounds like it's going to be tough."

Stephanie nodded. "Yeah. She also said that if I still want to do it in a month, we can start the testing to see if I'd be a suitable host mother."

"That sounds reasonable." Tommi pulled her car to a halt by the curb in front of Steph's sorority house.

I thought so, too." Stephanie unbuckled her seatbelt, then leaned over and gave Tommi a hug. "Thanks - for everything." She closed her eyes for a moment. "It hurts, and it probably always will, but I feel like I've finally found a path forward." She shook her head. "It's not going to be easy, but at least it's a positive step."

Tommi sat in her car watching Stephanie walk to the front door and enter the house. She hoped that Stephanie would be okay. Despite how Stephanie had acted toward her, she really didn't wish Stephanie any harm.

Chapter 19 - The Dean, Round Three

"I told you that this was going to happen!" Katie said in frustration. "I knew it was a mistake for you to start hanging with Jillian!" She paced uneasily back and forth between the beds, visibly frustrated with the new situation.

Tommi shook her head. "You don't know that, and neither do I."

Katie sighed, letting her head fall forward until she was staring at the floor. "Dammit, Tommi, what's going on?" She shook her head slowly. "What does the Dean want now?"

Sara lay sprawled on Tommi's bed. "It's not fair," she complained. "You haven't done anything wrong!" She frowned, her expression giving vent to the anger she was feeling.

"Why don't you give Jillian a call and see what the hell this is all about? I bet she knows!"

Tommi leaned back in her chair, letting her head rest against the wall. "Maybe I should," she sighed.

"Your grades are pretty good," Sara noted, "so that can't be it."

"And you haven't been in trouble with the house mother, so that's out," Katie added.

"And he wouldn't dare make trouble over your pregnancy," Sara added. "You're not even showing, so he wouldn't even be able to tell!"

Tommi sighed. "I don't know. It doesn't make any sense."

"Except that he hates you," Katie reminded her, "for screwing his daughter last year."

Sara stifled a giggle. "Would he carry a grudge that long?"

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know. From what I've heard, most of her older lovers were gone within weeks. I'm the only one who didn't get booted for some reason or other."

"And since she's been hanging with you," Katie added glumly, "she hasn't been so 'outgoing', so her dad doesn't have any new 'boyfriends' to pick on."

"Is there anything Rachel can do?" Sara asked hopefully. "I know she's offered legal help before."

Katie picked up on Sara's train of thought. "If you went in with a company lawyer, he'd really have to watch himself. He couldn't bully you like he's been trying!"

Tommi nodded. "Believe me, I've been thinking of doing something like that ever since his office called."

"So what are you going to do? The meeting is tomorrow morning."

"I don't know. I figured I might just go and see what he's up to before I overreact."

Katie and Sara both shook their heads, indicating their feelings towards Tommi's plan. "Probably not a good idea," Katie warned.

"You got a better idea with this short notice?"

Katie lowered her gaze again, shaking her head. "No."

Tommi padded to the secretary's desk. "I have an appointment with the Dean," she said softly.

The secretary looked up at Tommi, and then glanced at her computer. "Funny, I don't show a meeting scheduled. His schedule says he's unavailable for the next hour."

"But ... I got a call," Tommi began to protest.

"Send her in," the Dean's voice boomed from inside his office.

The secretary, wide-eyed with surprise at the scheduling irregularity, gestured to the office. "He'll see you now"

Tommi stiffened her resolve and marched into the Dean's office.

"Close the door." The Dean was sitting in his chair, staring directly at her, his countenance harsh and unfriendly.

Tommi shut the door before taking a seat opposite the Dean's desk. She didn't sit back, but rather perched on the edge of the seat. Something told her that this wasn't going to be a pleasant meeting.

"What is it with you?" the Dean began sternly. "Do you enjoy causing problems with my daughter?"

"Sir?" Tommi asked, perplexed.

"Jillian has been spending a lot of time with you."

"Yes, sir," Tommi rebutted, still confused. "She's my friend."

"How good of a friend is she?" the Dean demanded, his tone unpleasant. "Is she as good a friend as she was last year, when you caused the other trouble?"

"I'm not sure I follow," Tommi said hesitantly.

"Stop playing innocent with me, young lady!" the Dean barked. "Have you been seducing my daughter again?"

"Sir?" Tommi was totally confused. "I'm a girl now!"

"Exactly. So you decided to seduce my Jillian this time by turning her into your lesbian lover, is that it?" Veins were bulging on the Dean's neck; he was becoming visibly enraged, even unhinged.

Tommi swallowed hard. She hadn't expected this! Something inside Tommi snapped. She decided she'd had enough of the Dean's bullying. She was going to fight back, and

damn the consequences. "Jillian is my friend, not my lover! In fact, since we've been friends, she hasn't been fooling around, or hadn't you noticed?"

"What?" The Dean was taken aback by Tommi's defiant tone.

"She's a friend. Nothing more. Since she lost her mother, she desperately needs a friend!" Tommi added quickly.

"What? How dare you talk about our private lives," he roared. "You think I don't know what kind of pain Jillian is feeling? What about me? I lost my wife of over twenty years! How dare you!"

Tommi was almost intimidated. Almost. But the recent pain of dealing with Ma's passing had given her a resolve that she hadn't known she had. "I'm sorry if my words have been a painful reminder of your wife's passing," she said, trying her hardest to sound sympathetic, and knowing her apology wasn't really going to calm down the Dean. Still, she knew she had to be formal. She knew she was skating onto thin ice. "But what you don't see is that you are hurting Jillian!"

"How do you know what Jillian needs?" the dean roared.

"Because she's my friend!" Tommi rebutted sharply. "We talk. I listen. And that's what she needs most right now. She's hurting because she lost her mother! And she's hurting more because she feels like she's lost her father, too!"

"You impudent little twerp!" the Dean snarled. "I'll see that you're off my campus before the week is out! You have no business meddling with my family!"

"And you're too busy feeling sorry for yourself to see how much Jillian is hurting. She needs you! She needs your love, your attention. And what does she get? Instead of helping each other with your grief, she sees you burying yourself in your work, never home, never there for her! Did you ever stop to think that maybe she was having lovers so she could feel a little bit wanted and needed? Did that thought ever cross your mind? Or were you too busy feeling sorry for yourself over your loss that you forgot about her loss?"

"You might as well pack your bags now, because I'll have you off my campus before nightfall!" the Dean yelled menacingly. "You have no right to lecture me about my family!"

Tommi stood and leaned forward, her fists on the Dean's desk. "Try it!" she said in a surprisingly calm tone. "If you do anything to me, the Morris Foundation lawyers will be all over you like flies on shit!"

The Dean countered by leaning forward. He towered over Tommi, and, with his added size, it was an action to intimidate the girl. "You ..."

"You want to try? The director is just waiting to unleash the lawyers on you after the bullshit you've pulled so far! She assures me they'll have a field day in court. Do you think the

President of this illustrious school wants _that_ kind of publicity? Headline: Dean threatens co-ed over friendship. University sued."

The Dean tried not to show fear, but he blanched at Tommi's words. Inwardly, he _knew_ that he'd stepped over the line in the way that he'd bullied Tommi. The only question in his mind was whether Tommi was bluffing or not.

"You don't get it, do you?" Tommi continued, now less menacing and confrontational in her tone. "Jillian _needs_ you! You need _her_!" She closed her eyes for a moment. "You know what we do when we're hanging? Mostly, we talk about the parents we've lost, and we cry on each other's shoulders. We support each other. That's what we do! Not the ... lewd behaviors you're accusing own your daughter of!"

Slowly, as Tommi's words reached the Dean, he sank backward into his chair. Tommi, likewise, sat back down.

"Jillian is my friend. I don't like to see her hurt! And she's hurting inside like you don't know!"

The Dean looked defeated. "I ... didn't realize..." he stammered.

"Of course, you didn't," Tommi continued, pounding home her point. "You were so busy grieving yourself, and hiding from your grief in your work, that you forgot to see how your daughter was doing." Tommi shook her head sadly, sighing. "You two need each other more than either of you know, but neither of you can see it."

The Dean sat, eerily silent, his expression unreadable. Tommi didn't know if she'd crossed the line or not, whether she'd gotten through his stony heart or not. After several awkward moments of silence, Tommi stood. "If you don't have anything else for me, I'd like to be going. I've got classes, and then I'm meeting Jillian for a workout and dinner."

It was almost an effort for the Dean to look up at Tommi. For a few seconds, Tommi wondered how he was going to react to Tommi's rant. Finally, he gestured toward the door with a half-hearted shooing motion. "Go," he growled.

Tommi rose and walked to the door, turning back toward the Dean before opening it. "She really, really needs you." She turned and walked out of the Dean's office.

Once she was in the hall, Tommi collapsed against a wall. She looked at her hand and saw how badly she was shaking. The encounter had really been unnerving. Now it was up to the Dean. She might be out of the dorms, and out of college, by nightfall. Somehow, though, Tommi knew it would be all right ... eventually. She'd stood up for her friend, and she had the Foundation backing her. But that knowledge didn't help her frazzled nerves.

Tommi drove down to the clinic for her afternoon checkup, feeling a black cloud hanging over her head. Even Suzie's cheerful greeting didn't dispel her sense of impending doom. After her checkup, Rachel was waiting in the hall for Tommi.

"I guess Suzie ratted on me," Tommi speculated.

"She did mention that you weren't your usual chipper self," Rachel admitted. "And from the way you look and the way you're carrying yourself, I'd say she understated things a bit. Do you want to talk about it?"

Tommi sighed. "Yeah. I was kind of hoping that you'd be available." They headed toward Rachel's office. "I had a run-in with the Dean in his office this morning."

"Again?" Rachel asked, concerned. "He's been a first-class problem for you since ..."

Tommi laughed half-heartedly. "Since I was, um, motivated to join the program."

Rachel turned into her office and sat down on the sofa. Tommi sat at the other end, turned so she could talk to Rachel. "So what happened this time?" Rachel began.

Tommi sighed. "I've become friends with Jillian, the Dean's daughter," she began.

"Yes, I remember. And I also remember that Katie and Sara haven't exactly warmed to Jillian. And I also remember telling you that I didn't think it was a very good idea, given how the Dean tried to get you kicked out of school before."

Tommi nodded. "That's an understatement. They don't trust her, although I think Sara is torn. Because of Jillian, I'm a big sister to Sara."

"Yeah, she mentioned that," Rachel blurted without thinking. Her eyes widened as she realized that she'd said something that she shouldn't have.

Fortunately, Tommi missed it. "We had a run-in the other night when Jillian and I were going to go out for pizza. So were the girls. They were doing their best to make Jillian feel snubbed, and she was going to duck out, but I kind of pushed the issue."

"Oh? How so?"

Tommi grinned sheepishly. "I told the girls that, essentially, they should be ashamed because they'd given me a chance when they knew nothing about me, but they wouldn't give Jillian a chance to show that she'd changed."

"You do know that girls hold grudges a lot longer than guys," Rachel commented.

Tommi laughed. "Yeah. As I remember, that was part of my speech, too."

"What happened?"

"The girls decided that I was right, and they should give Jillian a chance." She shook her head. "And then this happens. I just know they're going to think she had something to do with it."

"Okay, back up. _What_ happened in the Dean's office?"

"The Dean accused me of corrupting his daughter into being my lesbian lover and threatened to have me thrown out by the end of the week." Tommi was a bit hesitant.

"That doesn't sound like fun. And?"

Tommi grimaced. "I kind of ... blew up at him," she admitted softly.

"Define 'blew up'," Rachel said, suddenly alert and very concerned.

"I basically told him he was full of shit, and that Jillian's behavior was because she was hurting from the loss of her mother, and that she needed someone to talk to because he wasn't there for her."

"Yikes!" Rachel flinched visibly. "Anything else?"

Tommi nodded, looking like she was confessing to murder. "I told him to go ahead and try to kick me off campus, because you'd have the Foundation lawyers circling like buzzards, and that the University probably wouldn't like the bad press."

"Holy crap, Tommi!" Rachel exclaimed. "Why don't you just toss a grenade in his office next time? That'd cause a lot less damage!" She sighed, closing her eyes. "I'm going to have to get on the phone to the corporate lawyers, aren't I?"

Tommi looked down, knowing she was in trouble. "Probably." She looked back at Rachel. "But I _had_ to say something! Jillian is really hurting! And she's my friend! I couldn't just let him keep ignoring her, when she needs him."

Rachel sighed again, shaking her head. "Probably accurate, but it really wasn't your business, nor was it your place to confront the Dean like that."

Tommi hung her head. "I know."

"Well, what's done is done." She sighed again. "Let's talk about something different."

"Okay," Tommi agreed, glad to change the subject.

"How are you feeling about yourself?" Rachel asked bluntly.

"I haven't had much morning sickness this time," Tommi replied quickly. "And I've been able to get through a few light workouts, so I think I'm doing well."

Rachel shook her head. "Not your pregnancy. About yourself, your self-image. How do you feel about _you_?"

Tommi wrinkled her nose. "I'm not sure I understand."

Rachel laughed. "Look at how you're sitting." She'd observed Tommi's posture. Even in a relaxed setting, Tommi had her legs crossed, and she was sitting in a very feminine pose.

"So? The girls got me well trained."

"It's a habit now, isn't it?"

Tommi thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess it is."

"Your walk, your mannerisms around people, your posture - to any outside observer, you're very feminine."

"Thanks, I think."

Rachel laughed. "It was a compliment. I meant that you are adjusting well. Tell me, how do you feel being a big sister to Sara?"

Tommi got a faint smile and a far-away look in her eyes. "I love having Sara as my little sister. We do so many things together now! We talk, we borrow each other's clothes - we're very close, and I really like how it feels."

"Do you think you like being Sara's big sister more than you liked being her big brother?"

Tommi was surprised by the question. "Well, yeah!" she answered, as if the question was silly. "We've never been closer."

"And other things - how do you feel about being a woman? Is it easier now?"

Tommi smiled. "Next, you're going to ask if I'm getting so comfortable that I'm not sure I want to change back after this term, right?"

It was Rachel's turn to be surprised. "Well, the thought had crossed my mind."

Tommi smiled at Rachel's surprised expression when Tommi told her what she thought her answer was.

"Daddy was so pissed!" Jillian said between bites of her salad. "What did you say to him?"

Tommi tried to feign innocence. "Me? What makes you think it was me?"

"Because your name came up, like five or six times a day, for the past week," Jillian replied.

Tommi swallowed uncomfortably. "I did have a meeting with him," Tommi admitted.

"And?"

"Well, it's kind of personal," Tommi said.

"But my name came up, right? Come on, Tommi, what happened?" Jillian continued to pry.

Tommi sighed. "He accused me of trying to make you my lesbian lover," she admitted.

Jillian laughed aloud, attracting attention in the café. "That's funny!"

"Well, I kind of told him that was bullshit."

Jillian giggled. "Yeah, that would get him a little upset."

Tommi grimaced. "There's more. I also kind of chewed him out for not paying any attention to you."

Jillian's eyes almost bugged out of their sockets. "Good God, girl!" she exclaimed. "Do you have a death wish?" She shook her head. "No wonder he was so pissed!"

"There's more," Tommi admitted sheepishly. "When he threatened to expel me, I kind of dared him to and threatened to have the Foundation loose its lawyers on him and the University if he tried."

Jillian blanched. "Do you realize what you've done?" she asked softly. "Daddy doesn't take kindly to threats." She shook her head. "You better not have been bluffing with the lawyers, because he's going to come after you with all guns blazing!"

Tommi nodded somberly. "I know. I was just tired of his bullying, and how he's hurting you without realizing it. It really pissed me off when he implied you were a lesbian because of me."

Jillian chuckled. "That's sweet. Fatal, but sweet."

Tommi sighed heavily. "I almost wish he'd get on with whatever he's going to do to me. It's been almost a week, and I feel like I'm on eggshells! Every time the phone rings, my heart stops!"

Jillian shook her head sadly. "Well, what's done is done."

Tommi about choked on the bite she was chewing. "You're the second person who's said those exact words."

Tommi nudged the door with her foot to close it, and tossed her backpack on her bed. "What a day!" she sighed heavily.

"It's not over yet," Katie said as she turned from her desk. "I took a call for you. And there's a message on the machine."

"Oh?"

Katie looked serious. "The Dean wants to see you in his office ASAP. Yesterday, if possible."

Tommi flinched. "Oh, shit. Here we go."

Katie nodded. "I wondered what was taking him so long. You've been an emotional wreck this past week."

"I think that's what he wanted," Tommi said nervously. "Should I call Rachel to let loose the hounds now, or after I meet him?"

Katie shook her head. "I hope I don't have to start training a new roommate," she said, her voice echoing with fear and worry even as she tried to make a joke. "You want me to go with you?"

Tommi shook her head. "No sense in you getting in trouble, too." She picked up her purse. "I guess I better go face the music."

To Tommi, walking to the administration building and the Dean's office seemed like "the last mile", the long walk faced by the condemned to the executioner; the only thing missing were two stone-faced guards and an old padre. She had a fatalistic attitude. If the Dean was going to expel her, she was going to try to be civil but firm. As she walked, she plotted her next move. Did she let him know that a suit would be filed before he said anything, or should she wait? Should she be defiant, or meek and humble?

She arrived at the secretary's desk without having settled on a strategy. "I'm here to see Dean Brown," she announced softly.

"Yes," the secretary acknowledged. "I'll let him know you're here." She pressed a button on the intercom. "Miss Wilson is here," she announced simply.

In moments, the door opened, and the Dean stepped out. Tommi gulped as he stepped toward her. In the past, he'd made a show of demonstrating his power by making Tommi approach him, like a servant approaching a master, or a prisoner approaching a judge. Unexpectedly, he extended his hand, and she nervously shook hands with him. "Won't you come in, please?" he asked. He sounded strangely calm, and his eyes seemed sad and distant.

Tommi felt more ill at ease with the display of gentility than when the Dean had been hostile. She wondered what he was up to. Was he attempting to disarm her with politeness and charm before he booted her?

"Please have a seat," the Dean announced. He, too, took a seat, but, unlike their previous encounters, he sat in one of the stuffed chairs nearer Tommi. "Would you like something to drink? Coffee? Tea? Perhaps a soft drink or water?"

Tommi felt uncomfortable and suspicious. "No, thank you," she answered, trying not to sound nervous.

The Dean bit his lip. He looked down at the floor for a few seconds, and then back up at Tommi. "I need to say," he started, but his voice sounded like it was about to break, "that I'm very sorry for how I've treated you."

Tommi's eyes widened with surprise. This was the last thing that she'd expected. "Uh, I'm sure I would have done the same thing...."

The Dean shook his head to cut off her feeble protests. "I was wrong -- on many, many counts," he said softly. "The other day, I wanted to have you off campus within the hour. I was going to kick you out personally," he admitted slowly.

Tommi sat, nervous, uncertain of what she should do or say. She decided to say nothing.

"I have to admit that I was furious," the Dean admitted. "It's been a long time since anyone dared to talk to me like that, like Marge used to."

"Your wife?" Tommi asked hesitantly.

The Dean nodded. "Marge used to get cross with me when she wanted to let me know I was out of line. Since ... well, you know...." He bit his lip again. "She was a steadying influence for me, and I miss that."

"I'm sorry," Tommi apologized. "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

The Dean shook his head. "You shouldn't have to apologize. I'm the one who was wrong." He looked down again for a few seconds. "When you left, I started looking for an excuse to have you expelled. I have to admit that I was getting pretty creative, too."

"But?"

The Dean laughed. "I caught myself. It took a while, but some of the things you said sank in." He shook his head sadly. "You were right. I have been ignoring Jillian. And you were right about why. I miss Marge - Jillian's mother - so much that it hurts. I was staying busy with work to try to hide from the pain. I guess I was feeling so sorry for myself that I forgot to think about how much Jillian hurt."

Tommi sat still. The situation felt awkward, and she didn't know what to say.

"I have a question for you," the Dean said. "If, last year, if you had gotten Jillian pregnant, what would you have done?"

Tommi stared for a moment. "I would have done what I was supposed to do. I'd have done right by her. I think she's a very special girl. Troubled at times, but special."

"I happen to think she's special, too," the Dean agreed softly.

"I really liked her then, and I really like her as a friend now."

The Dean nodded. "Yes, I know that - now. You were willing to put your college career on the line for her. That says a lot about your friendship." He bit his lip again. "I'm sorry I accused you of ... corrupting my little girl. I know she's a bit wild at times, but it wasn't fair of me to say what I said."

Tommi nodded. "Apology accepted."

"There's one more thing that's bothering me," the Dean added.

"And that is?" Tommi felt nervous again.

"You're carrying a baby for someone, right?"

Tommi suddenly feared where this line of questions was going. "Yes, sir," she answered plainly.

"Is it Jillian's?" The Dean sounded sad, not angry.

"Jillian's?" Tommi was trying to feign surprise. In fact, she was totally surprised that the Dean suspected - or knew of - Jillian's pregnancy.

The Dean explained. "I ... found a pregnancy test kit ... in the garbage a couple of months ago. I ... suspected that maybe Jillian had gotten herself pregnant. Then I found out that she hadn't bought any ... woman's supplies, at least not through the service that handles our shopping. It all added up to Jillian being pregnant."

"If she was, well, the program doesn't work that way," Tommi lied. She knew that she was an exception to the rule. She hoped the Dean didn't know, and couldn't see through her fib.

The Dean sighed. "Jillian told me yesterday afternoon that I was right, and that she'd gotten pregnant. She also said that she went to the same Morris clinic that you go to, so she didn't have to have an abortion. I put two and two together, and wondered if, maybe, you might be the one carrying her child, my grandchild."

Tommi shook her head sadly. "Everything is anonymous. The host mothers don't know the donor mothers." She hoped her lie wasn't transparent; the last thing she needed was for the Dean to know that she actually was carrying Jillian's child. What would he do then, give her special treatment? Take too much interest in her to the point that she seemed to be the Dean's pet student? She shuddered inwardly at the thought. "The Foundation feels that it's better that way."

The Dean nodded slowly. "I understand. I really am sorry. I'll see what I can do to get some kind of scholarship reinstated for you, so you can change yourself back."

Tommi smiled. "I wouldn't be able to have the surgery until after I have this baby," she reminded the Dean. "And that won't be until around the end of the spring semester."

"Oh, yes," the Dean said. "I forgot how that works. Well, I should be able to get something so you can move back to the men's dorms in the fall, then."

"That's okay," Tommi found herself saying. "I have a long way to go to finish this pregnancy, and I have to take it one day at a time. For now, I'm happy where I'm at. I have some wonderful friends and a very special little sister. It's a lot easier being friends with Jillian now than it was back then." She couldn't believe the words that had come out of her mouth.

Chapter 20 - First Date

"Hi, Tommi," Brian called as he dashed to catch up with Tommi. "How are things?"

Tommi sighed to herself. "Peachy," she said sarcastically. "I've got a major paper and two lab reports to finish before we start studying for finals."

"You'll do fine," Brian said, both to bolster her confidence and to demonstrate, yet again, that he really liked Tommi. "I wish you were studying computer engineering, though."

"Why? So we'd have more classes together?" Tommi tried to keep her voice cordial.

"Well, yeah, that too," Brian answered, blushing. "But I was thinking mostly that I could help you study, so you felt more confident going into your finals." He laughed. "I don't know anything about anatomy and physiology or the bioengineering courses you're taking!"

Tommi let herself smile. "And I know nothing about computer engineering."

Though it was in the opposite direction of Brian's apartment, he walked with Tommi toward her dorm. Tommi knew there was something on his mind; Brian was having trouble making small talk.

"Um," Brian finally started to speak again. "You know the Winter Formal is coming up next week, and ..."

Tommi shook her head. "Brian, please don't."

"But...?" He seemed confused. After all, they'd shared an intimate kiss the night of the Halloween party.

Tommi let her head fall forward, shaking it slowly as she bit her lip. When she looked up, she had a sad expression. "There's a lot about me that you don't know."

Brian was ready for that line. She'd said it to him the night of the Halloween party. "Isn't that part of the fun of dating - getting to know each other better?"

Tommi sighed, then she reached into her backpack and pulled out her wallet. She fumbled around and pulled out an old photo she'd kept in case she ever had to explain things to Brian. She'd dreaded the thought of actually having to show him. It was faded and somewhat wrinkled, but she handed it to him.

Brian looked at the picture, studying it closely. "Who's this? Your brother?" he asked. "I see a family resemblance."

Tommi shook her head sadly. "No," she said, her head shaking and her eyes mostly closed. "It's not my brother."

"But ... it looks so much like you," Brian observed.

Tommi had been dreading this moment, hoping it would never come. "That picture ... is me."

Brian looked at Tommi, and then at the picture again. "But ..." He shook his head. "You're kidding, right?" His brow wrinkled as he tried to figure out what Tommi was intimating. "You're a transsexual? No, that can't be! You had a baby!"

Tommi took the picture back from Brian. "Have you ever heard of the Morris-Henderson process?"

Brian thought for a moment. Suddenly, as if a light bulb had come on, he nodded. "They're the guys who developed the organ cloning process," he said. Then his eyes widened. "And there's a Morris foundation that ..." He stopped abruptly as full realization of Tommi's situation hit him. He stood, his mouth agape and a shocked look on his face.

She winced at his reaction. "Up until last year, this picture was me. I got into trouble and lost my scholarship." She knew that Brian adored her, but she also knew that she had to tell him the whole story, since he'd asked her on a date. "I found a job at the Morris Foundation clinic - as an adoption facilitator. It's called a lot of other things, too, like a rent-a-womb."

"But you were a guy?"

Tommi nodded. "They used the organ cloning technique to make female organs for me. I was basically made entirely, fully, completely female, so I could carry a baby to term."

"But" Brian couldn't help but glance at Tommi's chest.

Tommi saw where he was looking, and smiled. "These? They're side-effects of all the female hormones in my body - and my Ma's genes."

"But you look so ... feminine! So beautiful and sexy!" Brian protested. "I ... I have a hard time believing that picture was you."

Tommi shrugged. "It's true."

"You changed gender, so you could earn money to finish college?"

"Basically. But my contract is over in the spring, after I deliver this baby."

"And then?" He seemed to deflate at her implication that she wouldn't be Tommi after the baby was born.

Tommi shook her head sadly. "And then I don't know. Part of me has gotten used to being a woman. I have a lot of good friends, a wonderful little sister that I've gotten very close to, and a loving almost big sister. But part of me is still Tom Wilson."

"Oh."

Tommi sighed. "Didn't you ever wonder why I knew so much about sports?"

Brian thought a moment. "Yeah, I guess that is a little odd, but ..." he added quickly, "there are girls who are really into sports,"

Tommi shook her head sadly. "I don't know where I'll be in seven months. I might be Tommi, but I might be Tom. I can't let you get hurt falling for Tommi when Tommi might not even exist after the baby is born." She closed her eyes to try to block the tear that had suddenly formed. "I already hurt one person who fell for me as I am now. I can't do that again."

Brian stood, shocked by Tommi's revelation. "I ... I don't know what to say," he finally muttered.

"I knew I had to tell you. I'm sorry." She gave him one more glance, turned, and walked into her dorm. She wondered why the corners of her eyes were so moist.

Behind her, Brian stood on the sidewalk, staring after her, his mind swamped with confusion as he tried to sort out his reaction to the facts that Tommi had given him.

"You okay?" Sara asked as soon as she read the expression on Tommi's face. Sara was sprawled on Tommi's bed, working on a history reading assignment. Sara knew that Katie was probably working at the library - again.

Tommi sighed heavily, then put her backpack on her desk and slumped in her chair. "Long day."

Sara looked more closely at Tommi's face. "Yeah, so now tell me what's really bothering you."

Tommi thought for a bit. "Brian asked me to the Winter Formal."

"From what I hear, you'll have a fabulous time!" Sara said, excited at Tommi's prospective date.

Tommi shook her head. "I was hoping he wouldn't ask."

"But ... don't you kind of like him?" Sara was confused. She shut her book; she knew that this was probably going to be a long sister-to-sister conversation.

"I'm not sure," Tommi answered. "I don't really know how I feel about him. I mean, he's a nice guy."

"And a good kisser!" Sara interjected.

Tommi was startled by her sister's comment, but she lost herself in thought for a moment, recalling Brian's kiss at the Halloween dance. "Yeah," she said softly.

"But?"

"I had to tell him."

Sara's eyes widened. "Did you tell him everything?"

Tommi nodded silently.

"How did he react?" Sara asked after a moment.

Tommi sighed again. "I don't know. I think he was pretty overwhelmed. He didn't say much when I left."

"Aren't you curious about going on a date?" Sara changed the subject. "Even a little bit?"

Tommi looked up, one eyebrow raised in puzzlement over her question. "What?"

"Aren't you curious?"

"Some, I guess."

"So why didn't you accept? You could have always explained it to him later, if he gets too serious about you."

Tommi shook her head sadly. "He's already too serious about me," she replied.

"Yeah, that's true," Sara agreed. "So what are you going to do?"

Tommi shrugged. "I can't let him get close, and then break his heart, like I did with Erica." She shook her head, feeling her eyes misting. "I can't break someone else's heart."

"Can I ask you a question?" Sara asked timidly.

"Sure."

"Do you want to stay a woman - after the baby?"

Tommi let her head droop, and her eyes closed. Seconds ticked by with agonizing slowness as she contemplated the question. "I ... don't know," she finally answered softly, uncertainly. She shook her head. "I really don't know."

"That's what I thought."

"I feel so confused!" Tommi blurted. "There's so much that's happened to me in the past year." She looked at Sara, a pleading look in her eyes. "What do you think I should do?"

Sara hesitated. She knew what she wanted - she wanted Tommi to stay her sister forever. She was close to Tommi, and she hoped that Tommi felt the same about her. But she also knew it wasn't her choice. "It's not my decision," Sara finally answered.

Tommi nodded slowly. "But you would like me to stay as Tommi, wouldn't you?" It wasn't so much a question as a statement of fact.

Sara's head moved slightly, almost imperceptibly, as she acknowledged the truth of Tommi's comment. "Yeah, I would."

She looked up at Tommi, her eyes full of compassion. "You've got a long time until the baby is born," she noted. "And that's a lot of time for you to think about what you want." She changed the subject. "Let me pose a few hypotheticals."

"Okay."

"First, assume you have the other ... surgery," Sara said. "What would you do? Are there any girls that you would find ... attractive, or interesting?"

Tommi tried to laugh. "Jillian is nice. And I ... really like Erica." She saw Sara's eyes widen. "I'm not sure that she would like me as a guy, though."

I think that some of the girls here in the dorm would find you very attractive because you understand women a lot better than any other guy ever could. And you're their friend, which would be a good foundation for something more."

Tommi considered her words carefully. "I hadn't thought of that," she said softly.

"And what if you decided to stay as a woman? What then?"

Tommi shook her head. "I haven't thought about _that_, either" she said.

Sara raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "You're not fooling me," she cautioned Tommi.

A tiny laugh burst from Tommi. "You're right. I've been thinking of that for a while."

"Would you settle into a relationship with Erica, maybe?" Sara's query had no judgement, no implication that it would be wrong. It was a simple question.

Tommi nodded. "I might. Yeah, I could be very happy with her."

"Final hypothetical."

"Good. I've got papers to work on."

"What if Brian decides that your situation doesn't matter, and he asks you to the dance again anyway?"

"Uh," Tommi stammered, shocked at the possibility that she hadn't even considered. "I don't think he'll do that."

"What if he does?"

Tommi shook her head. "I ... I don't know."

"Want a suggestion?" Sara didn't wait for Tommi's answer. "If he does ask, go."

"What?" Tommi was astonished at her answer.

"If he asks again, go. You like him, at least a little, and it wouldn't hurt for you to 'gather more data', so to speak, about the female experience."

Tommi's mouth hung open in shock at her suggestion. "But ... I don't think ...," she stammered, trying to find an answer. "Next you're going to suggest that I try sex as a woman, too!"

Sara giggled. "No, I won't do _that_, but a simple date _would_ be a chance to see what it's like to deal with guys in a romantic situation."

Tommi thought before she nodded her agreement. "Good point," she noted. "But there's no way Brian is going to get over my past and ask me again."

Sara smiled enigmatically. "You might want to have a conversation with Suzie about that situation before you jump to conclusions."

Tommi put down her fork; for some reason, she didn't feel like eating. "Dee," she asked hesitantly, "can I ask you something ... personal?"

Dee finished chewing the bite she'd taken from her chicken flatbread sandwich. "Sure."

"What made you realize that you wanted to stay a woman? That you'd be comfortable living the rest of your life as a woman?"

Dee smiled. "You know my story. I don't think it would apply to anyone else."

"But ..."

"I'm going to guess that you're starting to question your future, aren't you?" Dee speculated.

"Yeah," Tommi acknowledged softly. "I feel pretty confused right now. How did you know? What made you realize that you were going to stay a woman?"

Dee shook her head. "I didn't have anything to go back to," she said. "There really wasn't a choice for me. Sorry, but I can't help you."

Tommi nodded. "I kind of figured, but I had to ask."

"I thought you'd already decided," Dee said hesitantly. "You're so ... feminine in everything, you know."

Tommi was surprised by Dee's observation. "Really? I ... hadn't noticed."

"You've got a lot of feminine mannerisms. The way you walk, the way you sit, your choices of clothes." She smiled. "By the way, I love that outfit! That blouse is so cute, and your skirt really shows off your figure! And those boots are to die for! The way they hug your calves, I bet there isn't a guy around who doesn't love staring at your legs!"

"Thanks," Tommi said, trying to sound unenthusiastic even though she blushed at the compliment. "You really thought I'd decided?"

A flash of concern crossed Dee's features. "Yeah," she said hesitantly. "I mean, you just seem naturally feminine and comfortable with yourself."

"Oh." Tommi sounded disappointed, as if she'd discovered something that she didn't like.

"What triggered all this deep thinking?" Dee asked. "Something happened that's got you suddenly all concerned about your future. A couple of months ago, it was pretty much settled. After the second baby, you were going to have the operation and change back."

Tommi nodded. "Lots. Sara is the most loving little sister I could imagine. Katie is a fabulous big sister - even though she won't let me borrow her clothes!" she added with a light laugh. "I ... had ..." Tommi blushed, "an affair."

"Oh?"

"With another girl."

Dee's eyebrows rose. "Oh? I take it you found it ... interesting."

Tommi dropped her gaze, embarrassed. "It ... just happened," she confessed softly. "And I liked it."

"Have you tried, you know, the other way?"

Tommi's head snapped up. "You mean, with a guy?"

"Yeah."

Tommi shook her head. "No. I ... couldn't. It's" She tried but failed to suppress a shudder. "It just seems, I don't know. Weird?"

Dee laughed. "But I bet you're curious."

Tommi's blush gave her away. "A guy asked me to the Winter Formal dance."

"Oh. Oh!" Dee's eyes widened with surprise. "And you're wondering if you should go? And the question you're not asking is whether that might lead you down the path to staying a woman, right?"

Tommi nodded. "But I doubt he'll want to take me now. I had to tell him who ... what ... I am."

Dee shrugged. "I don't see how it would make much difference to most people. I mean, there are still a few troglodytes that make a big stink about gender changes and lifestyle choices, but I've found that most people are pretty accepting." She smiled. "You never know. He might be okay with the whole thing and ask you anyway."

Tommi nodded. "But what do I do if he does ask again?" She shook her head, her brow furrowed with worry. "How should I handle it? I don't know if I'm ready for a date."

"You have to go with your instincts, not your brain," Dee advised.

"Yeah," Tommi nodded, "that's what my roommate and my sister keep telling me - and Rachel, and most of the girls in the dorm."

Dee laughed. "Are you finished with your lunch? Because if you are, I'm ready to go do some shopping."

Tommi nodded and gathered the remains of her food. "Sure." The duo threw away their garbage and strode through the mall, heading for Dee's favorite store, the maternity shop.

"There's one more thing I'm curious about," Tommi said, as they walked.

Dee chuckled. "You're just a curious girl today, aren't you?"

"How did you, um, decide when to, you know?" Tommi stammered uneasily.

Dee laughed. "You make it sound like I suddenly decided to get laid and began to plot and plan how to make it happen."

Tommi blushed. "Sorry."

"It just _happened_," Dee continued. "I wasn't planning on anything. I wasn't expecting it. It just _felt_ like it was right."

"How does it ... compare?"

Dee laughed. "Girlfriend, you're going to have to find that one out for yourself!"

"Tommi!"

Tommi spun to see who was calling after her.

"Wait up!" Brian was trotting down the sidewalk to catch up to Tommi. In no time, he was beside Tommi, though he was a little out of breath from running. "You've been ducking out of your classes too fast. I haven't had a chance to talk to you lately."

Tommi's shrug went unseen beneath her heavy jacket. "I got the impression that you were avoiding me," she said softly. "Not that I would blame you if you did," she added in a self-pitying tone.

"Nah," Brian countered quickly. "I've been a little busy with a programming assignment," he explained. "Why would I want to avoid you?"

Tommi lowered her gaze. "After I explained" She shook her head. "I figured you'd"

Brian gently turned Tommi to face him as the two halted in the middle of the sidewalk. "As far as I'm concerned, anyone who can deliver a baby into the world is a woman. Who you _were_ doesn't matter. I like who you _are_."

"It's just that ..." Tommi lowered her gaze again. "When I was home, I had a very ... unpleasant encounter," she said quietly. "And I've had a few ... incidents on campus." She shook her head. "I ... figured you'd ... think the same."

"I spent a little time researching the Morris Foundation, and the procedures you've had," he continued. "The whole organ cloning process is really fascinating! I didn't realize how complicated it is!" He sounded like a nerd in a technical library. "No wonder you're interested

in bioengineering!"

"Brian," Tommi tried to interrupt.

"I wanted to know more about what you're experiencing," Brian continued.

"Brian," Tommi tried again. "I've got to get to my next class."

"Oh, yeah." He took a deep breath. Tommi could tell he was nervous. "I would be honored if you would accompany me to the Winter Formal," he said, his voice about to crack.

Tommi sighed. "You don't know what my future holds," Tommi explained. "Neither do I. I don't want to hurt you."

"Would you please let me worry about that?" Brian pleaded. "I want to get to know you now. You're sweet. You're smart, you're beautiful. You have so much going for you. I can't help but want to spend time with you!"

Tommi closed her eyes as she thought. She recalled her conversations with Dee and with Sara. She pondered what she'd learned from Suzie and Rachel. She contemplated all the discussions with the girls, her friends, in the dorm. "Okay," she said as she opened her eyes. "Yes, I'll go with you."

Brian grinned, then he leaned forward, wrapping his arms around Tommi, and he kissed her enthusiastically. It wasn't a quick kiss. Brian was putting his heart into his gesture of happiness.

Tommi felt herself melting as, involuntarily, her arms lifted to encircle Brian's shoulders. For a brief moment, she realized that they were in the middle of campus, on a busy sidewalk, with students scurrying past them to get to classes. She knew some of them were staring at the spectacle she and Brian were making. And she realized that a big part of her didn't care.

"How was your day?" Katie asked simply as Tommi slumped onto her bed.

"Busy, as usual. Getting ready for finals sucks." She sighed heavily. "And I'm afraid my car is about to die. I didn't think it was going to start when I was ready come home from the clinic. The engine sounds terrible!"

"I know what it's like to get stranded," Christine chimed in. "All you have to do is ask, if you need to borrow my car." Christine and Diane were sitting on Katie's bed, and Sara was occupying Tommi's chair, which was why Tommi was sprawled on her bed.

There was a quick knock on the door, and before anyone could answer, Kim and Ashley came in. Kim saw how many were already in the room, and just plopped on the floor beside Tommi's bed.

Ashley sat on the edge of Katie's bed after Diane scooted to make room. "What's up?" she asked cheerfully.

Christine shrugged. "Thinking about what to do Friday night," she replied.

"Pizza?" Ashley suggested with a twinkle in her eye.

"Nah," Sara replied with a disgusted look. "That's getting old. Is anyone going to the big dance?"

"Nope," Ashley replied. "Not me."

Diane glanced around. "You mean I'm the only one with a date?"

The other girls nodded, a few with mischievous smiles, but Tommi was strangely quiet.

Katie noticed. "You didn't say much," she said directly to Tommi.

"Nah," Tommi muttered, trying to stay out of the conversation.

Katie and Sara were instantly suspicious. "That sounds like ... an unusual denial," Sara said slowly.

"I ... wasn't really paying attention," Tommi lied. "What are you guys talking about?"

No one in the room bought her half-hearted fib. "Okay, Tommi," Katie began, "what's the story?"

Tommi shrugged. "Nothing, really."

Sara's eyes widened. "He did ask you again!"

Ashley and Katie both read Tommi's expression. "And you're going?" Ashley asked with a squeal of delight. "You're going to the dance?"

Tommi felt her cheeks burning. She had hoped to keep the date a secret. "It's no big deal," she tried to downplay the event.

"No big deal?" Diane asked, stunned at the way Tommi was trying to characterize the dance. "It's only the biggest non-Greek event of the semester!" she exclaimed.

"And your first date!" Katie added enthusiastically.

"Tommi, you've got a date?" Sara seemed delighted. "I knew he'd ask you!"

"Who is it?" Kim asked. "Is it that guy from your classes?"

"Brian," Sara answered before Tommi could.

"He's kind of a ... nerd, isn't he?" Diane said cautiously, not wanting to hurt Tommi's feelings.

Sara rose to her sister's defense. "I think he's okay," she countered. "He's smart, he's polite, and he's very nice."

"And he's totally ga-ga over Tommi," Ashley added.

"Oh," Kim put the pieces together. "He's the one you"

"Yes, that's him," Tommi said gruffly, a scowl on her face as she interrupted Kim and cut off further words. That kiss was supposed to be a private event.

"Oooh," Diane and Ashley cooed together. "Looks like you're in for a hot date!"

Tommi shook her head, sighing. "I'm just going to a dance, okay? Can we please drop it?"

Katie laughed. "And we all know that those words mean there's more you aren't telling us."

"Did he kiss you again?" Kim asked playfully.

Tommi's beet-red cheeks betrayed the answer. "I'm just going to the formal with Brian, okay?"

"What are you going to wear?" Sara changed the subject. "I don't think you have a suitable dress."

The girls squealed with delight. "Shopping trip!" they called in unison.

Tommi groaned inwardly as the girls 'escorted' her out of her room toward her car. She knew that a shopping trip was going to be a long, tedious exercise in patience.

Brian's eyes were nearly popping from their sockets as Tommi came into the dorm lobby. "Wow!" he exclaimed softly.

To Brian's eyes, Tommi was a vision of loveliness. Her long black dress, strapless and daring, clung tightly to her curves, flared around her hips, and hung in a tight knee-length skirt with a side-slit that showed off her sexy legs when she moved.

She wore black heels, and carried a matching black clutch purse. A wrap on her shoulders completed the wardrobe with a bit of feigned modesty and hint of protection from the cool winter weather. Her silver earrings, three dangling concentric hoops of different sizes, flitted into and out of vision as her long wavy hair swirled with her every motion. Tired of being blonde, she'd dyed her hair back to her natural color. She made a stunning brunette.

Tommi's lips glistened with crimson lipstick, inviting and sexy, adding the perfect touch to her perfectly-applied makeup.

"Wow!" Brian said again. "Look at you!"

Tommi smiled demurely. "You look nice, yourself."

Brian shrugged self-consciously. "I look like a bum compared to you," he said. In fact, he didn't. He wore a rented tuxedo, and he looked quite dapper. He offered Tommi his arm. "Shall we go?"

"Not yet," Sara complained as she pulled out her camera. "I want some pictures first."

Christine, Ashley, and Kim, each waiting with her own date, heartily agreed. "Let's all get some pictures with these hot dates of ours," Kim said, giggling.

Tommi blushed, but the other girls egged her on, so Tommi acceded to their request.

After the photos, the couples headed to their cars. Brian paused at the door to help Tommi put on her coat. Even that, he noted, didn't detract at all from Tommi's beauty. Her coat was black, like her dress, very stylish, and it fit her tightly. Even through the thick coat, Tommi's figure was striking.

Acting the part of the perfect gentleman, Brian opened the car door for her. For dinner before the dance, they went to a nice French restaurant, where Tommi felt like she was overdressed, but Brian seemed proud of being Tommi's date. It was almost like he was showing off a trophy. The odd thing to Tommi was that she didn't seem to mind. Brian was proving to be very pleasant company.

The dance was surprisingly pleasant to Tommi. Held in the auditorium of the theater arts building, it reminded Tommi of the stories she'd always heard about big-city proms. The room was very tastefully decorated, with a winter theme, and a live 50's style swing band played a delightful assortment of music for dancing.

Tommi smiled to herself at the comparison; in a way, it was her prom. The best part was that every person there had a date, and she didn't have to worry about predatory guys wanting a dance - or more. She could relax with Brian. And relax she did. When they weren't dancing, they were talking. But Tommi danced a lot. She'd forgotten how much fun dancing was.

The slow dances were the most enjoyable. Tommi found, with each dance, that she was holding Brian closer, resting her head on his shoulder, while he fell deeper and deeper under the influence of her intoxicating perfume. She smiled to herself at Sara's insistence on the perfume. She slowly realized that she was glad Sara had spritzed her with the scent.

Much to Tommi's dismay, the dance eventually ended with one final slow dance. Tommi felt herself holding Brian after the music had ended, as if she could will the dance to go on forever. As the lights in the ballroom came up, Tommi looked up, still holding Brian tightly.

"I think that's the signal that we need to go."

Tommi nodded sadly. "I know."

"I guess we should go."

"Yeah." Tommi lifted herself on her toes, her arms around Brian's shoulders, and pulled him down to her lips. They met in a kiss, a long, passionate kiss that went on and on, and Tommi felt herself being swept away. After what seemed an eternity, Brian broke the kiss. "I think everyone is staring," he commented as he glanced around.

"Let them," Tommi countered as she tried to pull Brian back for more kissing.

Brian held firm. "We really should be going."

Sadly, Tommi let herself be escorted from the floor. After retrieving their coats, Tommi and Brian walked to the valet parking station. Brian seemed embarrassed when they brought his car around, since most of the cars were newer and in a lot better shape than his own car. His Camry seemed out of place. Not only was it not sporty, but the paint was faded and bland. After holding the door so Tommi could get in, Brian walked around to the driver's side. The valet glance Tommi's direction, raising his eyebrows appreciatively. "Dude, a little hint," he said softly to Brian.

"Yeah?"

"Get a car that's worthy of your date, man."

Brian smiled. He knew that Tommi was a knockout, and he was very glad that he was with her. Not that he cared about the social plus of being seen with a girl as pretty as Tommi; he really wasn't in the social status game. He just adored Tommi - and it showed.

"What do you want to do now?" Brian asked as he pulled the car onto the street.

Tommi sighed contentedly. "I wish the dance had gone on all night."

Brian smiled; he was thinking the same. "We'd be pretty exhausted by morning, though."

"I'd rather not go straight back to my dorm," Tommi found herself saying. Part of her couldn't believe she was hoping to spend more time with Brian.

"Maybe coffee and dessert? There are a few 24-hour restaurants that are open."

Tommi wondered if Brian had any clue what she was trying to suggest. "That sounds nice." She didn't add, "and safe," but she definitely thought it.

It was a short drive to the restaurant; Brian seemed to know exactly where he was going.

"I think you planned ahead for this, didn't you?" Tommi asked, curious.

Brian nodded sheepishly. "Yeah," he admitted. "I ... like to plan ahead."

"How many other options did you plan, in case I wasn't interested in coffee and dessert?"

Brian blushed. "A few."

"Such as?" Tommi pressed.

Brian parked the car, quickly got out, and opened Tommi's door, offering his hand to help steady her, as she climbed out. Still the gentleman, he offered her his arm as they walked into the restaurant.

As late as it was, the restaurant wasn't busy, and they were seated immediately. Tommi felt conspicuous in her formal dress, but the other patrons didn't seem to notice. As she glanced around, she noted a three other couples from the dance. Very quickly, the waitress took their drink orders.

"You didn't answer," Tommi said with a smile. "What were your 'contingency plans'?"

Brian shrugged. "I figured it was too cold to go walking the park, or to sit and talk by the fountains outside the student center," he admitted. "And I didn't figure you'd want to go to a late movie."

"So what was your plan? Going back to your room for a little make-out?" Tommi tried to sound like she was joking.

Brian paled and his jaw dropped open. "Uh, no!" he stammered emphatically. "I ... that is ... you" He shook his head. "That didn't seem ... appropriate! I mean, you're ... so nice, and"

Tommi smiled and put her hand on Brian's atop the table. "That was a joke! I know that you didn't want me to think that you were just a guy on the prowl, right?"

Brian looked visibly relieved. "I ... I'm not" He shook his head again, trying to figure out what to say. "I'm sorry if I seem nervous," he finally blurted. "It's just that, well, I haven't had a lot of dates, and, I don't want you to think badly of me."

Tommi smiled. "How could I think badly of you, when you've been such a ... gentleman, and a friend?"

Brian sighed with relief. "I'm ... just a simple Midwestern farm boy, and I was raised to treat girls with respect," he explained.

"Farm boy?" Tommi smiled. "I've heard lots of stories of farm boys ... and hay lofts. Where exactly are you from?"

"A small farming town in South Dakota," Brian replied quickly. The conversation was back on safe ground. "I doubt you've ever heard of it. Nobody has."

"How small?"

"About eight hundred people. It's really nice, though," he added defensively. "You know everyone, and it feels ... comfortable."

Tommi laughed. "I know the feeling. Where I came from ... is about three thousand people." It was obvious that she was trying to avoid the word 'home'.

"Farming?"

Tommi shook her head; a hint of grief clouded her eyes. "Mining, mostly. West Virginia, in coal country." She took a sip of coffee, just as the waitress came to take their orders. Tommi glanced at the menu again. "I think I'll splurge and have a slice of the raspberry cheesecake," she said to the waitress. She turned to Brian. "Dr. Tina - from the clinic - she's going to have me in the gym for _hours_ for this!" she giggled.

"I'll have the same," Brian said with a smile. The waitress scurried back to the kitchen.

"I didn't live on a farm, but I spent a lot of time working on farms," Brian continued to talk about his background. "My dad was a high school teacher. A lot of the other teachers were farmers' wives, so I got _volunteered_ a lot to help out."

Tommi took another sip. "Sounds interesting."

"Not really. Especially when you're feeding cattle in a blizzard in February," he retorted. "Then it's just miserably hard work."

"How did you end up down here? This seems kind of far away."

"I got a pretty good scholarship," Brian replied. "So I took the chance. There are a couple of good colleges back home, but I wanted to try something a little different."

Tommi sighed. "I know what you mean. There weren't a lot of opportunities close to where I lived." Once more, she avoided the word 'home'. "Do you live in the dorms?"

Brian shook his head. "I was in the dorm my freshman year. Now I live in an apartment just off campus. The one big plus about dorm life is not having a commute to and from school. It made it a lot more convenient to do labs or get to the library."

Tommi laughed "Labs and library. Spoken like a true hard-core nerd!"

The waitress returned with their desserts. "Two raspberry cheesecakes," she echoed the order as she put the plates down. "Anything else, hun?"

Tommi shook her head, smiling. "This is bad enough for my diet."

"I think we're okay for now," Brian answered the waitress, who smiled and darted away to take care of other customers.

"I don't understand why you wanted to ask me," Tommi mused.

Brian grinned. "I couldn't help wanting to take you. You cast your spell over me practically from the first time I saw you."

Tommi blushed. "You make it sound like I'm some kind of enchantress. You don't even know a lot about me - like what kind of music I like, or what my favorite foods are, or ... anything!"

"Okay," Brian rebutted with a grin. "What is your favorite music?"

Tommi laughed. "I've enchanted you so much that I direct your conversation, too? Wow! I didn't realize I had it in me."

Brian smiled. "Believe me, you're a very bewitching woman. And you haven't answered my question."

Tommi blushed again. "I used to listen to a lot of country music, but lately, it just isn't the same. I don't know why, but I just don't get into it as much." Tommi was certain that Brian wasn't just engaged in flattery. She was sure he really wanted to know.

Brian laughed. "I never really got into country. I've always liked ... different music."

"Define different."

"Parodies like Weird Al. Older rock. Some classical, some jazz and swing band. I played trumpet in my high school band, so I really like the big-band and swing band sounds. As to the other sorts, well, everyone always said I was ... different."

The conversation went on and on, the time passing so quickly that neither Brian nor Tommi were aware that it was after four in the morning, even though the waitress refilled their coffee cups more than once. Tommi eventually had to make a visit to the restroom, and, as she turned, she spied a clock. "Oh, wow!" she exclaimed softly. "I didn't know it was this late!"

Brian glanced at his watch and grimaced. "I didn't notice, either," he apologized quickly. "I guess I should take you home," Brian said sadly. "It's pretty late."

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. I've got to get some study time this weekend to try to get ahead for finals. I've got a couple of papers due, too."

After paying the bill, Brian escorted Tommi to his car and drove back to campus. He parked in a visitor's parking spot near her dorm, leaving the car running, and turned toward Tommi. "Thank you for going with me," he said simply.

Tommi smiled. "Thank you for inviting me. It was nice. I had a good time."

Brian squirmed uneasily, leaning a bit toward Tommi, but he hesitated; clearly he wasn't sure how far he should press things.

Tommi showed him by leaning toward him, lifting her arms to his shoulders and pulling him closer, as her lips rose toward his.

Fifteen minutes later, Brian escorted Tommi to the door of her dorm. She felt like she was walking on air. Brian gave her one final quick kiss in the dorm lobby, and then he turned and walked back out into the cold night air.

Tommi sighed contentedly as she walked up the stairs and down the hall. As quietly as possible, she opened the door, so as not to awaken Katie.

"You're late," Katie whispered as Tommi slipped out of her dress.

Tommi sighed. "I was trying not to wake you up."

Katie laughed. "Did you honestly think I was going to get any sleep, while my little sister was out on her first date?"

Tommi smiled to herself. She liked the sound of "little sister" coming from Katie; the words made her safe and loved. "I suppose not."

"So, how was it?"

Tommi slipped on her nightgown. "It was ... nice," she purred. "I had fun."

"And afterwards? I mean, the dance ended at twelve-thirty."

Tommi grabbed her toothbrush. "I'll be right back."

"And I'll be waiting for you to answer my question," Katie replied.

"Tommi," Rachel's question came back to what seemed to be her favorite topic, "how are you feeling today?"

Tommi wrinkled her nose. "It's okay, I guess. I mean, for the time being," she added quickly. "But I'm still Tom inside."

Rachel's eyebrows rose. "Are you?"

"Huh? Have you been talking to Dee?"

Rachel looked like kid caught with a hand in the cookie jar. "Guilty," she admitted. "Don't blame Dee; it's part of the mentor's job to keep me informed. You know that."

"Yeah. Sometimes, I forget how extensive your network of spies is."

"Don't change the subject," Rachel warned, still smiling. "Look at you. Your jeans are tight and very girlish. Your blouse is, well, to be frank, rather sexy. Your posture, your mannerisms - you're quite feminine right now. I've been noticing for the past few weeks, and I figured we're past due for this talk."

"Huh?" Tommi shook her head. "But ... I'm still Tom. Aren't I?" The last question sounded very uncertain, as if Tommi herself wasn't quite sure.

"You've adapted to living as a woman very well. But how much is because the girls you've become friends with - or your sister, for that matter - want you to fit in versus you wanting to fit in."

Tommi leaned back in the chair, letting her head rest against the back of the chair. She stared at the ceiling for a while. "I don't know," she said. She looked at Rachel. "You know, I should be really getting into the football season stats," she said with a grimace, "but I'm not. I should be embarrassed as hell about getting gyno exams, but I'm not."

"You told me you let Brian kiss you at the Halloween dance, right?"

Tommi nodded. "And again, the other day, when he asked me to the winter formal, and I accepted."

Rachel's eyebrows lifted at Tommi's revelation. "Did you enjoy the dance?"

Tommi started to deny it, but she paused. She knew Rachel would see through her lies if she did deny the truth. Rachel was good at that. She looked down, feeling her cheeks flush. "Yeah."

"But part of you didn't. Tom is still inside, still a part of you. You're naturally confused. Anyone would be." She paused for a moment. "Tell me, does being attracted to a man scare you because you're afraid that when you change back, you'll be gay?"

Tommi nodded slowly. "Yeah."

Rachel noted significant hesitation in Tommi's response. "But?"

Tommi sighed, feeling very conflicted. How she felt about her date was private, wasn't it? Was it something she should share with her counselor? It was affecting her; she hadn't slept well for the past two nights. She quickly decided that Rachel needed to know.

"After the dance, he kissed me again."

Rachel read Tommi's tone. There was a lot more that she hadn't yet spoken, things on her mind that needed to be coaxed from her. "And then?"

Tommi shook her head. "We went out for late dessert, and talked a long time. When he took me back to the dorm, we kissed some more."

"You know," Rachel interjected, "it's very common for people in your situation to, um, experiment," she tried to sound clinical and dispassionate. "It doesn't mean you're good, or bad, or going to stay female. It's just normal curiosity." She saw Tommi look up at her, with a guilty expression.

"We just kissed," Tommi replied defensively.

"At some point, if you keep dating, you may find yourself going ... further," Rachel observed calmly.

"I feel like I'm changing inside, whether I want to or not," Tommi protested softly.

"You are changing," Rachel confirmed in a gentle tone. "We all change, all the time. It's part of life."

"But ... I was kissing a guy!" Tommi countered. "And I liked it ... kind of. I was the one who ... started some of the kisses." She shook her head sadly. "I feel ... confused - like it should be gay, but" She let her head loll to one side as she stared at the wall. "What about the part of me that's still Tom?" Tommi asked softly. "I'm losing Tom, aren't I? Who I am is changing, and I'm powerless to stop it!"

Rachel grimaced inwardly. "I would imagine that you feel pretty conflicted right now. You find that part of you is still attracted to girls, and part of you was very curious and even a bit attracted to Brian, right?"

Tommi nodded silently.

"If you're normal, you're worrying that you're going to like sex as a woman so much that you'll stay a girl, and even become a promiscuous little slut, lesbian or straight, right?" Rachel noted Tommi's reaction. "You're still attracted to Erica, aren't you?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah," she admitted in a half-whisper.

"And you're afraid that you'll feel gay if you change back to being a guy, right?"

Another nod from Tommi confirmed Rachel's supposition.

"The fact is, that if you stay a girl, you have the option of keeping your former attraction to girls and living your life as a lesbian, or of being straight, in which case you'll actually have an advantage in bed, because you knew what it was like for guys. If you change back, you'll be

a lot better lover, because even if you haven't experienced making love as a woman, you still know how to arouse a woman's body."

Tommi stared at Rachel silently, the gears in her mind turning slowly, as she processed Rachel's words.

"But there's one thing you must remember. If you think back to the psychological test we did when you applied, didn't you think it odd that we included a lot of questions about your feelings of sexuality?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Tommi answered softly.

"We know the basic character of all of our clients. We have to know. It wouldn't do to have a facilitator carry a baby and then infect it with an STD because they were overly promiscuous, would it?"

Tommi thought for a moment, and shook her head. "I guess not."

"Based on your answers, it is very unlikely that you're going to turn into some kind of sex-starved whore if you got curious once," Rachel said reassuringly. "But that still doesn't help with how you feel right now about a simple date, or your fears of what might happen if you continue dating, does it?"

Tommi sighed. "That's the understatement of the century." She wiped at a tear. "I'm so confused," she confessed. "I ... don't know what I am."

Rachel nodded. "I know you're not going to believe me," she began, "but you are perfectly normal. This is very confusing for most people. In fact, I've only had two clients who weren't confused."

"Like Dee."

Rachel showed surprise at Tommi's comment. "Yes," she answered. "Like Dee. You need to know that your hormones are helping confuse you right now. That happens with every client like you..."

"Former guys."

"Temporary girls," Rachel corrected him. "Temporary girls who are pregnant. You aren't used to the heavy load of female hormones, so you're more vulnerable emotionally. But it will seem less confusing after you deliver your baby. Trust me."

Chapter 21 - Christmas

Sara lay face-down on Tommi's bed, one arm draped lazily over the edge of the bed. Her head was turned toward Katie's bed across the room, but she wasn't really looking at Katie or Tommi. Her eyes seemed glazed, unfocused. "I don't know," she said sadly.

"Trust me," Tommi reassured Sara. "It'll be a great break."

"I _know_ you'll have a great time," Katie added.

"You're probably right," Sara replied unenthusiastically, "but it just feels ... wrong."

Katie moved over to sit on the edge of Tommi's bed and put her hand gently on Sara's shoulder. "I know it's tough, but it'll be good for you."

Sara didn't respond at first. She rolled over and sat up. "I need to think some," she said as she scooted her feet off the bed to the floor.

Tommi read her little sister's mood. "Do you want to take a walk?" she suggested.

Sara looked at Tommi and slowly nodded. Tommi jumped to her feet and offered her hand to Sara to help her stand. "You're going to need a coat," she suggested.

Sara nodded slowly. "I'll be right back," she said as she turned toward the door.

As soon as the door closed, Katie sighed. "She's pretty depressed," she observed.

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. This is her first Christmas away from home, not that she even _has_ a home to go to any more.

"I know she'll be welcome with my parents," Katie said reassuringly. "And I know she'll have a great time."

"Yeah, I know," Tommi agreed. "But Sara's still got some grief and loss to work through. It's going to be a tough holiday for her."

"You _both_ do," Katie sighed. "You need to let me know what you're going to do, so I can let my folks know if you're coming."

In a couple of minutes, Sara returned. Tommi slipped on a coat and walked to the door. "We'll be back in a bit."

Katie glanced at both of them. "Remember, you've got finals to study for," she commented, sounding like a scolding mother.

"Yes, ma'am," Tommi replied in a mockingly deferential tone.

Katie glared at her and threw a pencil Tommi's way. Giggling, Tommi ducked out the door quickly as the pencil ricocheted off the wall.

The night air was brisk, a hint of the winter's full force, which hadn't yet arrived. The girls walked slowly toward the student center building. "You're nervous about going home with Katie, aren't you?" Tommi prompted.

Sara nodded. Her eyes were moist, and she had a lump in her throat. "It doesn't seem right," she said sadly. They treat you like family, and I'm really, honestly happy for you," she continued, "but" She shook her head as she wiped at a tear. "I just don't know..."

"Sara," Tommi began, "I do know it's hard to think about being away from home at holidays. But you have to think about what we didn't have! We never had a happy Christmas-card holiday! Not since Dad" Tommi felt a lump in her own throat. She wasn't sure she remembered a happy holiday time even before their dad had died.

"I know," Sara said sadly. "But it was home."

"No, it wasn't," Tommi retorted. "It never was home! It was always a house with people who didn't like each other!" She felt herself flinch at the memory of the pain of her last visit home for Christmas.

Sara let her head hang, her eyes almost closed, as she nodded slowly. "I know. I mean, I know the rational part, but ..."

Tommi wrapped her arm around Sara's shoulder. "I understand. The emotional part is tough. Last year, even knowing that Ma and Liz would probably not accept me, I still had some hope that things might be different, that Christmas might be special for once." She shook her head sadly. "It's hard to give up hope."

"Now there's no hope at all," Sara sniffled. "I'll never have a family Christmas to remember."

Tommi stopped and wrapped her arms around Sara. "Yes, you will," she replied. "You have family. You have me! And if it's just you and me, I promise you we'll have the most wonderful Christmas you ever had!"

Sara looked up at her sister, her eyes moist with tears. "Yeah," she said softly. "We've got each other." She let her gaze drop back to the sidewalk. "For now," she added softly.

Tommi glanced into the back seat one more time. "Will you stop fidgeting?" she insisted.

Sara sighed. "I can't help it," she replied. "I'm nervous."

"Which is making you more nervous, your sister's driving, or meeting my folks?" Katie laughed.

That got a laugh from Sara. "If I say it's Tommi's driving, I'll be in big trouble."

Tommi made a turn onto Katie's street, and then into the driveway. As Katie was reaching for the remote, the garage door opened, revealing Ronnie and Roger standing, his arm around her waist, smiling at the girls. Both were dressed casually, since it was around dinner time, unlike their last arrival at nearly midnight. Tommi was glad that they'd have some time to relax before bedtime.

As soon as Tommi stopped the car, and before she could even shut off the engine, Katie was out of the car and bounding to her mother's arms for a hug.

Tommi stuck her head out the window. "We're here," she said unnecessarily. She gave Sara a quick smile. "Let's go." Tommi pulled out the key and opened her door, swinging her feet to the driveway. She glanced at Sara again. "Come on," she urged. "You'll love Roger and Ronnie."

Sara anxiously pushed the seat back forward and clambered from the rear seat. She was so jumpy it felt like she was being squeezed and couldn't breathe. It didn't help her nerves to see Roger give Tommi a warm embrace and a quick fatherly peck on her cheek. She felt like an alien, an intruder in a place where she didn't belong. Tommi and Katie fit in well, but in her mind, she was an outsider, no matter how many times Katie and Tommi had reassured her. She stood by the door, feeling more alone than she had ever felt, watching Tommi talking enthusiastically with Roger.

"You must be Sara," a warm voice sounded beside Sara. "I'm Ronnie, Katie's mom. I'm so glad you girls are here."

Sara turned to Ronnie, surprised. "Uh, yeah, thanks," she stammered. She extended her hand toward Ronnie.

Ronnie smiled and wrapped Sara in a hug. "You don't think I'm going to welcome you with a simple handshake, do you?"

Sara felt confused. Ronnie was treating her very well, but Sara still felt out of place.

Ronnie released her embrace and took a step back as Roger came to her side.

"Hi, Sara," Roger said warmly as he clasped Sara's hand. "I'm glad to meet you."

"How about we go inside," Ronnie interrupted. "Roger, can you please take the girls' things to their rooms?"

Katie reacted immediately, returning to her car. "Aw, Mom," she protested, "quit picking on Dad. We're capable of carrying our own luggage!"

"Now, Pumpkin," Roger protested, "you girls have had a long trip. Go inside and relax a bit. I can get your things."

Tommi gave Ronnie a quick protesting look, but she gave up when she saw Ronnie's stern visage. "Okay," she said. She walked around the car and took Sara's hand. "Let's go, before we get in trouble for trying to be more helpful!"

Roger grinned, but Ronnie scowled. "Besides, you're pregnant," she added sternly. "While you're in this house, you're not going to do any heavy lifting, got it?"

Tommi looked suitably chastised, so Ronnie took her hand to lead them inside. As they walked into the house, Tommi was watching Sara. Tommi knew that, just like when she first visited, Sara was going to experience some significant culture shock. None of their old friends back home lived in houses even remotely this comfortable. It was opulent by the standards of a poor mining town, and yet, it was normal for Ronnie, Roger, and Katie. In fact, it was a normal middle-class home anywhere except in a poor mining community.

Sara's nose was tickled by a wonderful aroma wafting from the kitchen. Her eyes closed, as she inhaled the delicious smells, pausing to linger over them.

Ronnie noticed Sara's action and smiled. "I've got dinner and dessert in the oven. It's nothing fancy, just tarragon chicken with scalloped potatoes, mixed vegetables, and caramel pecan rolls for dessert."

Sara's eyes widened. "That's nothing fancy?" she exclaimed in astonishment.

Tommi laughed. "If we're lucky, we'll get Italian one night while we're here. Ronnie's lasagna is to die for!"

Ronnie seemed ready to blush. "Oh, Tommi, you make it sound like I'm some kind of gourmet chef!" She turned to Sara, pooh-poohing Tommi's comment. "It's nothing special; just a few recipes that I throw together."

Tommi's mouth was watering at the thought of Ronnie's cooking. As they sat down in the family room, Tommi couldn't help asking, "Will you please make some turtle cake while we're here? Please?" She was nearly begging.

Ronnie smiled. "No," she answered, taking delight in watching Tommi's face fall. "But I will help you girls learn how to make it!"

"Deal!" Tommi agreed without thinking. She turned to Sara. "You're going to love Ronnie's desserts!"

Sara still felt out of place. She found herself jealous of Ronnie's fun interaction with Tommi. "Remember, you're on a diet!" she reminded Tommi, her voice devoid of enthusiasm.

"I'm sure you girls would like to freshen up after that long drive," Ronnie suggested as the girls walked down the hall toward the bedrooms. "Tommi, you've got your usual room, if that's okay." She turned to Sara. "I put you in my hobby room. Well, it's kind of a hobby room and second spare bedroom. I hope you like it." She gestured into the room.

Sara gasped as she looked into the room. To her, it was huge - bigger than even her parents' bedroom back home. One wall had a fold-down bed, made up with white bed linen, and several throw pillows in different shades of pink for accent. Matching curtains, lacy and pretty, adorned the windows, adding a nice feminine touch to the general pink and white theme of the room. Beside the bed was a nightstand with a lamp and clock-radio. Opposite the bed, a sewing and crafts table stood, with shelves above and below, all picture-perfectly neat and organized. "This is the spare room?" she asked, astonished.

"I hope it'll be okay," Ronnie said, sounding a bit worried that Sara wasn't ecstatic about her room.

"Okay?" Sara stammered. "I've never had a room this beautiful! Are you sure it's for me? I don't want you to go to any trouble!"

Tommi, in the hall, smiled to herself. Sara was getting the full "Ronnie" treatment of hospitality; it was only a matter of time before Sara was completely at ease and relaxing.

"And your bathroom is through that door," Ronnie added.

"You mean," Sara sputtered, her mouth hanging open in surprise, "I've got my own bathroom? No sharing?"

"No sharing," Ronnie answered with a smile.

Sara shook her head as she took it all in. Part of her felt like she was being lured into a trap, sweetness and honey calming her before the bitter trap was sprung. But part of her was touched beyond anything she'd experienced. She glanced past Ronnie at Tommi. "That's probably the best part - not having to share a bathroom with the queen of slow."

Tommi tried to force a scowl through her smile. "It's not my fault I'm slow," she protested weakly. "I haven't had as much practice as a girl!"

Ronnie laughed. "Well, you don't have to share while you're visiting."

"I can't believe you have enough rooms so we can all have separate ones!" Sara exclaimed softly.

Tommi and Katie shot Sara warning glances, but she missed their cues.

Ronnie sighed. "We were planning to have a larger family," she said by way of explanation. "Before" Her voice trailed off and her lower lip trembled.

Tommi was closest; she wrapped Ronnie in a hug to comfort her at the uncomfortable memories, while Sara stood, confused, wondering what she'd said.

Ronnie disengaged from Tommi's brief hug, giving her a silent 'thank you'. She turned back to Sara.

Katie decided to change the subject - quickly. "Dad made most of the furniture here - and in the other bedrooms."

Sara's eyes widened. "Your dad made all this?"

"Yup," Katie said proudly.

"Wow! I wish I knew how to do things like that!" Sara exclaimed softly.

Ronnie smiled. "Maybe we'll have time for Roger to give you some lessons in woodworking," she offered. "I better go check on dinner, while you girls get ready." She turned and strode back toward the kitchen, humming a happy tune as she walked.

In a few moments, Roger came into Sara's room carrying her suitcase. "You don't pack nearly as much as I expected a girl would," he observed.

"Yeah," Sara nodded slowly. "I don't need a lot. Besides, it's not like I have dozens of outfits to wear every day." There was no hint of bitterness in her acknowledgement that she was a poor girl from a poor background.

"Well, I bet Ronnie would love to help you find a new outfit or two," Roger suggested cheerfully.

"I understand you made all the furniture," Sara changed the subject.

Roger shrugged meekly. "I try. Some of it comes out okay."

"Okay? This looks ... fabulous! I wish I knew how to do that!"

Roger smiled at the compliment. "If you'd like, I can help you make a small project for your dorm room; something simple to start with, of course."

Sara tried to think of the last time one of her parents had offered to help her learn a new skill. She couldn't remember even once. "That would be ... nice," she said hesitantly. The whole experience was turning surreal for her; she wondered if she wasn't going to wake up and find it was all a dream.

"Well, we'd better get to the table. I know you girls are hungry, and Ronnie doesn't like to serve cold food!"

As Sara sat down, she felt overwhelmed - again. From the table to the place settings to the serving dishes, it seemed more like fine restaurant fare than a simple family meal.

Tommi read the expression on her sister's face. "You're not dreaming," she whispered to Sara.

"Shhh," Katie hissed at Tommi.

Tommi turned back toward the table, noticed that Ronnie and Roger were preparing for grace, and bowed her head obligingly, straightening her posture as she did so.

Once the blessing was over, Ronnie began serving, starting with Tommi's plate. Sara was perplexed; she was used to a very informal, self-serve, pot-passing style of dining, but that wasn't happening, at least not for Tommi.

Ronnie was happily trying to put more food on the plate than Tommi wanted; evidently, she had a different idea about how much Tommi should eat than Tommi did. Tommi had to insist _twice_ that her plate was full enough.

After handing the plate back to Tommi, Ronnie glanced at Sara, who sat, not familiar with the routine. Tommi nudged Sara to catch her attention and nodded toward Ronnie. Sara looked toward Ronnie, and saw that she was looking at her, smiling, and holding out her hand to take Sara's plate. Slightly embarrassed, Sara handed her plate to Ronnie, and then went through the same routine as Tommi, insisting that she wasn't _that_ hungry, while Ronnie kept trying to serve her more chicken and potatoes.

As soon as she got the plate back, Sara started to reach for her fork, but she noticed that Tommi was still sitting with her hands in her lap. Sara let her hand drop back to her lap and waited, feeling a little sheepish. Finally, everyone was served, and only after Ronnie took a bite did Sara begin to eat. The formality of dining at Katie's house was, Sara realized, going to take some getting used to. Feeling famished after a long drive with no stops for food, Sara dug in.

"Wow!" she exclaimed softly as she savored the chicken. "This is _good_!"

Katie grinned. "Told you."

"What? This?" Ronnie asked, seemingly astonished that Sara was complimenting her cooking. "It's just something I threw together at the last minute!"

"Wait 'til you try the caramel rolls!" Tommi exclaimed, practically drooling at the thought of a caramel roll fresh from the oven.

"Oh, pshaw! You girls make it sound like you're eating at a five-star restaurant!" Ronnie discounted their compliments with a faint blush.

"Well," Roger added playfully, "I might be a little biased, but I always thought you were a great cook."

Sara ate silently, entertained by the jocular dialog, but also feeling strangely sad. The happiness and warmth of this family's dining style was foreign to her, and it accentuated what she'd missed while she was growing up.

"So, have you picked a major yet, Sara?" Roger asked her.

"What?" Sara realized she'd been asked a question and refocused her thoughts. "Oh, not yet. I'll probably go into something with medicine. Maybe a nurse or a physician's assistant."

"Or a doctor, maybe?" Ronnie suggested. "The way Tommi keeps bragging about you, it's pretty obvious that you're smart enough to go to med school."

Sara shrugged. "A couple of other people have suggested that I might be a good doctor." It was painfully obvious that Sara wasn't in a very conversational mood, despite continued attempts by everyone else at the table.

After a while, it was clear that everyone was done eating. Tommi rose and picked up her plate, and then reached to take Ronnie's empty plate as well.

Ronnie recoiled in horror. "You sit back down, young lady," she commanded. "While my girls are on vacation, they're going to relax, not work themselves with chores!" she said, smiling while sounding stern.

Sara saw the looks on Katie's and Tommi's faces, smiles of fun and familial warmth. She suddenly knew she was out of place, an intruder, not welcomed with the same love as Tommi received. Tommi was part of the family. Sara wasn't; she was alone. As tears started, she bolted from the table and fled down the hall.

Roger and Ronnie looked at each other, stunned, wondering if they'd said or done anything which had caused Sara's emotional breakdown.

"Sara!" Tommi called as she started to stand. She started to push her chair back, but Katie intervened.

Katie knew exactly what had happened. "I'll go talk to Sara."

"But"

Katie shook her head. "I'll go talk to her. I think Sara and I are way overdue for have a long talk."

Katie's knock sounded on the door again. "Sara, may I come in?"

Sara lay on the bed, tears streaming down her cheeks. She was crying softly, the sound muffled by the pillow in which she'd buried her face.

When there was no answer, Katie opened the door a crack. "Sara? Are you okay?"

Sara acted like she hadn't heard Katie; she lay still, except for the faint tremors of her sobbing.

Katie padded softly to the bed and sat on the edge, reaching to gingerly touch Sara on the shoulders. "Are you okay?"

Sara shook her head feebly as she continued crying.

"I think I know what's bothering you," Katie ventured. "You're feeling left out, like Tommi belongs, but you don't, right?"

Sara's nod confirmed what Katie had both feared and expected.

"I kind of figured that was it," Katie said softly. "But you shouldn't feel that way."

Sara barely moved from her position. "Tommi has ... a home! But I don't! I'm an ... orphan! I don't belong _anywhere_!" she wailed.

Katie nodded knowingly. "I've been wondering when we were going to need to have this talk," she said softly. "It bothers you, at least a little, that I look at Tommi as my little sister, doesn't it?"

Sara rolled to her side, looking up at Katie. "No," she fibbed, unconvincingly. "It's ... good for Tommi." Her sniffles and tears continued.

Katie smiled sadly. "You're not convincing me," she said softly. "It'd be normal for you to feel a bit jealous. And I know it bothered you a _lot_ when Tommi decided to room with me instead of with you."

"Yeah," Sara admitted after a long silence. "It's like ... Tommi is pushing me away! And then we come here - and she's ... she's ... _family_ to you and your parents! And I don't have _anyone_!" Her sobs became loud crying, tears flowing, as her emotional dam burst.

Katie continued to rub Sara's back, while she gently wiped tears from Sara's cheek. "It's okay," she repeated over and over. "No one is taking your place. No one can! Tommi loves you more than you know! How often did Tommi call you last year and during the summer? And when you weren't easy to get ahold of, didn't she buy you a cell phone so she could always be able to reach you? She's _so_ proud of you. Last semester, she was _always_ talking about you! She was so excited when you were accepted! She _loves_ you! She's your sister!"

Sara's tears slowed as she listened to Katie. "I guess," she said half-heartedly.

"There's no guessing about it," Katie replied sharply. "That's something special between you and Tommi. Nobody, including me and my parents, could ever come between the two of you."

Sara rolled onto her back. She looked up at Katie for a long time, her eyes red and her cheeks streaked with tears, as she contemplated what Katie had said. "I ... suppose," she said softly, as if admitting the truth to herself.

"She'd do anything for you!" Katie re-iterated.

"Like carry a second baby so I could afford college," Sara muttered to herself.

"What?" Katie's eyes widened in shock and surprise.

After a moment, Sara smiled faintly. "Don't try to deny it," she said. "I know what Tommi did for me."

"But ..." To say that Katie was stunned was an understatement.

"You're not a very good actress," Sara continued softly. "It wasn't hard to put the pieces together. Tommi had saved enough money to have the surgery after her first baby and still get through college. She didn't have the operation. I was accepted, but I didn't get the financial aid."

"Then suddenly, a foundation that I never heard of gave me a scholarship, without any application on my part." She smiled as she wiped at her still-moist cheeks. "It didn't take long in the library to find out that the source of the scholarship had ties to the Morris Foundation. And then Tommi announced that she was going to stay a girl and host another baby, but her reasoning wasn't exactly ... convincing." She looked at Katie's stunned expression. "How am I doing so far?"

Katie sighed. "If you don't go to med school, you should be a detective."

Sara sighed. "I know she wanted to help me, and I know she didn't want me to feel indebted to her."

"If that's not sisterly love, I don't know what is," Katie said softly.

"I would imagine that you were sworn to secrecy, right?" Sara asked.

Katie thought for a moment. Was acknowledging the truth the same as betraying Tommi's confidence? Sara had figured it out on her own; Katie hadn't told her anything. She decided to admit the truth and nodded. "She didn't want you to know."

"Well, then, the fact that I do know will be our secret, I guess."

"Deal."

"I love her, and I know she loves me." The sniffles started again. "I'm just ... afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of losing her - to you and your parents." She wiped at the renewed flow of tears. "And I'm a bit jealous of her."

"Because Mom treats her like her own daughter?"

Sara nodded sadly.

Katie wiped at Sara's tears, and then helped her sit up and hugged her. She didn't know how to answer Sara's fears. In fact, Katie had worried that Sara would end up feeling exactly as she had, and Katie knew she couldn't let herself or her parents come between Tommi and Sara, no matter how much Tommi meant to Katie.

"I know you said your dad would help, but I don't want to impose," Tommi protested.

"Nonsense," Katie replied. "We already talked, and he's looking forward to going."

"But ... car shopping is so ... unpleasant!" Tommi was definitely in a bind. Her car was twelve years old and on its last legs; she was starting to feel nervous even driving it to and from the clinic. It leaked oil, sometimes was hard to start, and was starting to get some serious engine vibration. In the last two weeks of the semester, it started rapidly losing power. There wasn't really a question; Tommi knew enough about auto mechanics to know that she had to replace it.

"Dad loves cars. Besides, he offered. Now, you're not going to be rude and turn down his offer, are you?" Katie smiled; she knew Tommi was cornered.

"I don't know..."

"Would you rather go car shopping with Dad, who has some connections around town and can help you get a good car at a good price, or would you prefer car-shopping in a college town where you don't know anyone and will probably get ripped off?" Katie knew she had the trump card with her argument.

Tommi sighed, closing her eyes in defeat. "Okay, I guess you're right."

"Let's get going, then," Roger interrupted. "I've got a friend in the car business, Don, who's always treated us right. He'll make a good deal on a good car." Roger held the door open for Tommi.

Tommi felt a little awkward as she climbed into Roger's car. He drove a red Mercedes two-door sedan that was immaculate; Tommi worried that she was going to scratch the paint just climbing in.

Roger noticed her unease. "Relax. It's just a car."

"Just a car?" Tommi asked, astonished. "Isn't this an SL?"

Roger nodded as he climbed behind the wheel. "You know your cars."

Tommi smiled to herself. "I try. Tried. Back when ..." She let the sentence hang.

Roger laughed. "There's no reason a girl can't be a car enthusiast. You might be surprised to learn that Katie knows a lot about cars, too."

"Knowing this family," Tommi said with a grin, "it doesn't surprise me. It's a 550, right? I _know_ it's not an AMG!"

"Very good!" He backed the car out to the street. "So, what are you thinking about for a car?"

Tommi had lost herself momentarily in the luxury of the car; the sumptuous leather seats and the sound from the premium stereo were delightful changes from her worn seats, dirty carpet, and tinny-sounding radio. "Huh?" she asked as she snapped from her temporary reverie. "Oh. I guess cheap. And reliable."

"You're probably not going to get both," Roger cautioned. "How long are you planning to keep the car?"

Tommi shrugged. "I hadn't really thought of that. I'd say at least five years. I figure I should try to get something that will last until I get out of college and have a chance to get established."

"Sensible. I see my Pumpkin is having a good influence on you!" Roger laughed.

Tommi couldn't help but grin. Roger was delightful, and she felt at complete ease with him. "I try to learn," she admitted.

"Okay. Economical, and in good shape. What style? Convertible? Sedan? SUV?"

Tommi thought for a moment. "I guess I'm not too picky. I'd _like_ something sporty," she admitted, "like ..."

"Like this?" Roger finished her comment. "Yeah, I can see you behind the wheel of a sports car."

"But," she continued, "insurance gets pretty pricey. I guess I should be looking for something smaller, to get better mileage. Maybe a hatchback, or a small sedan." She thought again. "I'd _like_ to get something with less than eighty thousand miles, if I can. More than that is asking for trouble."

Roger nodded. "Agreed. Have you considered a diesel?"

Tommi turned to him sharply, surprised. "No," she admitted. "Back ... in West Virginia, the only diesels were semis, tractors and pickup trucks." She wrinkled her nose. "Right now, I can't see myself climbing up into and out of a truck - especially in another few months!"

"You might want to think of a diesel, anyway. A diesel car, I mean. Fuel economy is much better, and if the engine is well cared-for, it should easily last well over two hundred thousand

miles." He thought a moment. "I'm going to guess that you won't want to finance a car, either."

Tommi shook her head. "Nope. Fortunately, I've got some cash saved from my first contract, so I'm hoping that I won't have to take out a loan."

Roger noted how Tommi was enjoying the ride. Without warning, he pulled to the side of the road. "How about we take the long way to the dealership? I can tell that you like the way this handles, so why don't you take the wheel?"

Tommi's eyes nearly bulged from their sockets. "Are you kidding?" she asked, astonished.

"No, not at all!" Roger assured her. "Pumpkin trusts you to drive her car, so you must be competent. And you're enjoying the way this thing handles, so" He shut off the ignition and stepped from the car, circling behind it.

Eagerly, but with some trepidation, Tommi climbed out and circled to the driver's side. After climbing in, she buckled, checked to see if Roger was set, and then she started the car. The roar of the engine was music to her ears. As she started to adjust the mirrors, Roger pushed a button and the top began to retract.

"Since the weather is good, we might as well put the top down," he explained unnecessarily. Seeing that Tommi was ready to drive, he continued. "You remember how to get to the freeway?"

"Uh, yeah!" Tommi said nervously. "But ... isn't that the wrong way?"

Roger put on a fatherly smile. "I told you we'd take the scenic way."

"Did you find a car?" Sara asked eagerly as Tommi came into the house.

Tommi shook her head. "Almost," she said. She shook her head. "Sheesh, there are a lot of choices in cars."

Katie gave Tommi an 'I told you so' look. "Let me guess - you were ready to buy one, but Dad told you to not jump at the first car, but to think about it carefully."

Roger, right behind Tommi, laughed. "Actually, Tommi was the one who insisted that she think some more."

"Oh," Sara sounded disappointed. "What were you looking at?"

Tommi smiled. "I'll tell you in a minute. First, though, I've got a few things I've got to get in from the car."

Sara stared, puzzled, but Katie took the hint. "I'm guessing that Tommi took Dad on a little detour for some shopping while they were out, and there's something that's a surprise that we're not supposed to know about."

Tommi shrugged, but her smile gave away the truth. "Could be - or not."

Katie took Sara's arm. "If Tommi is going to keep secrets from us, maybe we won't tell her what we've been doing all afternoon!" She turned to glance over her shoulder at Tommi, feigning a snobbish tilt of her head.

As soon as they were down the hall, Tommi scurried back into the garage and retrieved a few parcels and bags, and then carried them to her room. In a few moments, she was back in the living room. Within thirty seconds, Katie and Sara were back.

Even before Sara was seated next to Tommi, she was pressing her questions. "What are you thinking about getting?"

Tommi pulled out her cell phone and began to tap the controls. "I really wish I could get something like the SL," she said wistfully. "But on the practical side ..." she got a picture up. "I really like the looks of this one," she said, displaying a photo of a silver Mazda Three hatchback that she'd looked at.

"Oooh," Sara said in approval. "That's a cute car!"

"But the reliability isn't the best," Tommi noted. She tapped the phone. "The Ford hatchback is almost as good looking, and it's reported to be better quality."

"I can see myself borrowing that," Sara said playfully.

"I can't," Tommi rebutted quickly, "but it's in the running." She tapped the phone again.

"Boring!" Katie hissed.

"Maybe," Tommi countered, "but it's a diesel, so it'll last a long time and get good fuel economy."

"You sound like a practical old lady!" Sara snorted.

"You really don't want to ever borrow my car, do you?" Tommi commented sharply.

"What else?" Sara quickly got back to discussing the cars.

Tommi flipped to another photo. "They had a BMW 330."

The car got instant approval from Sara, but Katie noted Tommi's hesitancy. "What's the story with that?"

"Diesel, so good mileage. Stylish. But if it does break down, parts and service will cost a fortune, like with any German import." Tommi tapped to the next picture. "Then there's this one."

"I like it!" Sara and Katie echoed in unison.

"Mercedes three-hundred turbo diesel. Same plusses and minuses as the BMW."

"And?" Katie prompted.

"I like it," Tommi admitted sheepishly. "I really liked driving it. But ..."

"Too expensive?" Sara asked.

Tommi nodded. "In fact, if I want something reliable, it's going to cost more than I'd planned," she added with a grimace. She showed the last picture. "To be honest, this is the one I'm most leaning toward."

"Golf?"

"Turbo diesel," Tommi nodded. "It's very low mileage, and it's only a little more than the Focus."

Katie laughed. "You certainly didn't narrow your choices much, did you? Looks like you've got a lot of deciding to do."

Tommi nodded. "But I had a lot of great help today," she said appreciatively. "I don't know if I could have handled this much car shopping without your dad."

Ronnie knocked on Sara's door. "Sara?" she asked insistently, "are you okay?" Getting no answer, she gingerly turned the knob and opened the door a crack to peek in. "Sara?" she called again.

Sara lay on her bed, curled up in a fetal position, her back to the door. She didn't respond to Ronnie's entreaties.

Ronnie thought for a moment, wondering if she was possibly crossing into a area where she had no business. She quickly convinced herself that Sara was her guest, and since Sara had no family other than Tommi, she had a moral obligation to help. She'd invited Sara, and so far, the vacation had been an emotional roller-coaster for the unhappy young woman. She slipped into the room, closing the door softly behind herself, and padded to the bed, sitting on the edge and gently placing a hand on Sara's shoulders.

Ronnie could feel the faint tremors of Sara body as the girl sobbed quietly. "Sara, it's okay."

Sara barely shook her head. "No, it's not," she whispered. "Nothing's okay."

Ronnie continued to rub Sara's shoulder. "You've had a rough year," she said soothingly, "but you got through it."

Indeed, Ronnie wondered if she could have gotten through the seven months of hell that Sara had endured, even with all of Tommi's help.

Sara had been accepted to school, but then lost her financial aid, only to get a last-minute surprise scholarship, thanks to Tommi - but Sara didn't know that. She'd moved hundreds of miles from home to college, hoping to room with her sister, only to feel rejected when Tommi chose to stay with Katie. But Tommi had arranged for a last-second change so Sara could be in the same dorm and be much closer.

Tommi hadn't been able to cushion all the blows. Sara had watched her sister go on her first date, happy for Tommi but also wondering if she were losing her sister to some guy. She'd lost her mother, after being rejected - again - by that same mother and her oldest sister. And then she'd traveled to a home where she felt like an outsider because of how strongly Katie had accepted Tommi as Katie's own sister. On top of that, the gifts were a reminder to Sara of how little family - and how little money - she had.

Ronnie and Roger had done their best to help Sara feel included. Maybe they'd done too much; Sara had very nice gifts from everyone. Ronnie had been so happy to be able to get some very nice outfits for Sara. Tommi had chosen some very special gifts for her sister. But Sara didn't seem able to reciprocate, at least not in her mind.

"I ... couldn't ... afford anything," Sara sniffled. "I wanted to do so much, but I couldn't afford anything nice for Tommi!" she complained through tears.

Ronnie recoiled. She and Roger had gone too far with gifts for Sara. They'd wanted to make her feel like a part of the family, but instead, they'd inadvertently accentuated how little Sara was able to give.

"I bet Tommi will wear the earrings everywhere," Ronnie said, trying her best to sound reassuring.

"They're just cheap earrings," Sara protested. "I don't know why she would."

"Hush," Ronnie chided her. "They're not cheap. Maybe they didn't cost a lot, but the value is that you gave from your love. That's why Tommi put them on, and probably won't take them off very often - because they're a gift from you." She scooted a bit on the bed. "How about if you sit up, so we can talk?"

Sara turned her head, glancing up at Ronnie. Her cheeks were tear-streaked, and her eyes red and puffy. After a moment, she nodded and rolled over to sit up, her back against one end of the bed. She wiped at her tears as she took a Kleenex from Ronnie and blew her nose.

Ronnie continued. "I can't begin to imagine all the emotional turmoil you've had, but I do know that you have a sister that loves you to death, and the best gift you can give her is your love."

Sara shook her head sadly. "I'm not ... even sure ... how ... long," she said through sobs and sniffles, "she'll be ... my sister." The tears flowed anew, and she began to cry aloud. "She ... has a family!" Sara wailed. "All I've got ... is her! And when she has her second surgery" She was too distraught at the thought of losing Tommi to continue.

Ronnie shifted her position so she was sitting beside Sara. She wrapped her arm around the girl, pulling Sara's head onto her shoulder. "Hush," she said softly. "Whether Tommi stays a girl, or has a second surgery, you're still close."

"But ... Tommi has you! She's got a ... foster family!" Sara bawled. "I don't have anyone else!"

Ronnie tenderly wiped Sara's cheek. She realized that she didn't know what to say to comfort Sara.

"I'm ... scared," Sara admitted through her sobs. "I don't have anyone else, and I'm afraid of losing Tommi! I've never had anyone else who loved me like she does - not even my parents!"

"Shhh," Ronnie said soothingly. "What do you think of Katie and Roger and me?" she asked softly.

"Huh?" Sara pulled her head away from Ronnie's shoulder and looked at the older woman with a puzzled expression.

"What do you think of us?" Ronnie repeated. "Because we all think of you the same way we think of Tommi. She's like family. And I want you to think of us the same way - like family."

"But" Sara began to protest.

Ronnie shook her head, smiling. "But nothing. Katie thinks very highly of both you and Tommi. So that makes you like family, too."

Sara thought for a few seconds, trying to understand. There was some hidden emotion in Ronnie's voice, something that lent her words a sense of urgency.

"Okay?" Ronnie insisted.

Sara nodded slowly. "K."

Ronnie wiped Sara's tears and handed her another tissue. "Now let's get you cleaned up and let's go back out to the family room." She got another tissue.

"I've wanted to come here since I was little," Tommi said in awe as they stood in line.

"So did I," Sara echoed.

Ronnie smiled. "Then this is a dream come true for you both."

In moments, the doors opened, and the group was swept with the crowd into the monorail for the short ride to the Magic Kingdom. Tommi and Sara both stared at the huge lagoon, with ferry boats carrying additional guests to the park. They circled through the lobby of the Contemporary resort, pausing to allow more guests to board the already-crowded train, and then the train continued its journey. When they left the car, they could see the buildings of the iconic park, with the fairy-tale castle in the center.

Despite a very early start to the day, leaving home in the pre-dawn darkness to get to Orlando, the girls were wide awake and excited. This place was magical, and, as they strolled down Main Street, USA, Tommi and Sara were both struggling to take in the experience without feeling overwhelmed.

During the drive, Ronnie had insisted that they plan their day. Using park information from the Internet, they discussed what attractions they wanted to focus on. Roger and Ronnie had cautioned Tommi and Sara that the park would be crowded, and that they'd have to be judicious in their choices of rides. What worked in their favor is that their college break was longer than most, so they were able to go after many schools had resumed. That meant that they avoided some of the worst crowds of the holiday season.

Even with that, it was very unlikely that they'd get to do everything that they wanted. Ronnie took the opportunity to remind Tommi that, because of her pregnancy, she was not going to ride any of the faster, more exciting rides. Naturally, Tommi grumbled some, but she knew that Ronnie was right, and that arguing would be a losing battle.

The team decided that, while Roger, Katie, and Sara rode on the "exciting" rides, Tommi and Ronnie would spend time shopping and just relaxing. Tommi had tried to insist that Ronnie should be with Roger and Katie, but Ronnie would have none of that; she insisted that she didn't like the faster rides, and besides, she liked spending time with Tommi. Tommi thought she saw a hint of jealousy or sadness on Sara's face at the way Ronnie expressed her preference, but it passed, with the excitement building, as the miles passed.

In the park, they strolled briskly toward their first destination, the Jungle Cruise. Because they were resort guests, and it was an early-opening day for resort guests, the park wasn't as crowded as Roger had feared. The line for Jungle Cruise was mercifully short. While they were waiting, Katie and Sara ran to the Pirates of the Caribbean to get Fast Passes. They returned just as the group was ready to board a boat.

By hurrying between rides, they managed to get on four attractions with very short lines before the crowds started growing significantly, and, by mid-day, the lines were getting quite a bit longer. As a result, Ronnie and Tommi were spending more time sitting and shopping, while Roger, Sara, and Katie rode the attractions. Tommi didn't want to admit it, because she

wasn't showing yet, but she felt a little more tired than she'd remembered from the first pregnancy. Having some time to relax and occasionally sit was a welcome relief for her.

After the evening parade in the Magic Kingdom, they returned to their rooms to freshen up, and then went to the luau dinner at the resort. Katie offered to stay with her parents in one room, leaving Sara with Tommi in the second room, but Sara insisted that the three girls stay together. Tommi felt pleased that Sara was more accepting of Katie; she'd hoped that Sara would fit in and not feel like an outsider. It was very important, on this first Christmas without parents, that Sara had a loving environment. The day had been long; despite their unspoken intention of staying up late talking, both were asleep by ten. Katie tucked them in and crawled into bed herself.

The second day was longer than the first. Though they didn't have to get up so early, they did have to pack and have breakfast, before they went to the theme park. Tommi wanted to go to the Studios, but she was convinced by the others that Epcot would be better, especially with the fireworks show in the evening. Once more, Tommi stuck to the slower rides, but this time, Katie stayed with her mom and Tommi, letting Roger go on the attractions with Sara. The one ride Tommi really regretted not being able to ride was the Test Track, especially after Sara gushed about how much fun it was. Nevertheless, she enjoyed herself, despite the crowd.

By the time the fireworks display was over, the girls were exhausted, and the monorail ride back to the resort didn't seem long enough. All three would have been asleep, if the trip had been only ten minutes longer. At the resort, they piled into the car and headed for home. Before Roger had gotten ten miles onto the highway, Tommi was asleep, followed shortly by Sara. Ronnie glanced back at them and noted that they were sleeping peacefully, with Sara's head resting on Tommi's shoulder. She smiled and patted Roger's arm lovingly. The short Disney trip had been exactly what she'd hoped, and, she figured, exactly what Tommi and Sara had needed.

"So, which one are you getting?" Katie asked as Tommi crawled into Roger's car.

Tommi smiled. "You'll see when I get back."

"Fine!" Katie huffed. "Be that way!" She couldn't keep up her pretense of being mad, though. "I think you should get the Benz."

Tommi laughed. "Sara wants me to get the Bimmer," she commented, before sighing. "Either of them are more than I planned to spend, though."

"At least you won't have to worry about fixing your car for a while," Katie added. She glanced around before leaning closer. "I guess the second contract is handy after all," she said quietly.

Tommi nodded. "I was thinking the same thing." She frowned. "You know, with Sara's scholarship and the car, I'm probably going to have to do a third contract."

Katie nodded. "I was wondering about that."

"Well, we can talk more about it back at school."

"No hints about the car?"

Tommi grinned. "Nope. It'll be a surprise."

As the car drove off, Katie shook her head, smiling. "All _that_ means is, you haven't made up your mind yet!" she said to herself.

An hour later, Sara and Katie heard Roger's car approaching. They quickly pulled themselves from the backyard pool, towed off, and ran to the garage. Roger pulled in his Mercedes, and Tommi pulled up behind him.

Sara's mouth dropped open as she ran to the driver's side. "It's ... wow! It's _cute_! Is it a Jetta?"

Tommi smiled and nodded. "Turbo-diesel," she announced proudly. "It's very low mileage for a diesel, it's fun to drive, and it's loaded."

Sara's eyes widened. "It's pretty!" The car was a dark blue. Sara could see the sunroof, and she suspected Tommi wasn't exaggerating about the other amenities.

Katie walked slowly around the car, eyeing it critically. "Let's look under the hood," she said as she approached the front.

Sara gawked at her. "Are you kidding?" she exclaimed. "The first thing you want to look at is the engine?"

Roger grinned. "That's my girl!"

"Fine!" Sara said in exasperation. "You look at the engine! I'm going to check out the interior!" She climbed into the driver's seat. In deference to Katie, she pulled the hood release handle before she began to look at the controls. She purred as she sank into the soft comfort of the leather seats, and she ran her fingers over the controls on the center console.

Tommi stood beside the fender. "Your dad's mechanic checked it out," she announced, "and it's very clean."

Roger raised one eyebrow. "Um," he cleared his throat, "I thought you were going to call me 'Roger' or Dad'."

Tommi winced. "Sorry, _Dad_." She turned back to Katie. "It gets over forty miles per gallon."

"It's not as sporty as I was expecting you to get," Katie observed.

Tommi shrugged. "I guess I'm just getting too practical."

Sara poked her head out the window. "I can definitely see myself borrowing this! This is one cool car!"

Tommi raised an eyebrow and stared at Sara. "You wish!"

"Why not? In case you've forgotten, I don't have a car, and, since we live on campus, you don't need to drive all the time, so if I borrow your car, it shouldn't be much of an inconvenience," Sara argued.

Roger laughed. "If she doesn't go into medicine, she'd make a good lawyer!"

Tommi closed the hood. "Let's go for a drive," she announced. As Sara climbed out, Tommi grinned. "And if you behave, I'll let drive a bit to see how you like it."

Sara crept into Tommi's room. "Are you sleeping?" she whispered, as she approached Tommi's bed.

Tommi sat up. "Not yet," she answered.

Sara sat on the edge of Tommi's bed. "I wanted to thank you for bringing me here."

Tommi leaned forward and gave her sister a hug. "You're welcome. Thank you for coming. I had a great time."

"So did I," Sara answered. Still, there was a hint of sadness in her voice.

Tommi noticed. "What's wrong?"

Sara shook her head, an action barely noticeable in the darkness. "Nothing."

Tommi sighed. "You're not very convincing. What's wrong?"

Sara shook her head sadly. "I ... I don't know," she answered, feeling the tears welling up again. "It's just ... this reminds me of what we never had!"

Tommi nodded. "I know," she agreed softly. "But I know we'll always feel that we have a home with them." She thought back to her previous visit, during Spring Break, when it was just her. "Even without Katie, they accepted me. I know they feel the same about you."

"It's not the same," Sara replied sadly. "It's just not the same."

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, I know." Her voice choked. "But it's a lot better than nothing."

"Maybe."

"We're orphans, aren't we?" Tommi asked sadly, knowing the painful truth. "We'll never have a real home to go back to."

Sara clutched Tommi tightly. "No," she said through her tears. "I really envy Katie."

"Why?"

"Because she has a real family and a real home," Sara cried. This vacation had been extremely emotional for her. "I wish we had a real home," she said sadly. "With real parents who loved us, like Ronnie and Roger love Katie."

Katie was out in the hall, approaching Tommi's door. She'd found Sara's door open, with no sign of Sara, so she figured Sara was probably with Tommi. The light was off in Tommi's room, but Katie could hear some soft talking. She clutched the doorknob to open the door and peek in, but for some reason, she instead bent her ear closer to hear what the girls were talking about.

She heard them sobbing, and wondered if she shouldn't knock and help. Slowly, though, as she realized what the girls were saying, her eyes widened. After a few minutes, the girls' conversation died down, so Katie tiptoed back down the hall toward her parents' room, a smile slowly spreading on her face. She paused at the door and tapped softly on the door jamb. "Mom, Dad," she said, a sense of urgency in her voice, "can I come in? There's something we need to talk about."

Chapter 22 - Springtime of Our Discontent

Her top still damp from sweat, Tommi strode wearily into her dorm room and tossed her gym bag on her bed before collapsing in her chair.

"Good workout?" Katie asked without looking from her books.

Tommi sighed. "It seems like they're pushing me a lot more than they did the first time."

Katie shrugged. "What do you expect? You've shown that you're a good host mom, and your hormones don't have to adjust to a sex change this time."

"That, and I had an éclair for breakfast this morning, and Dr. Phillips noticed."

"One éclair?" Katie asked skeptically.

"Okay," Tommi admitted sheepishly. "Jillian and I have been regulars at the coffee shop in the student union building. A few eclairs."

"And donuts and sweet rolls and ..."

"Okay!" Tommi said, exasperated. "So I've got a sweet tooth! I admit it!"

"So your exercise is your penance," Katie concluded with a smug smile.

"Sheesh! You're almost as bad as the staff at the clinic."

Katie turned, a sweet smile on her face. "I'm just watching out for my little sister." She wrinkled her nose at something else Tommi had said. "Dr. Phillips again? I thought Dr. Tina was your primary."

Tommi shrugged, but angst flitted briefly across her features. "My class schedule kind of dictates who I can see."

Katie noticed the momentary troubled look on Tommi's face. "Rachel left a message that you missed another appointment." Katie frowned. "That's, what, three you missed in the last two weeks? She's going to start thinking that you're avoiding her."

Tommi looked away from Katie quickly to hide her expression. "Can't be helped," she said, trying to keep her voice even. "I'm sweaty and stinky, so I'm going to go take a shower." She started to pry her tired body from her chair.

"You had another phone call while you were out," Katie announced. "In fact, you had several calls."

"Oh?" Tommi's eyebrows rose with her curiosity. "Who was it, and what did they want?"

Katie shrugged. "Wouldn't say. Wouldn't leave a message, either."

"Interesting."

"The number is on your desk," Katie concluded. She turned back to her studies.

Tommi turned and looked at the paper on her desk. "I'll call after I get done with my shower." She stood, grabbed a change of clothing and her shower kit, and walked wearily from the room.

In a few minutes, Tommi was back. After hanging up her towel and gym clothes, she sat down again and lifted the phone receiver. Her fingers danced over the keypad, as she dialed the number from the note.

"Hi," she said hesitantly into the phone. "I'm Tommi Sue Wilson. I was given a message that I should call this number." She paused to listen.

"Oh, hi, Steph," she said. Another pause. "No, I'm pretty busy the rest of the evening. I've got a test to study for." Pause. "Sure, I can meet you tomorrow. About two?" More pause, this time longer. "No, really, it wasn't anything. I'm glad I could help."

Tommi glanced at Katie when she wasn't talking, and she noticed that Katie's head was cocked slightly to one side to listen.

"Sure, I can stop by the house. I mean, if it's okay." Tommi sounded hesitant, even uneasy, in her response. "Sure. See you around two." She hung up the phone.

From what she'd overheard, Katie couldn't play innocent. "I take it that was Stephanie Harmon, right? What did she want?" Katie's disdain for Stephanie and the Betas was undisguised. Many girls on campus disliked the Betas.

"Nothing much," Tommi replied with a shrug. "She said thanks for helping her, and she wanted me to come by her sorority house to talk."

"Oh? About what?" Katie's intuition was in full suspicion mode.

"I don't know," Tommi answered truthfully. "She just asked if I could meet her at their house."

Katie shook her head. "Remember what it was like the last time you dealt with the Betas?"

Tommi winced at the reminder. Right after the initial surgery that changed her from Tom into Tommi, the Betas had been downright vicious toward her with their harassment. "Yeah," she answered, "I was thinking about that." She shook her head slowly. "Maybe I'm being naïve, but Stephanie sounded friendly, and I know she was grateful for me helping her last semester. I guess I'll find out tomorrow."

"Are you sure you want to go?" Katie didn't try to hide her concern as she attempted to dissuade Tommi from visiting the Beta house.

Tommi gulped as she stepped to the door. The Beta sorority house, as she remembered from the time she'd been there with Stephanie, was one of the more ostentatious of the sorority houses. The sorority was home to a higher socio-economic class of girls, and they flaunted both their wealth and their disdain for those they considered beneath them. Tommi felt suddenly out of place.

When she tentatively reached for the doorbell, the door opened, as if she were expected. This unnerved Tommi even more.

he girl who stared at Tommi was the same girl who'd greeted her weeks before, when Tommi had taken Stephanie to the clinic. At the previous encounter, the girl's demeanor had matched the reputation of the Betas. Now, however, things were very different. "Hi," the girl said in a very pleasant, warm voice, extending her hand to Tommi. "I'm Traci. You must be Tommi Sue."

Tommi took Traci's outstretched hand, politely shaking. "Yes, I'm Tommi."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Traci said with a smile, as if she'd never met Tommi before. "Won't you please come in? Stephanie is upstairs, but she'll be down in a moment."

Nervously, Tommi followed Traci into the house. As she glanced around, she felt even more intimidated by the sorority. Other girls were coming and going, and Traci made sure that she introduced Tommi to each of them. It was a dizzying swirl of pleasantries from the girls, all of it unexpected.

The parlor they entered almost took Tommi's breath away. The room was two stories high, so that a room-length balcony could look down on the parlor. A matched pair of sweeping curved staircases descended from each end of the balcony to the parlor. Overhead hung an ornate chandelier, almost comically stereotypical for the room, and the hardwood floor was partially covered with what appeared to be an expensive Oriental rug. Tommi knew it was genuine and expensive without having to ask.

Following Traci's lead, Tommi sat down on the sofa, waiting for Stephanie. Tommi glanced around again, trying to make sense of the change in the girls' attitudes. The parlor was furnished and decorated in a display of exclusivity, wealth, and class. Immaculate matching sofas and wing chairs were clustered into several small conversation groups with various coffee and end tables and accent lamps. A massive grandfather clock stood prominently against one wall, and a polished baby grand piano sat on display in one corner of the large room. The fireplace mantle opposite the balcony was enormous, elaborately carved, and home to several marble busts. Paintings hung on the walls; Tommi guessed that they were founders or noteworthy alumni from the sorority, some by-gone achievements or historical importance preserved for posterity in oil and canvas within gilded frames.

The girls bustling about matched the house in display of wealth. Tommi suspected that even the shabbiest outfit among them was designer clothing, and that the girls here wore only the most exclusive perfume. Their jewelry certainly wouldn't be of the cheap costume variety from Target. Had she been in the middle of a gathering of space aliens, Tommi wouldn't have felt as out of place as she did in this sorority house.

"Hi, Tommi," Stephanie called from the balcony of the second floor. She waved happily as she pranced down the stairs to meet her guest.

Tommi rose and found herself wrapped in an enthusiastic hug by Stephanie. She hesitantly returned the embrace.

"I'm glad you could stop by," Stephanie said cheerfully. She took Tommi's hands, as both a gesture of friendship and to encourage Tommi to sit with her. "I wanted to say 'thank you' again," Stephanie continued.

Tommi felt her cheeks warm; she knew she was blushing. "I was glad I could help," she said humbly. "How are you doing?"

Stephanie bit her lip. "Mostly okay," she confessed softly. "But it's still hard." She shook her head sadly. "Father Bill said it would be. But at least I'm reconciled with the church, so I can take the sacraments again."

Tommi's curiosity was piqued. "Are you going to be a host mother?" she asked.

Stephanie shook her head, a hint of sadness in her eyes. "No, I'm not," she answered. "I didn't pass their tests, so I guess that wouldn't make a good host."

Tommi paused, not sure what to say. On one hand, she was sorry, because she had thought that carrying a baby would help Stephanie heal psychologically. On the other hand, Tommi wasn't a trained counselor like Rachel, and Tommi wasn't even sure if Stephanie wanted to carry a baby.

Stephanie noted Tommi's hesitation. "It's okay. I'm going to continue as a volunteer," she offered with a smile, "and I'll keep working with the donor mothers." She shrugged. "I'm doing what I can." She had a wistful look in her eyes. "Part of me really wanted to ... make up for what I did ... by being a host mother, but I guess it wasn't meant to be."

"I understand."

Stephanie suddenly frowned. "Where are my manners? Can we get you something to drink or, perhaps, a snack? I think our cook just made a tea cake."

Tommi glanced at the sofa involuntarily. She was nervous enough sitting on the fine furniture without a drink or food. "Uh," she stammered quickly, "no, thank you. My doctor has me on a very strict diet and exercise program." Tommi patted the small bulge in her tummy. "They're very particular about my fitness!"

One of the other sorority girls nearby laughed. "Sounds like a good personal trainer," she commented.

Tommi gulped again; it was obvious that the whole house was gathering for what she thought was a private conversation with Stephanie. She suddenly felt on display.

Nearly an hour later, after meeting all the girls, Tommi was escorted by Stephanie back to her car. "I really appreciate your help," Stephanie said again. "And I know the girls were interested in the Morris Foundation. You know, our national chapter has some ties to the foundation, but we really never knew much about what it does." Stephanie gave Tommi another embrace before Tommi stepped into her car. "See you on Sunday afternoon?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, Sunday, at three." She started her car and drove away from the sorority house as Stephanie stood and waved.

Tommi was totally confused. The girls had been surprisingly nice, and they were interested in her. She expected that, after Stephanie's ordeal, the focus would be on the Morris Foundation, but instead, the conversation focused on Tommi's background, her life, her likes and dislikes, and such. It didn't make sense to Tommi; the Beta girls had it all - very nice

cars, expensive clothes, rich families, friends in the "in crowd" - everything that Tommi didn't have. Why were they being so nice to her?

"Is Rachel in?" Tommi asked softly. She was uncomfortable to be asking for Rachel, and she sounded tentative and uncertain.

Suzie glanced at her computer and shook her head. "She's meeting with some of the foundation board members. It's like a quarterly progress report."

"Oh." Tommi sounded both relieved and disappointed.

"I'll leave a message, if you'd like. She actually might like an excuse to duck out of the meetings to deal with a client," Suzie laughed.

Tommi shook her head. "No, not really. It's not urgent, and I've got an appointment tomorrow. I just ... need to talk to somebody."

"Well, if it's not professional, but just talking," Suzie replied easily, "how about you join Dee and I for lunch?"

Tommi thought for a moment and nodded. "That sounds good." She felt genuinely relieved. She glanced at the clock on the wall behind Suzie's desk. "I've got a lab at one-thirty, though."

"We'll be back in plenty of time."

"I'll drive," Tommi offered quickly. She saw the smile spreading on Suzie's face. "That way I can make sure we're back in time."

"Yeah, right!" Suzie scoffed. "You just like showing off your car." She locked her computer and grabbed her purse. "But I'm not going to complain," she added with a grin, "because it's more comfortable than my car."

Lunch was at a popular deli in the downtown area. Much to Tommi's delight, a car pulled out of a parking spot near the door at just the right time.

"You are so lucky!" Suzie complained as Tommi parked in the just-vacated space only yards from the deli. "I never get a close parking spot!"

"Except at the clinic," Tommi rebutted quickly. "I seem to recall that you have your own reserved spot!"

"Dee should be here in a few minutes," Suzie changed the subject, as the girls walked into the deli. "She said we should go ahead and order in case she gets delayed a bit." The line wasn't too long, so they knew they wouldn't have much of a wait.

They needn't have worried; by the time it was their turn to order, Dee walked in.

Tommi waved at Dee and turned to the two men who were behind her and Suzie. "Our friend is a little late. Would you mind if she cut in line with us?" Her voice oozed charm, and she had a coy smile.

The pair exchanged a quick glance before one smiled at Suzie and Tommi. "No, not at all."

"Oh, thank you so much," Tommi purred in a sexy voice, batting her eyes as she did so. Suzie noticed and stifled a guffaw.

As they sat, Suzie couldn't contain her mirth any longer. "You are _so_ bad!" she chortled.

"What?" Tommi asked innocently. "What did I do?"

Dee laughed. "You know what you did! You were using your feminine charms to get what you wanted from those old codgers."

"Yeah. Have you been practicing a 'come hither' voice?" Suzie added.

"I was just asking a favor," Tommi protested weakly.

Dee glanced knowingly at Suzie. "If you say so."

Tommi smiled sheepishly. "Okay, you're right. I _was_ practicing a bit."

"So," Suzie changed the subject, "what do you want to talk about?"

"Is it more about that boy you've been dating?" Dee asked bluntly.

"Or is it that you're confused about whether you want to stay a girl?"

Tommi shook her head. "You guys know me _too_ well!" she complained.

"So which is it?"

"Both," Tommi admitted sheepishly.

"I take it you like Brian more than you want to?" Suzie prompted.

"Yeah."

"You told me you've gone out with him since the formal dance. How many dates _have_ you two been on? Three? Four?" Dee inquired before taking a bite of her sandwich.

Tommi shrugged. "Six, counting last night."

"And?"

"And what? He's nice, and I had a good time. But I'm just not sure."

"Since you wanted to talk to Rachel, I'm going to guess that you went a little further than just a good-night kiss, right?"

Tommi's blush answered the question.

"Second base? Third base? Home run?" Dee asked bluntly after quickly gulping down another mouthful of sandwich.

"Second," Tommi said sheepishly. "But the funny thing is, I kind of wanted more." She looked directly at Suzie. "Does that mean I'm ... losing myself?"

Suzie laughed. "No. It means you're curious, and your hormones are making you a bit ... excitable."

"Happens a lot with pregnant women. You probably experienced it the first time around, but you were too scared to do anything. Are you going to go all the way with him?" Dee asked.

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted. "Part of me really wants to, and part of me is scared to death."

Suzie noticed that Tommi didn't recoil in horror at the question. She smiled. "Maybe you're afraid that he'll think you're in-love serious, when you're really not in love?"

"Yeah," Dee chimed in. "When you talk about him, you don't get that dreamy, head-over-heels-in-love look in your eyes. It's more like you're talking about a good friend that you like spending time with."

"Maybe that's it," Tommi admitted. "I don't really feel like I love him, but I do like spending time with him."

"What about the other question - whether you stay a girl or not?" Suzie took a small bite of her salad.

"I don't know." Tommi sounded confused. "I like being a girl. I'm not sure that I remember what it's like to be Tom."

"If you had to decide right now, what would you do?" Dee asked.

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know. A lot of people would be very happy if I did stay a girl."

"But this isn't about making other people happy," Suzie reminded her.

Tommi chuckled. "Fortunately, I have a few months before I have to face that question."

"True, but you are going to have to face it sooner or later," Dee cautioned.

Tommi sighed. "I know."

Dee sensed that Tommi had tired of the line of conversation. "I like your blouse," she commented, changing the subject abruptly. "It's cute."

Tommi relaxed at the change in conversation. "Thanks. Sara helped me pick it out. I'll tell her it was a hit."

The rest of the lunch was full of normal girl talk. Tommi had felt a bit like she was being cross-examined for a couple of minutes. Still, she knew the conversation was one she needed to have, although it was supposed to be with Rachel instead of with Dee and Suzie.

After lunch, Tommi and Suzie drove back to the clinic. As Tommi pulled up outside the clinic, Suzie turned to her. "Thanks for lunch. It was fun."

"Yeah, I enjoyed it, too."

"But you know I have to report the cheesecake to Dr. Tina," Suzie cautioned playfully.

Tommi sighed. "Yeah, I know. It's just ... I really love desserts. I know I shouldn't have them; it's so hard to keep from gaining weight."

Suzie grinned. "Yeah, the curse of a nice figure. Anything that tastes good pours on the pounds. The key is moderation, followed by lots of abstinence and exercise."

"And I should quit eating an éclair every morning with Jillian," Tommi confessed.

"I think Dr. Tina already knows about those. Besides, since I didn't see you eat any eclairs, it's just hearsay to me. See you later," Suzie said cheerfully. She gracefully swung her legs out and stood up.

"One more thing," Suzie bent forward slightly to look at Tommi. "Have you and Rachel and Dr. Tina got things patched up?"

"I think we're getting there ... slowly," Tommi whispered. "It ... still hurts."

Suzie nodded sympathetically. "I know, but don't you suppose that it still hurts them, too? They think of you as more than a client. I probably shouldn't say this, but ... you're ... a friend ... to both of them. When you avoid them - which you have been doing - it hurts them more than you know." She straightened, closed the door, and strode easily back to work, leaving Tommi wondering at her last words.

"Hey, Sara! Wait up!"

Sara stopped and turned at the sound of her name being called. Immediately, she recognized the voice. "Hi, Brian. What's up?"

Brian trotted beside her. "I was hoping you could tell me," he said between breaths. He'd run to catch up with Sara, and, judging from how out-of-breath he was, he'd run quite a ways.

Sara frowned. "I don't understand."

Brian sighed. "What's going on with your sister?"

"Oh. I still don't understand. You're spending as much time with her as I am," Sara rebutted lightly.

"_Was_ spending as much time," Brian replied, his voice tinged with frustration.

"Was?" Sara's eyes widened with surprise.

"It's like ... she's been avoiding me for the past few weeks," Brian finally confessed.

Sara's brow furrowed. "That doesn't sound like Tommi," she said cautiously. "I know she's busy..."

Brian shook his head. "Whenever I meet her between classes, or when I manage to find her at the student center, she's always too busy to talk. It's like she doesn't want to be seen with me," he explained, sounding hurt. "And she cancelled our date last night," he added bitterly, "at the last minute, and with no explanation."

Sara's mouth dropped open in shock. "I didn't know ..."

Brian was too busy venting his emotions and didn't hear Sara. "I mean, is she trying to dump me or something? Did she find someone else?" He shook his head slowly. "If she had, I'd try to understand. But I'd expect her to at least be honest with me about it."

"She hasn't said _anything_ to me about anyone else," Sara replied, her voice somber. "I swear, I don't know of any other guys she's dating - or interested in."

"Then it's got to be the Betas," Brian said acidly.

Sara nodded slowly. "Yeah, that's what I was thinking."

"Has she been ... stuck up ... around the girls in the dorm?" Brian asked tentatively.

Sara started to rebut his absurd comment, but then she realized it wasn't so absurd. Brian had perfectly characterized Tommi's new attitude. Sara nodded slowly. "Yeah, I'm afraid so. It's been going on for a while, and I think, it's getting worse." She glanced around at the throng of students rushing between classes. "You don't have a class this period, do you?"

Brian shook his head. "No."

"How about we go somewhere to sit and continue this ... discussion. Somewhere a little less public."

"Coffee at the student union?" Brian suggested.

"Sounds good." Sara sighed. "After those last two classes, I need a big cup of coffee. I've got a ton of homework tonight, and without a lot of caffeine, I'll never get through it."

Brian and Sara walked in silence to the student union building, as if there was an unspoken agreement not to talk further about Tommi's situation in public. After they ordered and sat down in a relatively quiet corner of the coffee shop, Sara took a long sip of coffee and practically purred. "Ah, that's just what the doctor ordered."

Brian sighed heavily. "I wish all I needed was a cup of coffee. What I really need is to figure out how to get Tommi back."

Sara looked evenly at him for a moment, trying to read the emotion in his eyes. "You're assuming that you had her to begin with." After a moment, her eyes widened. "Oh, God!" she exclaimed. "I didn't mean like that!"

Brian shook his head slowly. "Nothing like that. I just really like her."

"Despite everything?" Sara asked. "Sounds as if you more than 'like' her."

Brian leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling for a moment. When he looked back at Sara, his expression was confident. "That doesn't matter! Tommi is a very beautiful, warm, charming, friendly, witty ... she's just such a wonderful girl." He stared at Sara for a moment before dropping his gaze to his steaming cup of coffee. "Yeah, I guess I am falling in love with her."

"Glad you could admit it. It is kind of obvious," Sara noted wryly.

"So why are you interested in me and your sister being together?" Brian turned the tables, questioning Sara.

Sara took a long sip of coffee. Still holding the cup in both hands, her elbows resting comfortably on the table, she smiled. "Because you're a nice guy. You're sweet, genuine, and caring, and not a predator. You're the kind of guy that could make Tommi happy. I get the strong sense that you'd treat her like a queen. She deserves someone nice like you."

"And maybe, if she fell in love with me, she'd decide to stay as your sister?" Brian speculated.

Sara's mouth opened to deliver a denial, but the words fell short. As her mouth closed, she let her head drop until she was looking at her coffee cup, still clasped in both hands. She nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's part of it."

Brian laughed lightly. "You obviously love her - as your sister. I'd guess that you two never really got along before she became your sister?"

Sara shook her head. "No, we didn't."

"And you don't want to lose that special relationship you've found, right?"

Sara's eyes narrowed. "I thought this conversation was about you and Tommi, not me and Tommi!"

Brian smiled. "Am I right?"

Sara nodded again. "Yeah, I guess that's part of it."

"Part?"

"You're the kind of guy a girl would be lucky to find," Sara tried to change the subject from her feelings toward Tommi. "I just want Tommi to be happy."

The grin returned. "Sounds like you might be a little bit jealous," Brian said laughingly.

"No!" Sara's denial was quick - too quick. She slowly realized that maybe she was jealous of Tommi. Maybe just a little bit.

"That's what I was wondering."

"Look, can we keep this about Tommi?" Sara tried to change the direction of the conversation. It was clear that Brian had hit a nerve.

"Okay. So how do I deal with Tommi's new ... attitude?" Brian asked.

Sara shook her head sadly. "I don't know," she confessed. "I really don't know. All I can say is that you're going to have to just hang in there and hope she realizes that she's pushing away a lot of people who care about her."

"You mean, we're both going to have to hang in there," Brian corrected somberly.

Sara nodded. "Yeah. Everyone that cares about Tommi. All any of us can do is wait and see."

Tommi was leaving the bathroom without really looking, and if, Erica hadn't dodged, Tommi would have run headlong into her. Tommi's head jerked up. "Oh," she exclaimed, "sorry. I wasn't paying attention." She sounded a little impatient.

Erica nodded, her expression strangely neutral. "No kidding." She shook her head. "You've been very distracted lately."

"I _said_ I was sorry," Tommi apologized again, but her voice lacked sincerity. "I guess I was in a hurry. I've got to get ready for the social this afternoon."

Erica's expression changed to disdain. "Oh. It's the _Betas_ again."

From the tone of Erica's voice, Tommi knew that Erica disapproved of the Betas. "It's just a social get-together." She sounded defensive.

Erica shook her head in disbelief. "Not with the Betas. I think they're checking you out, seeing if you can live up to their _high_ standards, so they can get you to join their sorority."

Tommi laughed aloud. "I don't think that's it. Stephanie is just being nice after I helped her."

"That's only one. What about the rest of them?"

Tommi shrugged. "They're just being friendly - probably because the sorority has ties to the Morris Foundation." She frowned. "Now, if you're done criticizing my friends, I have to finish getting ready." With a dismissive tilt of her head, Tommi stepped around Erica and stomped down the hall to her room.

Erica watched Tommi walk away. She shook her head slowly, and a tear formed in the corner of her eye. She was so engrossed in her private thoughts that she didn't hear Sara padding down the hall right behind her.

Sara saw Tommi turn into her room. "I take it she's going to another one of _those_ parties," Sara observed.

Erica jumped. "Oh! You startled me."

"I take it you tried to have a conversation with her just now."

Erica nodded slowly. "Not very successfully, though."

"Another social event with the Betas? And she just _can't_ be late, right?" Sara sounded critical, even sarcastic, about her sister's plans.

"Yeah." She sighed. "She's ... different lately. She's ..." Erica broke off, clearly unwilling to express her thoughts in Sara's presence.

"She's turning into a Beta snob bitch. That's what you were thinking, isn't it?"

Erica's jaw dropped open a bit. "Yeah," she replied hesitantly.

Sara laughed hollowly. "You're not the only one who thinks that," she added. "I overheard Diane saying that, quote, she should move her sorry, snobby ass the fuck out of what _used_ to be a friendly floor, unquote." Her voice carried the sadness of a girl whose best friend had just moved far away.

Erica nodded. "I've heard comments like that, too." She shook her head. "What's happening to her? Why is she changing so much?"

Sara shrugged. "Maybe she's being seduced by the chance to fit into a higher class. You know, growing up, we never had anything like what the Betas take for granted. Maybe it's feeling popular with the in-crowd girls. I don't know. But you don't know the half of how much she's changed."

Oh?"

Sara bit her lip, wondering momentarily if she'd said too much, and if what she was about to say was really appropriate. "She cancelled a date with Brian the other night to go over to the Beta house."

Erica's jaw dropped. She'd hoped that Tommi would drop Brian - for her. But for a Beta sorority function? "You're kidding!"

"Nope. And that's the second date she cancelled. Last night was a co-ed mixer, but Tommi got the notion that Brian wasn't ... the right kind of company to bring to the sorority." She watched the shocked expression on Erica's face. "There's more. According to the rumor mill, she was dancing and having a good time with a couple of the Alphas who were there."

Erica's eyes were both watering. "We're losing her," she cried softly, "to a bunch of stuck-up sorority cunts!"

Sara grimly nodded her agreement. "That's what I'm afraid of, too."

Out of habit, Tommi glanced around her as she stepped out of the classroom building. It wasn't that she was paranoid so much as she wanted to be prepared mentally for the crowds scurrying this way and that, as they scrambled between classes.

Tommi hadn't noticed Brian in the crowd, but he hadn't overlooked her. He knew the classes she had, and the path she usually took between them. He saw her start to walk rapidly, and he quickened his own pace. "Tommi, wait up!" he called.

At the sound of her name, Tommi paused and turned, glancing around, and suspecting strongly that it was Brian. Indeed, it only took seconds for her to recognize him, now almost trotting to catch up with her.

"Hey, Tommi," another voice called, this time female, close by, and friendly.

Tommi turned again, and was surprised to see Stephanie, Traci, and Katarina, all members of the Beta Tau sorority, waiting at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Got a minute?" Stephanie continued, smiling pleasantly.

Tommi glanced once more over her shoulder, toward Brian, before she smiled at the girls and ducked through a line of students to the waiting girls.

"I've got to get to Calculus, so I hope you don't think I'm rude if I can't talk long," Tommi explained quickly.

"Oh, that's no problem," Traci answered, still smiling pleasantly. "We can walk with you."

Tommi nodded, and the girls fell in line, Stephanie and Katarina to Tommi's left, and Traci to the right, moving in a deliberate but leisurely pace toward the mathematics building. "What's up?" Tommi asked, curious at the Cheshire-cat grin on all three girls' faces.

When Brian saw Tommi join the Beta sorority girls, he stopped short. After staring for several seconds at the retreating girls, he sighed heavily and turned back toward the computer labs, his expression crestfallen. He knew that Tommi had noticed him, but she had chosen to talk with the Beta girls instead.

"You know," Stephanie said, "we Betas have certain time-honored traditions. Among them are the rules for who we ask to join."

Tommi's heart skipped a beat. She hadn't been expecting anything like where the conversation seemed to be headed.

"At least three girls have to propose a new member," Traci continued, sounding like she was reciting a traditional formula, "and those whom we would have join us must be unanimously approved by the membership in a secret vote."

"Yeah," Tommi said hesitantly. "I'd heard that at the party the other day."

"Some sororities have formal rush parties," Katarina spoke in turn, "where anyone who wants to be considered is met and evaluated. We choose not to do this, but instead, invite selected guests to social functions, where we can meet those prospective members in a less ... hectic setting."

"Once a girl has been proposed and voted upon," Stephanie took her turn, "the three proposers meet the candidate and let her know that she's been invited to join our sorority." She stopped, took Tommi's hands, and looked her directly in the eyes. Traci and Katarina flanked Tommi, each with a hand on one of her shoulders. "We would be honored if you would join our sisterhood, the Beta Tau Sorority."

After Traci's words, Tommi had suspected that the girls were going through the 'offering ritual', where they informed a candidate that she would be accepted into the sorority after Rush week. She was thoroughly startled by the offer, however, by Stephanie's offer. "I ... I don't know what to say!" she stammered. "This is so unexpected."

Stephanie smiled. "It usually is a surprise," she explained, "and we like to keep it that way." She reached into her purse and placed a silver-colored envelope in Tommi's hands. "We

can't take an answer now. It is part of the tradition that you wait at least twenty-four hours before answering."

Stephanie gave Tommi a kiss on the cheek, followed in the same manner by Traci and Katarina. "Think about our offer."

With Tommi standing, stunned, in their wake, the three Beta girls walked off, their mission completed. For several seconds, Tommi stared alternately at the silver envelope and at the retreating Beta girls, who had so completely surprised her.

Rachel rose from her desk, smiling warmly as she reached out her hand toward Tommi. "How are you doing today?" she asked pleasantly.

After momentarily grasping Tommi's hand, Rachel picked up a folder and moved from behind her desk toward the sofa and chairs in the less formal area of her office. She didn't even need to gesture; Tommi was already easing herself into one of the stuffed chairs.

"Things are going okay, mostly," Tommi offered in a neutral voice. Despite her best efforts to hide her inner turmoil and her still uneasy feelings toward Rachel, her unease came through in her voice.

Rachel smiled, but it was grim rather than warm. She opened Tommi's folder. "Tina says you're doing okay - though she hasn't had much chance to see you lately." Her words carried disapproval at Tommi's reluctance to see Tina more often.

Tommi gulped; she hadn't expected Rachel to be so blunt, or to sound so critical of her reluctance to have Dr. Tina do her exams. "I'm feeling a lot better on this pregnancy," she said defensively.

"Except for some issues with weight," Rachel observed. She sighed. "Guys will never know how hard it is for a woman, especially a pregnant woman, to stay trim."

"I heard lots of complaints like that from girls when I was a guy, but I never guessed how true they were," Tommi laughed.

"But you are going to follow the doctors' orders, right?"

Tommi nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Dee said that you're rather distracted lately," Rachel got right to the point. "Anything I should be concerned about?"

Tommi sighed. "I don't know," she began. "It's ... well, the girls in the dorm are treating me differently."

"Define 'differently'."

"Like I have the plague," Tommi blurted. "They're kind of, I don't know, rude?" She thought for a moment. "No, that's not it. It's like ... they're distant, almost cold."

Rachel frowned. "I know you're very close to Katie, and Sara is in your dorm. What to _they_ think?"

Tommi shook her head. "They're about as distant from me as any of the other girls."

"So what's different? Has something new come up with the Dean? Or his daughter?"

"No." Tommi leaned back, staring at a point high on the wall opposite her chair. "Even Jillian is kind of cold toward me these days."

"Are you having issues with the young man who's interested in you?" Rachel pried further. She knew that Tommi relied on a good support group, and it seemed that she was losing it.

"Brian? No, he's kind of ..." Tommi winced visibly, as she dropped her gaze back to Rachel. "I guess I really don't know. I haven't been seeing much of him for the past few weeks."

"Oh?" Rachel's eyebrows shot up.

"Yeah, well, I've been a bit occupied. Socially, I mean," Tommi hastened to add. "Stephanie - the girl I helped last semester - invited me to a couple of functions at the Beta Tau sorority."

Rachel nodded slowly. "If I recall, isn't that the sorority that was kind of ... brutal with their harassment last year?"

"Yeah, but they're really a nice group of girls, once you get to know them." Tommi sounded like she was defending the sorority.

"And what do the other girls think of your ... newfound friends?"

"Well," Tommi wrinkled her nose, "all the girls think that the Betas are a bunch of stuck-up rich girls." Her eyes widened suddenly. "They're all jealous," she exclaimed.

"Why would the girls - including your sister - be jealous?"

"Because Stephanie asked me to pledge!" Tommi declared. "The girls are jealous that I have new friends."

Rachel shook her head slowly. "I'm pretty sure that's not it, Tommi," Rachel said firmly. "I may be guessing, but I'd venture that the girls think you're getting a bit stuck-up and snobbish from being around the Betas."

Tommi started to deny Rachel's speculation, but she cut herself short. "Is that it?" she asked herself. "_Have_ I been getting a bit stuck-up?"

"You tell me."

Tommi thought for several seconds, her mouth opening wider and wider, as she considered the recent past. Finally, she dropped her head into her hands as she sighed again. "I guess I have been paying more attention to the sorority than to my friends, or even to my sisters." She drew a deep breath. "Oh, God, I've screwed this up, too!"

"Do you want to join the sorority?" Rachel prompted.

Tommi looked up suddenly. "Huh?"

"Do you want to join?"

"Well, I guess I hadn't really thought about it," Tommi said. Her eyes widened again. "Oh, shit, that's what Erica was trying to tell me!"

"Erica was trying to tell you what?"

"She said something like the Betas were scoping me out as a pledge candidate, but I told her she was wrong." Tommi shook her head. "She was right, though."

"The question stands. Do you want to join?" Rachel pressed the issue.

Tommi thought for a moment, her lips pressed firmly together and her eyes narrowed. She shook her head. "No, I don't think so. It's not my kind of thing."

"But you were caught up in the popularity game, weren't you?"

Tommi nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess I was," she answered in a small, meek voice.

"Why do you think they asked you to join? I thought they were a very exclusive, rich girls' sorority."

Tommi laughed. "They sure are." She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe because Steph pressured them because she felt she owed me something?"

"Or perhaps they were expecting better ties to the foundation if you were a member?" Rachel suggested. "The national organization does have some pretty deep ties, remember?"

"Were they using me?" Tommi sounded suddenly angry at the sorority.

Rachel shook her head. "That's not what I was suggesting. I don't know their motives. I do know that you'd fit in the Beta Tau Sorority like a square peg in a round hole. You're not the type of person that would thrive in a sorority."

Tommi chuckled. "More data from my psych test and profile?"

It was Rachel's turn to laugh. "It's my job to know you."

"Sometimes, I wonder if you know me better than I know myself!" Tommi ventured with a grin.

Rachel's smile masked her shock at Tommi's guess, which was far closer to the truth than Rachel was willing to let on. "So now what?"

"I guess I owe my _friends_ a big apology," Tommi said simply. "I guess I _have_ been acting like a real snob with them, and I need to say I'm sorry."

"Is that all?" Rachel prompted.

Tommi shook her head. "No." Unexpectedly, she stood and walked over beside Rachel.

Rachel stood as well, wondering if Tommi was about to abruptly end their conversation. Instead, she found herself wrapped in a tight embrace. Still not quite sure what was happening, she reciprocated the hug.

"I need to tell you that I'm sorry, too," Tommi said, feeling her eyes moisten. "I haven't been fair to you, even though you've been here for me through everything."

"Oh, Tommi," Rachel said, trying to sound nonchalant. "It's my job to be here for ..."

"No, it's not like that," Tommi interrupted. "Through everything I've been through, you've been a good mentor _and_ a good friend. I didn't recognize that. I didn't see how rude I was being to you because _my_ feelings got hurt, and I didn't think about _your_ feelings. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Tommi," Rachel said through her own tears, "thank you!" She tried to wipe at her cheeks and failed. "You've become very much my friend, and then I opened my mouth last year and hurt you so badly. You can't imagine how many times I wished I could take those words back, so that we could have the relationship we had."

Tommi slowly released her hug. "I know," she said simply. A sudden chuckle seemed out of place. "Maybe I'm becoming too much a girl; I was hanging on to an old hurt, like you once told me girls do, instead of letting it go."

Rachel held Tommi's hands and used that leverage to guide Tommi back to a seated position. "Maybe you'd have been more comfortable if we'd gone out and gotten rip-snorting drunk and buried the hatchet, like you claim guys do!" she laughed.

"I guess I need to find Dr. Tina for a little talk, too," Tommi said softly. "But she's in the OR doing a procedure, so I won't have a chance today."

"Well, the next time you come in for a checkup, ask Suzie to schedule an extra few minutes so you can talk to Tina. She's got a private office, and we also have the informal break rooms if you want."

Tommi nodded. "I'll do that. Thanks." She stood. "I guess I've got a few things to do. I've got to tell Steph that I'm not going to accept their invitation, and I have a lot of people to apologize to."

Tommi sat on the wide marble ledge that surrounded the fountain, watching Stephanie walking toward her. She was still trying to figure out exactly what she was going to say to Stephanie, and, for a moment, she felt a surge of panic. She knew the conversation was going to be delicate, to say the least, and could turn ugly. But after a solid day of thinking, she still didn't know how she was going to handle it.

"Hi, Tommi," Stephanie greeted her with a smile. She opened her arms, inviting an embrace.

Tommi stood and exchanged hugs with Stephanie. "Hi, Steph," she echoed, trying to sound cheerful and confident. "How are things?"

Steph backed out of the hug and sat down on the ledge. "I'm still working at the center with the abortion counseling."

Tommi had noticed that even sitting was an act of feminine grace for Stephanie. She felt momentarily jealous that Stephanie and the Betas could be so poised, graceful, and elegant in seemingly everything they did. "I've seen your car there sometimes when I go for a workout. I didn't know if you'd continue volunteering after you got the ... issue ... straightened out."

Steph smiled modestly. "I suppose I could stop, but I feel obligated to try to help. Maybe all those Sunday Masses while I was growing up had an effect after all."

"Rachel says that good volunteers are worth their weight in gold."

Stephanie took Tommi's hand and looked directly into Tommi's eyes. "You didn't ask me here to chit-chat about the center, did you?"

Tommi shook her head slowly. "No, I didn't."

"It's about the pledge invitation, isn't it?"

Tommi nodded. "I've got a question for you. I hope you don't get upset, but I have to know the answer before I can go any further."

Stephanie nodded, suddenly somber. "Okay."

"Why did you invite me to join? I don't exactly fit the Beta type. And, if you recall, the first time I met you girls, you were a little ... unkind."

Stephanie blushed at the memory, and lowered her head in shame. "Yeah, I guess we were pretty nasty."

"It doesn't make sense to me," Tommi continued. "I mean, I'm just a simple country girl." She laughed hollowly. "Even that is a joke - until last year, I wasn't even a girl! You guys are ... well, you come from the right families, you all are pretty well-off. You're in the center of the social universe here, and I suspect that, at home], your families are, too."

Stephanie started to answer, but paused. Everything Tommi said was true.

Tommi didn't let Stephanie speak. "I have to know, Steph - does this have anything to do with, maybe, you feeling some kind of obligation toward me because I helped you last semester?"

Stephanie's eyes slowly widened as she thought about Tommi's words. "I don't ... I don't think" She lowered her head, shaking it slowly. "I don't know. Maybe."

Tommi clutched Stephanie's hand. "I couldn't help but wonder if that was the case." She took a quick deep breath. "Steph," she said firmly.

Stephanie looked up at Tommi, her expression unreadable.

"I didn't help you because I was expecting something in return. I helped you because you were hurting. I helped you because that's the way I was brought up - to help people just because they need it," Tommi explained softly.

"I see," Stephanie said evenly, her words deliberate and controlled. "I'm not sure I understand..."

"Steph," Tommi continued, "I'm really, really honored that you'd think enough of me to sponsor me for membership. But I can't accept, for a number of reasons."

Stephanie looked stunned. Girls just didn't turn down membership in the Betas!

"I'd always wonder if you pushed out of a sense of obligation or guilt or something like that," Tommi said. "Besides, you know my story. I'm not sure what I'm going to do once I finish this pregnancy. Can you imagine how awkward it would be if I joined and then decided to change back? I'm not sure you'd want me living in the house!"

Stephanie's eyes widened at Tommi's logical argument, and then she sputtered and chuckled. "I guess I hadn't thought of that," she admitted. "But ... it's just that you seem so natural that it's hard to think of you as anything but Tommi!"

Tommi felt her cheeks reddening. "Thanks. Sometimes, it's a little difficult to think of myself as anything but Tommi, but I am. There's more, though. I never have been a 'group' person. I've never tried to fit in. I've always been kind of a free spirit. It hasn't been as natural since my surgery; I had too much to learn. But it's still part of me."

"Are you sure? You know what it would mean to turn down an invitation," Stephanie said, sounding cautious and still trying to persuade Tommi to join.

Tommi did know; turning down the Betas would be the social snub of the decade. It just wasn't done. "Besides, I'm just a simple small-town country girl. The kinds of music and sports I like don't fit in with the Beta girls. Please don't take this wrong, but the average girl from the Beta house probably spends more on one party dress than I spend in my entire year's clothing budget. I'm not saying that you and the girls are rich snobs or anything," she added quickly, "but we're from different worlds." Tommi shook her head sadly. "I just wouldn't fit in."

Stephanie stared at Tommi for several seconds, and then simply nodded. "Yeah, I think I understand."

"How much persuading did you have to do to get the girls to accept your proposal?" Tommi asked bluntly.

Stephanie's mouth opened in protest. "I didn't ... it doesn't work like that" She shook her head and sighed heavily. "I'm lying to myself, aren't I?" she asked rhetorically. "I guess I did have to push some."

"It wouldn't work," Tommi reiterated. "We're too different."

Stephanie nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I know you're right." She seemed saddened by the realization.

Tommi noted Stephanie's mood shift. "Steph, I've gotten to know you, and I've gotten to like you. I'd like to be able to call you a friend, even if I can't join your sorority. We see each other at the clinic often enough; maybe we can go out for coffee once in a while."

Stephanie smiled. "I'd like that."

"So what are you going to tell the girls?" Tommi asked hesitantly.

"I'll tell them the truth. I'll tell them that I made a mistake by pushing for membership for you because I felt like I owed you something. I'll tell them that we talked, and you realized what I'd done and knew that it would be a mistake."

"Or you can tell them that I might change back into a guy, and then they'd have a real problem on their hands," Tommi grinned.

"I don't think I'll say that," Stephanie replied. "I know a couple of the girls that would take you up on the offer."

Tommi glanced around the room. Katie, Sara, Ashley, Erica, Diane, Jillian - all the girls were present, sitting on the chairs, on the beds, and on the carpeted floor. Tommi took a deep breath, as they watched with nervous anticipation.

"I suppose you're all wondering why I asked you to come here tonight," she began.

"Sheesh, this sounds like the reveal of a bad murder mystery," Ashley commented dryly. Erica gave her a sharp elbow in the ribs, but a few of the other girls giggled.

"If you've been wondering what's been going on with me, I got an invitation from the Beta Tau sorority to pledge," Tommi said simply. She knew she was adding to the suspense, and she was, in a way, relishing in the role.

Erica's heart sank. "I thought that's what they were up to," she said glumly.

"You were right," Tommi replied directly to Erica with an apologetic look in her eyes. She looked around the room at the girls. "I thought you needed to know, since you've all been such good friends."

"So ... when do you move out?" Katie asked in a steely-cold voice that hid her emotions.

"I'm not moving out," Tommi said simply.

"What?" Katie and Sara asked at the same time. "What did you say?"

"I'm not moving out."

"But that means ..." Ashley started to say in astonishment.

"I had a long talk with Stephanie today." Tommi explained. "We both decided that she was asking me to join for the wrong reasons, and that I didn't fit the Beta type."

Erica practically leaped from the bed and wrapped Tommi in a very passionate embrace, crying on Tommi's shoulder as she hugged her. "You don't know how happy it makes me that you're not joining that group of" She left the rest of her comments unspoken; in any event, words weren't necessary, since her feelings about the Betas were only too well known.

After a number of similar hugs and displays of emotion from the other girls, Tommi continued talking. "Please, I've got more that I need to say." The girls fell silent and stared at Tommi.

"Rachel helped me realize that I've been acting kind of bitchy toward all of you," she continued softly. The words came hard to her. She looked down at the floor as she continued her apology. "I've been arrogant, condescending, snooty, snobbish, and just plain being a Beta girl." Tommi bit her lip for a moment. "I'm very sorry. I was ... wrong. I hope that, in spite of the way I've been treating you all, you can accept my apology."

Sara was the first to embrace Tommi. "You're my big sister," she began, "no matter how much of a bitch you are. I have to forgive you - even when you're being such an ass."

Katie was next, then the entire room of girls. Tommi was in tears before the hugs were done. "I don't know how I deserve such good friends," she sniffled. "You guys are the best."

Sara gave Tommi another hug. "Welcome back to the gang," she whispered. "But you know, there's one person you owe an apology to - a big apology."

Tommi stared at her, her brow wrinkled in confusion. "Who ...?"

"Brian," Sara said softly, so the other girls couldn't hear.

"This really isn't necessary," Brian told Tommi, as they waited in the lobby of the restaurant.

Tommi smiled. "Yes, it is," she replied sweetly. She stood close to him, her arm around his and her hands lightly held in front of her, her body leaning slightly against him. It was as if she was afraid that he was going to run away, and she didn't want to let him.

"But ... this is a very expensive restaurant," Brian protested. "You know I'm just a simple guy."

"I told you, it's my treat," Tommi insisted, still smiling. "So hush!"

"This won't be good for your diet," Brian tried another avenue of protest.

"You're getting as bad as Dr. Tina and Katie!" Tommi fussed. "I'll skip eclairs with Jillian for a few days and put in extra time in the gym! Now, would you just stop arguing and enjoy our date?"

Brian sighed. "Okay, I give. I'll be a good boy and follow orders."

The wait for their table was very short. The dinner conversation was cordial, but Brian was starting to sense that there was something Tommi wasn't telling him. It was as if Tommi's unspoken secret was a Damoclean sword hanging over him, ready to fall and pierce any enjoyment. Tommi, however, seemed to be very relaxed and amiable. The dinner, to Brian, seemed agonizingly slow as he waited fearfully for Tommi's secret. To Tommi, the time sped by only too fast.

Once they were back in the car, Brian buckled his seatbelt, turned on the ignition, and looked at Tommi for whatever was next. "Back to the dorm?" he said suggested. He was driving Tommi's car, which was highly unusual. It was a display of trust and of her ceding the lead role for the date to him, even though it was her idea, her treat, and her car. It was highly unusual, and it added to Brian's nervousness.

Tommi shook her head. "I'm not feeling like going back yet," she purred. "It's still early."

Brian was confused. "Okay. Then what? Movie?"

Tommi wrinkled her nose. "Nah. Not really in the mood."

"We could go the park, but it's still a bit chilly."

Tommi felt herself shiver. "It's still _too_ chilly!" she replied quickly. "Why don't we just go rent a nice older movie and relax."

Brian gulped - Tommi was hinting that they go back to his place. Sure, they'd spent some time at his apartment before - like the disastrous date where he tried to cook a gourmet meal, and for a little couch-cuddling one evening when the movie theater lost power and they didn't have anything else to do. But this time, it was radically different. His roommate was on an interview trip, so they'd be alone in his apartment for the first time.

"My mom sent me a few older movies," Brian suggested. "She does that once in a while, when she thinks I need to be reminded of family movie nights. You ever see HOPSCOTCH or HATARI or THE GREAT RACE?"

Tommi smiled at him. "Those are some _really_ old movies!" she observed. "Sounds like a plan. If they aren't any good, we've always got your CDs to listen to."

After a short drive, during which Tommi couldn't help smiling to herself at the way Brian was babying her car and being paranoid about other traffic, they pulled into the parking lot. Arm in arm, they walked to Brian's apartment.

Without invitation, Tommi crossed to the sofa, sat down, and leaned back in a pose that was both confident and sexy. The DVDs of the three movies were on the coffee table. Tommi picked them up and began to read the descriptions.

Brian watched her sit as he walked to the refrigerator. "Orange sparkling water?" he asked as he opened the door and took out a bottle. He got two glasses down from the cupboard.

"Don't tell me you keep a supply just because I like it?" Tommi teased.

Brian smiled. "Never hurts to be prepared." He filled the glasses, closed the refrigerator, and walked to the sofa, sitting down next to Tommi. "Have you decided which movie?"

Tommi took a sip of her drink and set it on the coffee table. "Before you put in a movie, I want to tell you a couple of things."

Brian likewise set down his glass. "Okay," he said nervously. He didn't know what to expect from Tommi, especially given her erratic and even rude behavior for the past several weeks.

Tommi bit her lip as she tried to choose her words. "You know that I've been spending time with Stephanie and the Betas," she decided to be blunt.

Brian nodded. "Yeah."

"And ... they invited me to join their sorority."

Brian felt the floor drop from beneath him. He knew that he wasn't in the league of the typical Beta girl's boyfriend. They were rich snobs. "I see," he said carefully.

Tommi shook her head. "No, you don't. I turned them down."

"You _what_?" Brian asked in astonishment. He'd never heard of a girl turning down an invitation to join the most exclusive sorority on campus.

"I said, 'no.' I had a long conversation with Rachel, and she helped me see that, by getting close to the Betas, I was hurting my friends. I was falling into the popularity trap and forgetting who I am inside."

"That's ... interesting." Brian was being very careful with his words.

"I spent a lot of time talking with the girls in the dorm. I owed them a huge apology for being rude and stuck-up to them."

"How did that go?" Again, there was caution in his voice.

"We're friends. They forgave me," Tommi explained.

Brian felt himself relax just a tiny bit. "That's good. I know how important your friends are to you."

"Sara reminded me of something, though," Tommi continued.

"Oh?"

Tommi looked directly into Brian's eyes. She bit her lip again, as she struggled to find the right words. "I'm very, very sorry for how I treated you. I know you deserve better than the way I was acting."

"That's okay," Brian replied.

"No, it's not okay," Tommi interrupted. "I treated you like crap! I stood you up twice - and all because I was worried about what the Beta girls would think of you." She dropped her gaze, ashamed to look him in the eyes. "I'm very sorry." She shook her head slowly as she considered her actions. "I don't know how you can sit here beside me after the way I treated you."

Brian reached to Tommi and lifted her chin, guiding her head until she was looking directly into his eyes. "It's okay," he said tenderly. "I know you're sorry. I'm just glad I've got back the Tommi I enjoy spending time with." He leaned forward toward her guided her lips toward his.

Tommi lifted her head from Brian's shoulder as the movie ended and the credits rolled. She felt his hand leap from her breast and smiled to herself at how she'd startled him. "I need to use the ladies' room," she said softly, standing up.

In moments, she was back, and she stretched out against Brian again. Her head turned up toward him almost automatically, and as she began to kiss him, she found his hand and guided it back to her breast. She gave a purr of contentment, while they made out on the sofa.

As Tommi ran her fingers through Brian's hair, and he tenderly caressed her breast, she found herself becoming warm with excitement. Slowly, she reached for his hand again, and, grasping it, began to push it down her belly toward her warm crotch. Brian halted mid-kiss, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Are you sure?" he asked nervously.

Tommi, however, aggressively resumed French kissing him, offering an open invitation for him to continue exploring her body. She felt his hand rubbing against her panties, and she felt an almost burning need. She knew that she was ready.

Tommi's hand slipped down the front of Brian's shirt, across his belt, and began to rub against the bulge in his pants. Where she expected to be uneasy with what she was doing, she instead found herself feeling eager anticipation.

Once more, Brian pulled back from the kiss. "We aren't moving too fast, aren't we?" Brian asked, but his voice was tentative and uncertain, his rationale thoughts slowly being subsumed by more primal instincts.

Tommi continued to rub against Brian's erection, but she stared up at him. "I need you," she said in a husky, sexy voice. "I want you now."

Brian needed no further urging. He stood slowly, disentangling himself from the aroused woman. He picked her up in his arms and carried her from the sofa to his bedroom. He laid her gently on the bed, and lay down beside her. His hands groped at the buttons of her blouse, as she undid his belt and trousers.

Chapter 23 -Spring Break Surprise

"You seem a little distracted today," Rachel observed as she watched Tommi settle herself onto the sofa in Rachel's office. "Did your checkup go okay?"

Tommi shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"Tommi, it's obvious that you've got something serious on your mind."

Tommi laughed softly. "Yeah, I keep forgetting that you know me better than I know myself."

"That was funny once," Rachel said, feigning anger.

"Sorry," Tommi apologized quickly. "I wasn't trying to be sarcastic or anything. It's just"

"Just, what? You had another date last night, right?" Rachel prompted.

Tommi's eyes narrowed. "How do you do that?" she asked, baffled by Rachel's habit of accurately guessing her troubles.

Rachel smiled. "It wasn't too hard to figure out. I saw the report from Tina that you're overweight, and her notes that you confessed to a rather extravagant dinner last night, and you have a look on your face that is a mixture of contentment and uncertainty." She watched Tommi's reaction. "Shall I go on guessing?"

Tommi laughed softly. "Why not? Let's see if you can get this one."

"Okay. You apologized to your sister and friends, right? I would suppose that one of them - probably Katie - reminded you that you need to apologize to Brian for standing him up."

"Sara," Tommi corrected.

"Sara? Okay, Sara reminded you." Rachel smiled. "How am I doing so far?"

"Not bad, but since Katie is one of your spies, that would have been easy to find out. And I'm starting to suspect that you've recruited Sara into your little cabal, too!"

Rachel nodded appreciatively at Tommi's logic. "No, I haven't recruited Sara. Yet," Rachel added with an enigmatic smile. "It would be reasonable for you to take Brian out to dinner as a way of apologizing to him, correct?"

"Pretty good."

Rachel was studying Tommi's expression and body language. She recognized that there was more Tommi hadn't told. Suddenly, Rachel knew; her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open slightly with surprise. "You didn't!"

Tommi dropped her gaze as she felt her cheeks redden. "Yeah," she said softly. "We did."

Rachel took a deep breath. She knew that the next words from her mouth would be crucial for Tommi's opinion of herself and her actions. She absolutely couldn't be judgmental in any way. "Okay," she said evenly. "What else?"

Tommi looked up, surprised. "Huh?"

"What else do you need to talk about?"

Tommi shook her head, still uncomprehending. "I don't get it. You're acting like nothing happened, and I just told you that I _did it_!"

Rachel smiled at Tommi. "Tommi, you have to understand that sex is a part of being human, and curiosity about sex is normal. Experimenting is normal, especially for someone in your position."

"Doesn't it matter to you at all, since you're my counselor and my friend?" Tommi seemed to be trying to push Rachel for _some_ kind of reaction.

Rachel just smiled. "Tommi, if I said 'hooray', or 'it's about time', you'd probably think that I thought you a prude for not having tried sex earlier, or that I was celebrating the fact that, having tried sex as a woman, you'd stay and I'd have a client longer. On the other hand, if I sounded disapproving, you'd probably think yourself some kind of slut or whore or tramp, and that would damage your self-image. Even my tone of voice could be interpreted as judgmental."

Tommi nodded slowly. "I see what you mean. It's just...." She paused, closing her eyes for a moment, "I was hoping you could help me sort out how I feel about the whole thing."

Rachel practically grinned. "Now _that's_ what I was waiting for - for you to ask me to help you sort out _your_ feelings." She put down her pad and pen. "So how _do_ you feel? Was it what you were expecting?"

Tommi frowned momentarily. "I don't know," she admitted. "I wasn't sure _what_ to expect! But ... I was expecting fireworks and magic and ... I don't know, something very special."

"And?"

"I mean, it was nice," Tommi added quickly. "But ... somehow, it wasn't ... what I thought it would be."

Rachel nodded sympathetically. "Were you imagining angels singing from the heavens, accompanied by fireworks and the cannons from the 1812 overture in time with wave after wave of magical orgasms?"

Tommi laughed. "You make it sound like some kind of comic skit."

"Every woman has a different fantasy of what her first experience will be like. And most of the time, the reality is a far cry from the fantasy." Rachel smiled again. "My first time was in a tiny, leaky tent on a camping trip my junior year of high school. He sneaked into my tent, and we did it during a thunderstorm." She had a far-off look in her eyes as she recalled the event. "The air mattress leaked, so I had sticks and rocks poking in my back, the lightning was bright, and the thunder was loud and scary. The tent leaked all over us, and, to be honest, he was clumsy and in a hurry, and I didn't really have a good orgasm." She sighed. "The first time seldom lives up to the fantasy. But it can be _enjoyable_."

"Provided your air mattress doesn't pop," Tommi added mischievously.

Rachel laughed. "Yeah, that, too. So, while I don't really want to know the details, no matter how juicy and salacious they might be, we should talk about how you feel. What did the experience mean to you? How does it affect your view of yourself?"

"I don't know," Tommi admitted. "I mean, it was nice, and Brian was very tender and considerate - I think he was a virgin - but ... I don't know."

Tommi closed her eyes for a moment. "It was a lot different than what I expected. I mean, it wasn't painful or uncomfortable."

Rachel interrupted. "You did give birth before you had sex. That's backwards from the way it usually works. Because of your childbirth, you didn't have a hymen, so there wasn't anything to cause you pain," she explained.

Tommi nodded. "I didn't know what I'd think when he was inside me, but it was ... nice. And," Tommi blushed, "when he came, and I could feel him shooting in me, I kind of got a thrill thinking that I someday, a man could do that and make me pregnant the normal way, and I could have my own baby." She wrinkled her nose. "Does that make any sense?"

"Yes, it does. Tell me, Tommi, why did you 'do it'?"

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know. It just happened."

"Perhaps it was a combination of things, like your hormones are in overdrive, and perhaps you feel a little guilty at how you treated Brian and wanted to make it up to him, and perhaps you were a little bit curious?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, probably a bit of all three."

"Was the sex good enough by itself to make you want to stay a woman?" Rachel got right to the point.

"No." Tommi's answer was immediate and decisive.

"No? That was a pretty quick answer."

"I mean, it was 'good', but it wasn't enough."

"Based on your answer, I'm willing to say with certainty that if some well-hung stud came in the door in a stuffed G-string, you wouldn't feel the need to strip and impale yourself on him," Rachel suggested.

Tommi laughed. "Why, Rachel," she said with feigned shock, "I do believe your imagery has you getting a little ... hot."

Rachel roared with laughter even as she blushed a bit. "No," she answered quickly. Seeing the look of disbelief on Tommi's face, she continued. "Well, not entirely. In case you forgot, I'm three months along with my next one, and I'm starting to feel the effects of my hormones, just like you." She took a deep breath and let it out. "If we keep up this conversation, my husband is going to have one long, busy evening!"

"So now what do I do?" Tommi turned the conversation back to herself.

"You go on living your life, knowing that you've explored one option, and that it's not a scary, frightening monster waiting in the dark. You can continue your relationship with Brian at any level you like. You can back off and be more platonic, or you can continue with a sexual relationship. It's your choice. I think you know that."

"Yeah. And strangely enough, I feel a bit more empowered. I feel like I have a choice," Tommi confirmed. "It's my decision."

"Just like your decision not to go back to being Tom?"

Tommi's jaw dropped. "How ...? I never ... we weren't talking about that!"

"But you have decided, haven't you?" Rachel prompted. "You aren't going back to being Tom, are you?"

Tommi closed her eyes and slowly nodded. "No, I decided that I can't go back. I'm too much Tommi. Tom is a bunch of memories. Important memories and a part of me, but I've realized that I've become Tommi."

"Before you had sex?" It really wasn't a question, though it sounded like one.

Tommi nodded her confirmation. Suddenly, her eyes narrowed, and she gazed at Rachel. "How long have you known?"

"Moi?" Rachel feigned innocence, but it didn't work.

"You knew from the very beginning, didn't you?" Tommi sounded certain, but not quite accusatory. "You knew from the psych tests I took, right?"

Rachel nodded slowly. "The tests aren't a crystal ball. They can't predict the future, but they pretty accurately show your feelings about yourself - your self-image, your attitudes about sex and gender, your adaptability - things like that. We use them to get a reasonably accurate idea of whether a candidate can adapt to the demands of the program. I wasn't certain, but the tests showed a pretty high probability that you would eventually choose to remain a girl."

Tommi let the fact sink in for a moment. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked simply.

Rachel gave Tommi a stare that said, "You should know that!" Her answer was exactly what Tommi expected. "I couldn't. You didn't know, and if I had told you, 'Oh, by the way, you're destined to remain a girl after this is over,' you would have probably freaked out."

Tommi thought about her words for a brief moment. "Yeah, I probably would have."

Rachel's smile faded a tiny bit, and a hint of sadness entered her eyes. "You don't know how much I wanted to tell you, to help you through your self-doubt all those times you were questioning yourself. But I didn't dare."

Tommi pondered her answer. "When were you certain?"

"When you didn't freak out after the girls gave you a complete makeover, I was reasonably sure. When you signed up for a second pregnancy, I knew."

"And you still didn't tell me?"

Rachel shook her head. "If you recall, you were questioning your future a lot back then. We were talking a lot - at your initiative, by the way - about how you were adjusting, and how you felt about being a woman. You weren't ready to admit it to yourself, let alone to me."

"Yeah, I guess I can understand your reasoning." Tommi sighed. "Please don't tell anyone," she requested. "I need to tell people myself, in my own time."

"Okay."

"And one more thing," Tommi added.

"Which is?"

"Since I'm not going to have the reversal surgery, is there anything we can do to make my features a little less ... masculine? Maybe do something to minimize my Adam's apple, and a little something with my nose? And I'd like it if my chin could be a tiny bit less angular."

Rachel laughed. "Just like a woman to be thinking of her looks. I'll see what we can arrange."

Tommi rested her head on Brian's shoulder as they watched the movie. His arm was around her, holding her close. His head leaned softly against hers; her long, soft, brown hair, lightly perfumed by her hyacinth shampoo, brushed against his cheek like a delicate silk pillow, and the slight aroma of her perfume wafted around his face, entrancing him so much that if asked, he wouldn't have been able to tell anyone the plot of the movie.

Eventually, the credits rolled, and Tommi noticed that the crowd was leaving. She sat up slowly, breaking her spell over Brian. "Seems like we're always the last ones to leave," she observed lightly.

Brian smiled at her. "I think we both like to make every moment count."

Tommi glanced up at Brian and smiled, but her smile seemed a tiny bit forced. "So, now what?"

"How about some dessert? I seem to recall that you love raspberry cheesecake."

Tommi laughed. "But my diet doesn't." She followed Brian's lead in standing. "I can always make it up in the gym, though."

They walked to his car, arm in arm, but Tommi didn't feel like clinging quite so closely. She wondered what was wrong with herself. Brian was being extraordinarily polite and reserved; Tommi knew that he felt the same sense of awkwardness that she felt. They hadn't committed themselves emotionally to a relationship, at least Tommi hadn't, but they _had_ shared a much more intimate - to Tommi, at least - physical relationship.

After a nice dessert, where the conversation was friendly, but a bit stilted, as both avoided the subject of their sexual tryst, Brian didn't even hint at going back to his apartment. Tommi was grateful as Brian drove back to her dorm and parked his car.

"Thank you," Tommi said politely. "I enjoyed the movie."

"And the company?" Brian suggested hopefully.

Tommi laughed. "Of course. But you know how girls are supposed to play hard-to-get? I'm practicing."

Brian felt the tension ease a little. "We've both got classes in the morning." It was obvious where he was steering the conversation.

Tommi sighed and shook her head sadly. "Brian, I think we need to talk about ... what happened."

Brian's heart sank. "If you want to." He sounded like a condemned man.

Tommi put her hands on his and turned toward him. "Brian, in case you're wondering, I don't regret what we did. It was very special. But ..."

"But you want to slow down?" Brian prompted.

"Yeah," Tommi replied. "I think so."

"Okay," Brian said slowly. "I can back off." His self-pitying tone didn't exactly turn Tommi on.

"Brian, stop!" Tommi chided quickly. "I'm not saying that."

"Then what?"

Tommi sighed. "Brian, I've always been honest with you. I'm not going to stop. I always told you that I was afraid of you were falling in love with me, and that I didn't know if I could fall in love with you."

Brian stared for a moment, and then he nodded. "Yeah."

"The other night - it just happened. I think I know some of the reasons."

She paused, and saw Brian's expression sink.

"I don't regret it. But I do have to tell you why I think it happened. You've never been pregnant, so you can't know just what that does to a woman. Sometimes, I get easily ... excited." Tommi looked down at her hands, resting on Brian's. "And I know I was getting curious; that had some impact."

After a brief pause, she looked back at Brian. "I guess I was also feeling guilty over how I stood you up, and how I treated you when I was with the Beta girls. I think I was feeling a little like I needed to make it up to you. When everything came together, I couldn't say no."

"I see." Brian's voice was flat.

"No, you don't!" Tommi protested firmly, her voice bordering on angry at what she considered over-reaction on his part. "I really like being with you! I really like it when you help with homework, or when we got to a movie or a dance. I've ... gotten to like kissing you!" she added, looking down and blushing as she admitted the physical nature of her attraction. "You're fun, you're smart, you treat me better than I probably deserve! I wish you'd believe me!"

Brian's expression softened. "I figured you had serious regrets and maybe you thought I took advantage of you. I ... I guess I was expecting you to dump me." His brows rose. "You aren't dumping me, are you?" His voice cracked from nervousness.

Tommi laughed. "I'm not dumping you. You fell head-over-heels for me, even after I told you everything, and even after I warned you that I might not be able to fall in love with you. I haven't figured that one out, yet, but I do like spending time with you."

"So what you're saying is there's still hope that you'll fall in love with me?"

Tommi smiled, and then reached up and pulled his head down as she raised her lips. After a long and tender kiss, she smiled. "Maybe. If I didn't think it was possible, I wouldn't do that, now would I? If I was dumping you, I wouldn't have done that, would I?"

Brian smiled for the first time in the conversation. "I guess not."

"I'm still not sure if I could fall in love. But I do want to spend time with you. Let's enjoy everything we can, okay?" She lifted her lips toward his and kissed him again.

Brian put more effort into their kiss. "Okay," he said with a smile afterwards. "I guess I'll have to put a little more effort into sweeping you off your feet, then." He resumed kissing the girl he loved, trying to show her how much he adored her.

A few minutes later, Tommi stood in the doorway of the dorm, watching Brian drive off. He waved one last time, and she returned the gesture. She leaned against the wall and sighed. Her head was a swirl of emotions - gratitude to Brian for not pressing for more sex, sorrow that she might have led him on, bewilderment at her own feelings for Brian.

She didn't see Erica coming toward the dorm.

"Hi, Tommi," Erica called pleasantly.

Tommi practically leaped from surprise. She spun toward Erica, holding her hand over her heart. "Oh, hi, Erica," she called. "You startled me!"

"It's not my fault you were so distracted," Erica replied with a laugh. Her tone changed almost immediately, though. "Was that Brian again?" Her words were tinged with sadness.

Tommi nodded slowly. "I'm ... confused."

"Oh?"

"I'm sure you don't want to hear about it," Tommi tried to distract Erica from the true subject. "What are you doing out this late, anyway?"

Erica tried to smile. "I could ask you the same, but I think I already know the answer." She suddenly brightened. "You feel like a cup of coffee? The coffee shop is open for another hour or so."

Tommi smiled. "Sure. Sounds like a great idea."

No matter how tempted Erica was, she refrained from wrapping her arms around Tommi as they walked to the student center.

They sat down at a corner table in the little coffee shop in the student center, and Tommi noticed that Erica seemed a little subdued. "So what's up with you? You didn't tell me why you were out late."

"I was in the library working on a paper," Erica explained simply. "And you had a date with Brian, right?"

Tommi noticed Erica's tone, and the sadness in her eyes. "I know it hurts you when I talk about Brian," she said softly.

Erica nodded. "Yeah," she admitted honestly. She took a long sip from her coffee cup. "I also noticed that your eyes don't exactly light up when you talk about him."

Tommi chuckled. "Is it that obvious?" She took a sip. "I don't know. I'm ... confused."

"Confused - how? I know you enjoy kissing him," Erica said.

Tommi's eyes widened. "Who told you...?"

"It's pretty obvious from the way you two steam up the car windows when he tells you goodnight in the parking lot," Erica explained.

"I thought ..." Tommi began.

"Not much of a state secret," Erica smiled unconvincingly. It was only too obvious that she was still carrying a torch for Tommi. "The only thing the girls wonder is when you two are going to ... you know."

Tommi's mouth dropped open, and she quickly gazed down into her coffee cup, as she felt her cheeks burning. "I ..."

"Shhh," Erica whispered. "It's okay. You're a grown woman, and you have every right to" She stopped suddenly, biting her lower lip as she lowered her own gaze. She felt her eyes watering. "I really shouldn't be jealous," Erica finally said. "It's not like we're going steady."

Tommi placed her hand atop Erica's hands on the table. It wasn't lost on her that she'd made the exact same tender gesture to Brian a few minutes earlier. "I'm sorry, Erica," she said softly. "I really don't mean to hurt you."

Erica nodded almost imperceptibly. "But right now, you've got a lot on your mind, and you probably want to talk to someone, right?"

Tommi tried to laugh. "Yeah. Katie is buried in her senior papers, and I'm not sure where Sara is. Besides, how would I talk with my little sister about sex?"

"That I can't help you with," Erica laughed. "I don't know how to talk to a sister. All I've got are two younger brothers."

"Besides, I think Sara is trying to encourage me to get serious with Brian. I think she's hoping he'll sweep me off my feet and convince me to stay a girl." She shook her head. "I figured that you were uncomfortable enough talking with me about just kissing Brian."

"So what happened?" Erica forced herself to ask the question that Tommi needed to discuss.

"I don't know. Rachel thinks it was partly out of guilt for treating him like crap while I was being courted by the Betas. Partly, it might be curiosity. Partly, it might be my hormones." She took a quick sip of her coffee. "You know what they say - hormones make a pregnant woman insatiable."

"I could help you test that theory," Erica said with a naughty grin.

Tommi laughed. "I might take you up on that - later."

"Any time you want," Erica said eagerly. "So why are you having regrets?" she continued.

Tommi stared into her cup. "I don't know," she began. "I don't really regret trying it, but I feel like I'm leading Brian on, making him think that there's something there that I don't really feel."

"You know," Erica started, "and this isn't just me trying to persuade you, when you talk about Brian, it's like you're talking about a friend, not a lover. I don't get the impression that you think of him as a boyfriend."

Tommi chuckled. "It's funny. Dee, my mentor, and Suzie, the receptionist at the clinic, both said the same thing." She thought for a moment as she took another sip. "Brian is nice, and he's safe. I don't think he'd even consider getting aggressive or trying to take advantage of me. But I don't feel butterflies when I think about him. I don't feel like I'm on a cloud when I'm with him. I'm just ... comfortable, and safe."

"So what are you going to do?" Erica's question had a slight hint of anticipation, as though she felt that Tommi might dump Brian and come back to her.

Tommi shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she said. "Except walk back to the dorm and get some sleep, so I'm awake in class tomorrow." Hearing no protest from Erica, Tommi stood, picked up her nearly-empty coffee cup, and headed for the trash can. Erica followed right behind her.

"Are you going to keep going out with him?" Erica asked as they walked from the coffee shop.

"I don't know. I'll probably see him, but I really doubt I'll sleep with him again," Tommi said softly, so no-one but Erica could hear. "He's nice, but I'm afraid of leading him on."

"Did you ever think that just by continuing to see him, you're leading him on anyway?"

Tommi nodded, her expression glum. "Yeah, I kind of figured that, too." They continued to walk in silence for a bit. "I just don't know what to do," she admitted. "Things were so much simpler when I was a guy."

Erica laughed at that. "Somehow, I don't find that hard to believe."

"What do you think I should do?"

Erica sighed. "That's not a fair question. You know what I want."

The pair arrived back at their dorm, and stopped in the hall outside Tommi's door. "Thanks," Tommi said simply. "I really needed to have someone listen to me."

Erica nodded, and was about to turn away when Tommi caught her and pulled her into an embrace. "Thanks," Tommi said.

As they backed away from the hug, Erica looked in Tommi's eyes, staring deeply as if into Tommi's soul. Then, without warning, her head moved forward, her lips slowly moving toward Tommi's as Erica's eyes closed. At the last moment, she stopped, her eyes widened, and she pulled back. "I'm sorry," she said, ashamed. "I can't."

Tommi tried to make light of the situation. "I wasn't resisting."

Erica dropped her arms and backed a half-step from Tommi. "I can't," she said again. "If I kiss you, I won't want to stop, and when I do have to stop, I'll go back to my room and cry myself to sleep - again."

She turned, pausing only to look over her shoulder. "G'nite," Erica said quickly before scurrying down the hall.

Feeling a pang of guilt, like she'd led Erica on again, Tommi watched her retreat down the hall. Tommi knew that Erica was already crying, and she felt guilty for causing Erica more anguish.

"I thought your date was with Brian."

Tommi flinched at Sara's voice; she hadn't heard Sara coming up behind her. She turned, taking a couple of slow, deliberate breaths to calm her jangled nerves and racing heart. "You startled me," she complained.

"I thought your date was with Brian," Sara repeated.

"It was," Tommi replied curtly as they stepped into her room.

To Tommi's surprise, Katie was at her desk working, instead of in the library. She looked up as Tommi and Sara entered. "How was the date?"

Sara cut in before Tommi could answer. "She claimed she had a date with Brian, but I saw her coming back from the student center and then practically making out with Erica in the hall!" she kidded.

Tommi glared at Sara. "I did have a date with Brian! It's just that, afterward, I went for late coffee with Erica."

"Sure you did," Sara kidded.

"Maybe she did," Katie volunteered, bolstering Tommi's argument. "Maybe she decided to do a single-night speed-dating comparison between the two." Katie had a mischievous grin, as she poked fun at Tommi.

"Be that way then," Tommi huffed as she took off her jacket.

"So how were the dates?" Katie continued the ribbing.

Tommi turned around, hands on her hips. "Okay, if you must know, Brian and I had wild passionate sex in the back seat of his car, and then I ran to Erica for more passion so I could do a full comparison. Is that what you want to hear?"

Sara winked at Katie. "So which one is the better kisser?"

"Ooohhh!" Tommi growled. "You're impossible!" She grabbed her towel and shower kit and stomped out the door.

Katie watched her go. "You think we went too far?" she finally asked Sara.

Sara plopped down on Tommi's bed and stared at the ceiling for a few seconds. "Nope," she answered with a wink.

"Think she's serious about Brian?"

Sara wrinkled her nose. "I think she might be. I'm pretty sure that Tommi and Erica were talking about Brian, not about the two of them. Erica was nearly in tears when she left after forcing herself not to kiss Tommi."

Katie sighed. "Either Brian or Erica is going to get hurt, and probably pretty badly," she predicted. "Maybe both of them."

"Yeah. I know Brian is nuts about Tommi."

Katie's eyes narrowed. "Speaking of Brian, why have I noticed you talking to him several times? What's going on?"

Sara was surprised by Katie's observation. For a moment, she contemplated playing dumb, but decided against it. "He wants to know more about Tommi. You know, what she likes, what she doesn't like, her birthday, stuff like that."

"You're going to get caught in the middle of all this mess," Katie warned. "I think Brian is trying to get you as an ally to help him win over Tommi."

Sara seemed surprised. "I hadn't thought of that." She pondered the idea for a moment, before shaking her head. "No, he's too nice a guy for that. He'd be very good for Tommi."

"Well, you might be falling into the game without even knowing. It's a well-known fact that you want Tommi to stay a girl, and if she falls in love with Brian, it would clinch the deal." Katie sounded very concerned. "You're playing a dangerous game here."

"No, I'm not," Sara said firmly.

"Or maybe," Katie went out on a limb, "in some ways, you're a bit jealous of Tommi, because Brian is so good to her. You keep saying how nice and sweet he is."

"Preposterous!" Sara sputtered. "That's the most asinine thing I've heard you say in a long time!"

Katie pondered the ferocity of Sara's denial and decided against pursuing the matter. She had senior papers to work on. She couldn't afford the time for a lengthy discussion on the subject. But it did merit discussion, of that she was certain. "Do you think Tommi has made up her mind about changing back?" Katie changed the subject.

Sara shook her head. "Yeah, but I don't think I like the answer. If you ask me, she's going to change back after she delivers this baby." She saw the surprised look on Katie's face. "What do you think?"

Katie scratched her chin for a few moments. "I don't know. But if I had to bet, I'd bet on you keeping a big sister."

Diane stood in the doorway, modeling her new bikini. "This is going to be a great trip!" she exclaimed. "We're going to have so much fun!"

Sara glanced at Tommi; her nervousness showed plainly in her expression. "I don't really want to go."

"Aw, c'mon," Ashley chimed in. "We were there last year, and it was fantastic!"

Tommi turned from her desk. "Not all of us enjoyed Daytona Beach," she chimed in. "To be honest, I had more fun at Katie's folks' place."

Erica stuck her tongue out at Tommi. "Spoilsport!"

"Yeah," Diane added her two cents. "You were just too new at the girl thing to enjoy flaunting your bikini!"

Sara's eyes widened. "You got Tommi in a bikini last year?" She shook her head. "I just cannot picture that!"

Tommi frowned. "It wasn't by choice. They twisted my arm."

Erica got a dreamy look in her eyes. "Maybe, but you looked great in it!" She turned to Sara. "I've got some pictures if you want to see!"

"You will not show her pictures!" Tommi commanded. "I was a bloated whale! I was five and a half months pregnant, and it showed. I looked terrible!"

"Now I have to see them!" Sara grinned to Erica.

Tommi rolled her eyes. "This is a losing battle, isn't it?"

"You're so much better ... equipped for a bikini _this_ year!" Diane suggested.

"No, thanks," Tommi said, shaking her head. "I've got my own wheels this year. I'm going straight to Ronnie and Roger's, and you can't stop me!" She leaned back and rubbed her tummy, already swelling from the pregnancy. "By Spring Break, I'll be just past six months, and really showing. I don't want put myself on display for a bunch of oversexed, drunk, horny adolescent males who think they're God's gift to women!" She turned to Sara. "You wouldn't believe some of the lines I heard last year!" She shuddered at the memories.

"Sounds ... interesting," Sara commented with a wry grin, her eyebrows raising suggestively.

"Just wait a minute," Tommi cautioned, suddenly serious. "My little sister is _not_ going to flounce around in a tiny bikini in front of herds of guys who are looking for an easy lay!"

Diane and Erica flanked Sara and wrapped their arms around her shoulders. "Your little sister is eighteen. She can do whatever she wants!" Erica said firmly.

"Besides, _we'll_ watch over your little sister," Diane said sweetly. "We won't let anything happen to her that we wouldn't want happening to us."

Tommi glared at Erica. "That's what I'm afraid of!"

Sara squared her shoulders. "I'm not a little kid any longer," she said defiantly. "I can make my own decisions. I think I _will_ go to Daytona."

"You want to miss the home cooking and privacy and quiet of my folks' place?" Katie sounded concerned that Sara wouldn't be visiting.

Sara was suddenly torn. The peace and quiet and the pampering sounded too good to ignore. Still, Spring Break at Daytona had its own magnetic draw.

Tommi sighed. "Okay, so why don't you split the vacation, like I did last year? Go to Daytona for a few days, and Wednesday, I'll drive up and bring you down to Roger and Ronnie's."

"Tuesday," Katie directed. "I've seen Mom's menu for the week; she's making caramel rolls on Tuesday, and you don't want to miss that."

Erica did some quick counting, and her brow wrinkled. "We're going to be short a couple of seats," she announced, "with Christine and Kim going, too. Unless we pay for extra gas for a second car."

"Okay," Tommi knew the answer that the girls were hinting at, "I'll drive down there with my car, and then bring some of you back at the end of the week."

"Sounds like a plan," Diane said with a satisfied smile. "That'll make it easy for you to pick up Sara, too."

"Sara, are you asleep?" Tommi whispered softly into Sara's room. Even though it was their second time together at Katie's house, it still felt very strange to both of them to have their own rooms and baths.

"No," Sara whispered back.

Tommi crept in and sat on the edge of Sara's bed. "Did you have a good day? Are you still mad I brought you here from Daytona?"

Sara leaned up and wrapped her arms around her sister. "I'm glad," she said happily. As she leaned back, her expression clouded. "But if you say anything like, 'big sis knows best', I swear I'll club you!"

"If it's like last year, Daytona was fun, but this is a lot better."

Sara chuckled softly. "Daytona was a blast! It was better than I figured!"

Tommi tussled Sara's hair. "You just like flaunting your hot little body and having guys hanging all over you, right?"

Sara giggled. "I wasn't flaunting!"

"Yeah, but you're a good-looking young woman, and I bet all the guys noticed!"

"Jealous?" Sara teased her older sister.

"Me, jealous? Who's got bigger breasts right now?" Tommi teased right back.

Sara scowled. "It's not my fault. Yours are growing with your pregnancy. But I bet mine are firmer and not saggy like yours are getting!"

"Okay, enough with comparing titties," Tommi relented with her teasing. "How was the club scene?"

Sara thought of the parties and clubs. "The clubs were being very strict about carding, so I didn't even try to go to one," she admitted.

Unseen in the dim light, Tommi beamed with pride at the good sense of her sister. "I'm sure there were some parties in the motels?"

Sara nodded. "Yeah. I really didn't like those. It seemed like every guy was trying to offer me drinks, or cop a feel or grope me accidentally in the pool or in the crowd. It wasn't for me."

"And the others?" Tommi prodded.

Sara bit her lip; the pause was awkward. "Erica got a bit drunk one night."

Tommi recalled the previous year. "Yeah, she did that last year, too."

"I bet she didn't knee a guy in the crotch for trying to hit on her, and then stand on the diving board proclaiming her undying love for Tommi Sue!" Sara said hesitantly.

Tommi flinched. "She didn't?" she asked in horror, as she imagined the scene.

"Well, not the part about proclaiming her undying love, but she did knee a guy in the jewels when he got too aggressive," Sara laughed.

Tommi slapped Sara's arm. "You ... you you're so bad! What am I going to do with you?"

In answer, Sara leaned forward and wrapped her arms around Tommi again. "Hug me, like a good big sister should," she said sweetly.

Tommi laughed and did as Sara had asked. "I'm glad you're here."

"I feel like I'm at home, even if this isn't really home. You know what I mean?" Sara asked.

"Yeah. It's nice." She felt her eyes starting to water. "Roger and Ronnie are so sweet."

Sara agreed. "I wish we had parents like them."

Tommi wiped at the tears. "Well, we're supposed to call them Mom and Dad, so I guess they think of us like their daughters."

The backyard pool was less crowded than Daytona Beach, and there was no sand, nor roar of surf, but to Katie and Sara and Tommi, it was a perfect resort. Sara was lounging face-down on a raft in the pool, while Tommi stretched out in a lounge chair beside it. Only Katie was in the water, swimming slow laps.

As Katie swam past Sara's raft, she splashed Sara.

"Hey!" Sara flinched from the water, rearing up. Almost immediately, she realized that her bikini top was unfastened so she wouldn't get a tan line. She plopped back on the raft so she wouldn't expose herself. "You did that on purpose!" she complained, as she reached behind herself to fasten her top.

Tommi laughed. "Looked like an accident to me."

In response, Sara dipped her hand in the water and splashed Tommi.

"Hey!"

Sara smiled sweetly. "It was an accident."

Katie was laughing at the exchange, and, without warning, she dumped Sara from her raft. Sara came up from the water soaked and sputtering. "I know that wasn't an accident," she scowled.

Tommi watched the horseplay with amusement, until she saw Katie and Sara eyeing her. "I think I've had enough sun," she said as she darted toward the house.

Katie laughed. "Chicken!"

Tommi stopped at the patio doors of the sun porch. "I'm not chicken. I just have sensitive skin and can't overdo it."

The large splash from both Sara and Katie was expected, but Tommi's reaction wasn't quick enough. She had gotten quite wet before she ducked inside.

Katie swam to the side of the pool and pulled a raft in for herself. "Why were you at the clinic the other day?" she asked as she clambered onto the raft.

Sara frowned. "Me? At the clinic? You must be mistaken." She climbed on her raft and lay down on her back.

Katie shook her head as she likewise lay on her own float. "Nice try, but I don't buy it. I know it was you. You borrowed Tommi's car."

"Are you spying on me?"

"So, you're not denying it?" Katie continued.

Sara shrugged. "I stopped by to talk to Rachel. She's always curious about how Tommi is doing."

"If you say so," Katie didn't sound convinced.

"That's what happened."

"Three times in two weeks?" Katie posed yet another question. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear that you were testing for the program."

Sara blanched at Katie's speculative comment.

When Sara didn't answer, Katie turned her head, and, when she saw Sara's reaction, she knew the truth. "You are testing for the program, or you're starting the process!" she said, her mouth agape in surprise.

Sara's eyes were wide. "Please don't tell Tommi," she begged softly.

"You mean Tommi doesn't know?" Katie was thunderstruck.

"No, and I don't want her to know. You know how protective she's getting."

Katie nodded. "Yeah, but she is your sister, and she does care about you." She shook her head slowly. "You didn't see how hard it was for Tommi last year. It's not an easy way to earn money, believe me!"

"Promise me you won't tell!" Sara begged again.

Katie sighed. "I'm becoming a regular bank of your secrets!" she said. "Okay, I won't tell - for a while. But you are going to have to tell her sooner or later." She looked back skyward. "Why are you doing it?"

Sara rolled to her side so she could look at Katie. "I've got to earn my own way," she said firmly. "I know Tommi loves me and wants to help me, but I have to stand on my own feet. And, besides, I figure that if I go through the program, maybe I'll understand my big sister a little better."

Katie shook her head. "Not very good reasons."

"That's what Rachel said," Sara countered quickly. "She shut up, though, when I reminded her that Tommi's motive was financial the first time."

"How far are you in the process?"

Sara relaxed. Katie seemed to accept the inevitability of Sara being in the program, or, at least, Katie had decided to quit trying to dissuade her. "My lab work all passed, so if I pass the psych test and final interview, I'm in."

"No, you go on," Katie urged Tommi and Sara. "I promised Dad I'd help him with a couple of chores."

Tommi frowned. "This was supposed to be a trip for all of us girls," she complained.

Roger shrugged. "I guess it's my fault," he said. "I didn't realize you were going shopping, so I asked Pumpkin to help me."

Tommi scowled. "Why don't we just go shopping tomorrow instead," she suggested. Clearly, she wanted Katie to go along.

Ronnie shook her head. "Most definitely not. We made plans. The three of us will have a good time shopping. I don't get to see you girls nearly often enough, so we are not going to pass up this outing." She stood, punctuating her decision. "Now go get your purses, and we'll get going."

Sara glanced nervously at Tommi, who simply shrugged her acquiescence. Sara looked to Katie, who simply smiled and nodded.

"One thing you'll learn is that when Mom makes up her mind, the discussion is over," Katie said with a smile. "Go have fun. We've got several more days to go shopping before we go back."

Hours later, the girls arrived home. Sara and Tommi had several parcels and bags from the various stores. Tommi wanted to set the bags down in the family room and kick her feet up to rest.

Katie interposed. "You know how Mom likes to keep the family room neat. Besides, I haven't seen what you bought."

Roger stood beside his daughter. "Say, why don't you two girls model your new clothes?"

Tommi glanced at Sara, a puzzled expression on her face. "Okay," she said slowly. "I guess we can do that."

As the two girls walked down the hall, Tommi frowned. "There's something going on here," she whispered.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," Sara replied, confused.

"What's this big mystery project that Katie was working on with Roger? Why did Ronnie keep looking at her watch in the last couple of stores? And why did she insist on the outfits we got? They aren't exactly casual college wear!"

Sara lifted an eyebrow. "Now that you mention it, it does seem kind of odd."

Tommi shrugged resignedly. "Well, if there's some big secret, we'll find out soon enough. We better not keep them all waiting."

Tommi was the first one dressed; she emerged from her bedroom in a very pretty cocktail dress. Katie was in the hall waiting, and as soon as she saw Tommi, she intercepted her. "Mom said I should remind you that you're supposed to model all of it," she said sternly.

Tommi frowned. "That means putting up my hair and putting in the earrings and ..." She saw the firm expression on Katie's face. "Okay, all of it." As she strode back into her room, she glanced over her shoulder. "Does that include the necklace and makeup, too?"

Katie nodded. "All of it means all of it."

Tommi closed the door, muttering to herself. Katie smiled to herself when she heard Tommi's words about how the whole thing was like a setup for a formal date.

Moments later, Katie repeated the instructions to Sara. Satisfied that the two girls now knew exactly what was expected of them, Katie ducked into her own room.

When Tommi and Sara emerged from their rooms, they found Katie waiting in the hall. Katie was wearing a deep maroon sleeveless cocktail dress, with her hair done in a neat French braid. She wore a small diamond and ruby necklace, with matching earrings, and she carried a matching clutch purse. She wore dark hose and matching high-heel shoes. Somehow, between shoos Tommi and Sara back to their rooms, she'd also found time to put on her own makeup.

Tommi's eyes widened. "Okay, Katie," she started, "what's going on?"

Katie smiled innocently. "What makes you think something is going on?"

Tommi spread her arms and looked down. She was wearing an iridescent teal dress. The short sleeves were puffed and gathered at the shoulders. Like Katie, Tommi carried a matching purse and high-heel shoes. While not as fancy as Katie's braid, she'd managed an elegant hairstyle, with the sides anchored back by matching teal barrettes. She had a diamond and ruby necklace and earring set that matched Katie's. Tommi's makeup was a bit more fashionably done; her lipstick and eye shadow were stylish without being too bold.

"Are you're going to tell me again that nothing is going on?" Tommi asked incredulously.

Sara joined the two, and she was even more confused to see Katie and Tommi's outfits. Her dress was a little shorter than Tommi's, but no less elaborate. Royal blue with a lacy bodice overlay and lacy short sleeves, the dress perfectly matched Sara's purse and shoes. She had been very conservative with her makeup, but she did oblige her hosts by wearing what she now realized was the obligatory set of jewelry - a small diamond and ruby pendant necklace and matching earrings.

"Okay, Katie," Sara said firmly, "what's going on?"

Ronnie came around the corner into the hall, smiling, and Tommi knew that the entire afternoon had been a setup for something as yet unrevealed. Like the girls, Ronnie was wearing a formal dress. More importantly, she wore the same necklace and earrings. "My, you girls look pretty," she cooed.

Roger came down the hall, and his tuxedo raised eyebrows and more questions.

"Okay," Tommi demanded. "What's going on here?"

Ronnie exchanged a smile with her husband, and then smiled at the girls. "Why, nothing, dear," she said innocently.

Katie had been cued in to whatever was going on. "Sometimes, we like to have a formal dinner," she explained unconvincingly. "Mom and Dad are funny that way."

"Now, Pumpkin," Roger said softly, "we're not 'funny'."

"So we're going out for dinner?" Tommi guessed.

"Whatever for, when Roger is such a good chef?" Ronnie seemed stunned by the question. "Now, since we're all here, shall we go to the table?"

Roger offered his arm to his wife and escorted her down the hall and through the family room, followed closely by Katie and the two confused sisters.

When they came into the dining room, Tommi gasped. Ronnie's excellent taste in home furnishing was long known to the girls, but this room had been transformed into something almost regal. She knew, without seeing and without asking, that the family's formal china and silver was on the table.

Ronnie came to Tommi's side, and Roger to Sara's. "Please close your eyes," Ronnie insisted. "The both of you."

Not knowing what else to do, Tommi and Sara closed their eyes. The night had already had many surprises, and they didn't want to spoil any that remained. Slowly, they were guided through the dining room, and, with Katie pulling out the chairs, Ronnie and Roger helped the two girls sit down.

In moments, the others were seated. Tommi's curiosity was almost unbearable, and she imagined that Sara was likewise near bursting.

"Okay, you may open your eyes now."

Tommi opened her eyes, and, as she glanced around, she was confused. She didn't see anything that seemed out of place. Everything was normal for a formal candle-lit dinner, with fresh flowers, and Tommi stopped as she realized that there was something on her plate. As her gaze drifted down, her attention was riveted by the silver-hued envelope. She looked up, and saw a similar envelope on Sara's plate. Tommi looked at Ronnie, confused, and then to Roger, hoping for some hint.

"Go ahead," Ronnie said with a warm smile. "Open them."

Tommi glanced across the table at Sara, who sat equally astonished, before she gingerly lifted the envelope. Tommi turned the envelope over and opened the flap. Still puzzled, she extracted a card of the same silver hue. With another quick glance at Ronnie, Tommi opened the card and began to read.

Roger, Ronnie, and Katie Snyder would like to invite you, Tommi Sue and Sara Wilson, to join the Snyder family permanently and legally, through an adult adoption. We would be honored to have you as new daughters and as new sisters.

Halfway through, she dabbed at her eyes. By the time she finished, she was bawling. Tommi glanced across the table, and found Sara was having the same reaction.

Tommi looked at Ronnie, her face expressing her disbelief. "But" she started to say.

Ronnie beamed with pleasure. "It's real. If you say 'yes', it's real."

Roger nodded when Tommi glanced his way. "All the preliminary paperwork is done. If you want, we can finish the paperwork for an adult adoption and make you legally part of our family."

Tommi glanced at the card once more, and then she bolted suddenly from the table, wiping at her eyes.

"Tommi," Katie called, as she started to rise.

Ronnie put her hand on Katie's arm. "No, dear," she said softly. "I think this is a discussion _I_ have to have." She rose and followed Tommi to the back, to Tommi's bedroom. She knocked on the door, and when there was no answer, she peeked in. "Tommi," Ronnie said gently, "may I come in?"

Tommi lay on her bed, face down in her pillow. Sobs wracked her body. "Uh huh," she mumbled without looking up.

Ronnie closed the door behind her and sat on the edge of the bed, gently rubbing Tommi's shoulder. "I think I know what's bothering you," she said.

Tommi looked up. "You want to adopt two girls. But"

Ronnie smiled. "I want to adopt you, whatever body you're wearing. But I'll bet you feel that it's extra pressure on you to stay a girl, right?"

Tommi rolled to her side and glanced up. "Yeah," she muttered. "What happens if I change back? I wouldn't fit in anymore."

Ronnie helped Tommi sit up and wrapped her in a motherly embrace. "I don't think that's what you're afraid of, is it?"

Tommi thought for a moment, and then shook her head. "No."

"You've already decided, haven't you?"

"Is it that obvious?"

Ronnie smiled. "To a mother, yes."

Tommi nodded. "Rachel and I talked about my decision last week. I was waiting to tell everyone in my own way, when the time was right. Now, I'm afraid that everyone will wonder if I was pressured into staying a girl by ... _this_, because I didn't tell anyone yet."

Ronnie gently wiped tears from Tommi's cheeks. "_You_ know what the truth is, and that's all that matters."

"Yeah." Tommi didn't sound convinced.

"Maybe you need to talk to Sara alone, first?" Ronnie offered.

Tommi shook her head. "No. I'll tell everyone together - now."

Ronnie nodded. She retrieved a tissue and helped Tommi clean up a bit, and then the pair walked back to the dining room.

Tommi stood beside Ronnie, clutching her arm for support. "I need to tell you all something," Tommi announced nervously. She bit her lip, as she struggled to find words, but no magic words came. "Before we came down here, I had a talk with Rachel. I've decided on my future," she said, nervously glancing at Sara and Katie. "I ... you're ... this family is going to have two more forever-girls," she blurted. "I realized that I want to stay a girl, and I'd love to be a part of this family."

Sara leaped to her feet, crying anew, as she hugged her sister. "Oh, Tommi," she cried, "I was hoping and praying that you'd stay my sister forever!"

Not to be outdone, Katie joined in the group-hug. "I love you, little sis," she babbled through tears. "This is the happiest day of my life!"

After more hugging and crying, the family sat down at the table once more. "Now what?" Tommi asked in a moment of silence.

Roger smiled. "We have a big day tomorrow. All we need to do is to finalize the paperwork at the lawyers' office, and then we have a court appearance scheduled for Friday. Once that's done, you're part of the family."

Sara's mouth dropped open at the speed with which this was happening. She turned to Katie. "No wonder you didn't want me to go to Daytona Beach!"

Ronnie grinned. "And all it took to get you here was some caramel pecan rolls!" She looked back and forth between the two girls, her expression growing stern. "Now there is one rule that you two are going to have to follow from here on out."

Tommi glanced at Katie, who was still smiling, and then at Sara, who suddenly looked concerned. "Yes?" she replied simply.

Ronnie paused for a dramatic moment before continuing. "From now on, you two are required to address me as Mom or Mother. You are not allowed to call me anything else. Got it?"

Tommi's concern evaporated instantly, and she started crying again. "Yes, Mom," she answered with glee. She turned to Roger and added, "I suppose you want the same thing

too, _Dad_?" She practically jumped from her chair, ran to Ronnie's side, and hugged her tightly. "Mom," she said softly. "I like the sound of that."

Katie knocked softly on Tommi's door. Down the hall, Sara's door stood ajar; it didn't take a doctorate in logic to figure out that the girls were together in Tommi's room.

"Come in," Tommi called softly. She didn't want to disturb her new parents.

Katie closed the door behind her and sat down on the end of the bed, beside Sara. "It's late. What's up?"

Tommi wiped at her tears. "Nothing," she lied. "We were just talking."

Katie smiled. "C'mon," she urged. "Out with it."

Tommi smiled. "You know me almost as well as Rachel does." She bit her lower lip for a moment. "Why did you all decide to adopt Sara and me?" she finally asked.

Katie's smile broadened. "It's simple - it was meant to be."

Sara frowned. "I don't understand. What do you mean, 'meant to be'?"

"I don't believe in coincidences," Katie answered enigmatically. "Neither do Mom or Dad. When you were assigned as my roommate, we all knew that there was something special about you. Otherwise, it wouldn't have happened. All the time we grew together, getting to know each other - I wasn't kidding when I said you were my little sister."

She wiped at the tears of happiness that were forming in the corners of her eyes. "When you got Sara down to school, I knew _that_ was for a reason, too. When your Ma passed away, and you had all the trauma of reliving your past, I knew it was for a reason. I knew."

"Did you know about ... my decision?" Tommi asked hesitantly.

Katie nodded, smiling. "Yeah, I knew. And not from talking with Rachel, either."

Sara was quiet, unusually subdued.

"You're not saying much, Sara," Katie prompted.

Sara shook her head. "I don't get it. Why me?" She realized how her words sounded. "I mean, I'm happy, but I don't get it. Your special relationship is with Tommi, not me."

Katie laughed. "How many times have you come in to see Tommi, and just you and I ended up sitting around talking? How many times have you shared a secret with me, or have I shared a secret with you? How often do you and I just go out and do things, when Tommi has something else going on?"

Sara blushed, suddenly ashamed of her self-doubt. She looked down at her crossed legs.

Katie lifted Sara's chin toward her. "You probably didn't realize it, but you and I have grown just as close as Tommi and I."

Tommi suddenly frowned. "What do you mean, shared secrets? Have you two have been talking about me?"

Sara laughed and looked at Tommi. "Probably no more than you and Katie have shared secrets about me!"

"Don't you see?" Katie continued. "It all fit. We were meant to be family. I have two new sisters," she started to cry openly, "and I couldn't be happier." Katie leaned over to embrace Sara. Tommi leaned to hug both her sisters.

Tommi's eyes widened. "Is that why Rachel had me get copies of our birth certificates and Ma and Pa's death certificates? Was she in on this, too?"

Katie nodded. "Guilty as charged."

"So ... how did your parents ..." Sara saw the reproofing look from Katie. "I mean our parents," she corrected herself, "get the wild idea to do the adult adoption?"

Katie grinned. "Remember at Christmas, after all the nice time we spent here, you two were talking, crying, and wishing you had parents like mine? I overheard, and that's when I took the idea to Mom and Dad. They fell in love with it. After that, Dad just worked with his lawyer to do the paperwork."

Tommi wiped her tears again. "You can't imagine how happy today has been for me! This is," she blubbered as she started crying anew, "the happiest day of my life."

Sara, too, was crying tears of happiness. "Me, too," she added, for once at a complete loss for words.

The girls hugged and cried some more. Outside the door, Ronnie stood listening, a very contented smile on her face. She knew, as Katie had explained, that it was all meant to be.

Ronnie's smile turned to a grin, and she stifled a laugh as she heard Tommi interrupt the girls' happy-fest.

"Now that we're sisters, I think you have to let me borrow your clothes," Tommi said to Katie. "I heard that those are rules."

Chapter 24 - Sara

"Hey, Sara, wait up!" Brian called out after Tommi's sister, hoping to get her attention.

Fortunately, despite the throng of students, Brian's voice carried clearly to her. Sara stopped and turned. She immediately smiled when she recognized Brian. She gingerly stepped to the side of the walkway to avoid being trampled underfoot by less-attentive students.

"What's up?" Brian asked, trying to make small-talk.

Sara shrugged. "I've got a break between classes, so I was heading back to my room. Ashley usually has a coffee pot on about this time of day."

"Want to run down to the coffee shop for some real coffee?" Brian asked, sounding overly eager to have her accept.

"Sure," Sara changed her plans instantly. "If I don't help Ashley finish off the coffee, some of the other girls will." She fell in beside Brian walking toward the student center. "I take it you have a break, too?"

"Yeah. Actually, I'm done with classes for the day, but I was going to put in some time in the computer lab."

From where Brian had caught up to Sara, the student center was only a short walk. Sara ordered her coffee, but, as she started to dig out her wallet, Brian interrupted. "Allow me," he said graciously.

Sara laughed. "If Tommi saw you buying me coffee, she might think you were hitting on her little sister."

Brian's eyebrows rose. "Hmm, I hadn't thought of the jealous sister angle," he said thoughtfully.

Sara laughed again. "Forget it," she advised. "She may not get jealous, but she would try to kick your butt! She's turning into a very protective big sister!"

Brian shrugged. "Oh, well. It was worth a thought." He paid with his student debit card and picked up his own coffee.

Since it was the middle of the afternoon, the coffee shop was rather crowded. Brian took the first table he found free. "Sorry," he apologized, as he tried to corral some of the trash left by the previous occupant.

"No big deal," Sara excused the mess. "Not everyone is neat."

Brian used a napkin and wiped most of the spilled coffee, sugar, and powdered creamer off the table. He took the napkin and refuse to the trash can, and then he returned.

Sara set her coffee down and slid into a chair. "Thanks."

Brian sat opposite her. "How was Spring Break?" he asked simply.

Sara knew he was avoiding the subject forefront in his mind - her sister Tommi.

"Daytona was nice, but I didn't like all the parties. The beach was fun, but there was way too much drinking and noise and guys trying to go to bed with me. It just wasn't as much fun as I'd expected. The best part, though, was when we got to Katie's home, and we saw her parents, and we swam and sunbathed at their pool, without guys trying to score, and we got the surprise of our lives!" She was giddy with excitement at the memory of that week.

"Hey, slow down," Brian urged her as she began to jabber in her excitement.

"Sorry," Sara apologized. "It's just that, when I think of what happened, I can't help but get ... excited, and I want to tell everyone every detail."

"We can take all the time you want," Brian said soothingly, "so you can slow down and take your time."

"After last Christmas when we visited, Katie talked to her parents - Mom and Dad - and suggested that they do an adult adoption for Tommi and me! They were all acting really mysterious, and we went shopping, and we got these beautiful gowns that they insisted we wore, and we had the most fabulous dinner when they sprang the surprise, and then we were very busy doing legal paperwork and going to court, and" She had to pause to take a breath, and she realized that she was talking rapid-fire again. "Sorry. Well, once court was over, Katie's parents are Tommi and my parents! We're all family!"

Brian smiled. He had seen the pain in Tommi when her mother passed away without ever having accepted her. He got the distinct impression that Tommi's family memories were anything but pleasant. This was a new start with a loving family. "That's neat," he said to Sara. "You two deserve all the happiness you can get."

Sara was grinning now from her excitement. "And we're starting more paperwork to get our names changed. And Tommi told us" She stopped talking abruptly, and her eyes narrowed. "Have you talked with Tommi?" she asked.

Brian shook his head. "Not really. I asked her out a couple of nights ago, but she was studying for a test. What's going on with Tommi?" He sounded concerned. "It's not something serious, is it?"

Sara realized she'd said too much. "Um, it's for Tommi to tell you," she said simply, regretting the words she'd already spoken.

"Okay," Brian said hesitantly. He was disappointed not to get more information from Sara.

"_So_, what's up with you two?" Sara asked, bringing up the subject that she knew was on Brian's mind.

Brian shrugged, and he looked forlorn. "I don't know," he admitted softly. "I thought things were going so well, and then" He looked down into his coffee cup. "I just don't know." He looked up at Sara, his eyes brimming with hope. "Has she told you anything? Any hints or clues about where I stand with her?"

Sara thought for a moment before shaking her head. "I'm sorry, but I probably know less than you do."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed.

"Tommi thinks I'm trying to push you two together," she explained further.

"Are you?"

Sara laughed. "I wouldn't mind it if you two were serious. You're very nice, and you treat Tommi like a princess. Yeah, I'd like it, because Tommi deserves someone who adores her and treats her right."

"She is very special," Brian chimed in. "How could I not treat her like a goddess?" His eyes narrowed slightly as he thought about Sara's role. "Why are you so interested in Tommi's love life?"

"Touche," Sara said as she sipped her coffee. She laughed. "You know Tommi's history. She doesn't have the years of experience dating guys and knowing what to look for and what to look out for. Maybe I'm just being a protective little sister."

Brian shook his head. "I just wish I knew more about what she likes. You know, jewelry, perfume, music - things that she thinks are special."

Sara chuckled again. "You've got me. She's as new a sister to me as she is a girl to you."

"When's her birthday?" Brian asked hopefully. "Or any other special dates that I could use as an excuse to treat her to a nice dinner? Any movies she especially likes? Music?"

"You're trying to plan something really awesome to impress her, aren't you?" Sara was intrigued.

"Well, yeah."

Sara laughed. "Her birthday - well, the official one on paper - is in about three weeks. Of course, she considers her surgery date to be her birthday, too. And" She paused, as she had another thought. "You know, you could ask her out on Friday, to celebrate the two-week anniversary of getting another family."

Brian's eyes widened. "That sounds like a great idea!" he said enthusiastically. "But I don't know if I should get her something, like a card or a small gift or"

Sara shook her head. "Get her a card. Anything more might be misinterpreted." She chuckled. "But if you _really_ _insist_ on getting her something, maybe you could just give her a good foot massage. She's always complaining that her feet hurt, especially after a long day going to and from classes."

Brian's expression fell. "That might be kind of ... awkward," he stammered. "We ... the only, ahh, way I know to arrange that would be at my apartment, and, well"

The awkward way he ended the sentence left Sara wondering how much Tommi hadn't told her. "Just a card and a nice dinner should be fine."

Sara's phone interrupted her Saturday-morning sleep-in time. She glanced at the time and saw that it was 9:51. She took a deep breath before answering her phone. "Hello," she mumbled, sounding groggy.

"Oh, hi, Brian," she said after hearing the voice on the other end. "Yeah, I _was_ sleeping in, but it's almost ten, so I needed to wake up anyway."

As Sara listened, she glanced across the room to see if the phone call was disturbing Ashley. Fortunately, Ashley wasn't in; her bed was neatly made, and she'd already left.

"Yeah, I can meet you. Where?" She paused to listen to Brian's suggestion.

"Actually, that sounds good. I'm just getting up and haven't had breakfast, so a coffee and a pastry sound great."

"Good," his voice came over the phone. "I'll see you around eleven."

"No, I'm quicker. Give me half an hour, and I'll see you. K, bye." She clicked off her cell phone.

As she rolled out of bed, she muttered to herself, "Tommi, what the hell did you do?" Brian didn't sound very happy; something had gone wrong on their date - if they'd even _gone_ on a date.

It took her thirty-five minutes to get a quick shower, untangle her hair, pull on some clothes, and scurry to the pastry shop in the student center. Brian was waiting, as expected.

"Sorry I'm late," Sara apologized as she strode up to him.

"Late? I figured any girl who can get ready in less than two hours is _very_ early!" Brian laughed.

Sara ordered a cup of coffee and a Danish, but when Brian offered to pay, Sara turned him down. "You need to have money for dates with Tommi," she reminded him.

Brian's expression darkened at that comment. "The way things went last night, I'm not sure if I'll _have_ any more dates with her."

Sara's eyebrows rose. "Not good?"

Brian sighed. "Really bad."

"I assume you want to talk about it, right?"

Brian nodded. "I don't understand. It's like ... she's been distant ever since" He realized where his thoughts were going, and he stopped, staring down at his hands clutching his coffee cup.

Sara put her hand on Brian's for reassurance. "I think I can guess what happened," she said calmly. "Even if you're not saying anything, and Tommi isn't talking about it either."

Brian lifted his gaze to look into Sara's eyes, seeking some assurance that he hadn't been a cad. After a moment, his eyes drifted half-shut, and he nodded. "We ... made love ... a couple of weeks ago."

Sara nodded knowingly. "That's what I figured. Was it the night she apologized for being such an ass about the whole Beta thing?"

Brian nodded somberly. "Yeah."

"That's what Katie and I figured," Sara confirmed. "Katie told me that Tommi didn't come home that night, and when she got home Saturday morning, she seemed quite distracted and unusually ... happy."

"I ..." Brian started, and then he stopped, shaking his head. "It just happened. I didn't plan it, because I was afraid that something like this would happen, but, well, it just seemed right at the time." He dropped his gaze again. "Now I've scared her off."

"I doubt it," Sara said. "Tommi is a big girl, and she hasn't been one to get scared by something different."

"Has she talked to you about it?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"No," Sara admitted, "but she wouldn't. She's got something going on about being the protective big sister, even if she's had that job for less than a year and a half." Sara sounded a little disgusted by Tommi's presumptive role.

"Then why would she ask if we could ... back off?" Brian was clearly still distressed by Tommi's request.

"I don't know," Sara said softly, shaking her head. "I really don't know."

"What about her future? Has she decided anything about that?" Brian was grasping at straws, looking for something to be hopeful for.

Sara bit her lower lip, wincing at the question. She knew it really wasn't her place to say anything.

"You do know something, don't you?" Brian read her expression.

Sara shook her head. "I can't say. It's Tommi's business."

"Is there ... someone else?" Brian asked the question he most dreaded asking. "I heard ... that while she was with the Beta girls, she was ... with someone."

Sara sighed. This one should be easy to answer. "There aren't any other guys."

"I didn't specifically say guys," Brian rebutted. "I know, with her history, that she might be attracted to women more than men."

Sara felt her gut tie itself in knots. She knew that Erica had fallen in love with Tommi, and she knew that Tommi and Erica had a fling. Sara didn't think that Tommi was more interested in Erica than in Brian, but she didn't know how to answer. "As far as I know," she said carefully, "Tommi isn't having any kind of romance with anyone."

"Did she?"

Sara shook her head sadly. "Brian, as much as I'd love to help you dating my sister, there are some things that I just can't talk about."

"So what can I do?" Brian sounded desperate for some hint or clue. "I really love her!"

Sara sighed and placed her hands on Brian's for reassurance. "All I can tell you is, keep treating Tommi like you do, like she deserves, and hope for the best."

Tommi hurried past the student union coffee shop. She happened to glance in the coffee shop as she walked past; her stomach was growling and the thought of stopping for a pastry was tempting. As she was on her way to the gym, however, she resisted temptation.

The sitting area was separated from the hall by a glass wall to give those sitting a little privacy from the hustle and bustle of students in the hall. Tommi stopped so abruptly that the young man behind her had to hastily dodge around her. She glanced into the coffee shop again. Her eyes widened at the sight.

There was no mistaking Brian; he was sitting at a far table. What struck Tommi most was the figure across from him. Some girl, with her back toward Tommi, was holding hands with Brian, and, from the look on his face, he was paying rapt attention to his companion.

Tommi felt her stomach churn. She was distracted the rest of the way to the gym.

"Can I borrow your car?" Sara was already getting the keys from Tommi's purse as if the answer was a certainty.

"Huh?" Tommi didn't quite catch her question.

"I said, 'can I borrow your car'?"

"Oh, sure," Tommi said unenthusiastically.

Sara's brow wrinkled. "Is there something wrong?" she asked. She had an appointment, but she also had a sister she loved who seemed to be troubled about something.

"Nah," Tommi replied half-heartedly. "Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

Tommi turned. "What is it with you and Katie? You seem to think that there's always something bothering me!" Her angry tone was out of line with the question.

"Okay," Sara said carefully as she stepped back toward the door. "I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Okay," Tommi said, before turning her attention back to her books. Even that was a futile gesture; she was having a hard time focusing for some reason.

Sara glanced around her in a cloak-and-dagger style, as she walked into the clinic. She knew she was overreacting, but she didn't want Tommi to know what she was doing.

"Good morning, Sara," Suzie greeted her cheerfully. "Or should I say, Double-O-Seven?"

The greeting left Sara feeling foolish. "Was I that obvious?" she asked meekly.

Suzie laughed. "The only thing missing were dark sunglasses and a trench coat!"

Sara hung her head in shame. "Sorry. It's just that, well, I don't want Tommi knowing I'm here."

Suzie nodded. "I know. And we scheduled your appointment away from hers, just like you asked. So sit down and relax, please! Rachel will be with you in a moment."

"Er," Sara stammered, "can I wait somewhere less ... public? Just in case..."

Suzie smiled as she nodded. "I understand. Tommi's trips to the gym can be unpredictable. Sure," she locked her computer and stood. "I'll show you to one of the back waiting lounges."

Suzie needn't have bothered; Rachel was coming down the hall just as Suzie was leading Sara away.

"Hi, Sara," Rachel greeted her with a hug. "How are you today?"

Sara tried to act calm, but in truth, she had a case of nerves like she'd never felt before. "I'm okay, I guess."

Rachel saw through her charade. "Why don't we go to my office, and you can tell me how you really feel."

Sara started to sit in the formal chair opposite Rachel's desk, but Rachel gestured to the less formal sofa and chairs. "I bet you're feeling a bit nervous," she said, her warm tone and words chosen to help Sara feel less stress.

Sara nodded. "Yeah," she answered. "That's an understatement."

Rachel smiled. "There's no need to be. None of us bite."

"But ... this is the day," Sara stammered. "When ..."

"When you find out if you were accepted into the program," Rachel finished confidently. "I need to ask you once more why you think you should be in the program."

Sara gulped. She hadn't expected to hear this question yet again. "I guess because of Tommi," she began hesitantly. "I can see the good she did, and I want to emulate her."

Rachel laughed. "That's a good college answer," she replied easily. "I can believe the part about you wanting to do something noble and decent and good. I reviewed the results of your psych test just before you came in." Rachel smiled. "I'm willing to bet there's a little bit of sibling rivalry, and, maybe, jealousy, and, maybe, you also want to show Tommi that you're a big girl and can provide for yourself, too. Am I right?"

Sara stared at her hands folded in her lap, and she nodded. "Yeah," she answered, her voice a bit glum. "I guess so."

Rachel's smile broadened. "Sara," she said firmly to get Sara's attention.

Sara looked up and saw Rachel's smile.

"Those kinds of emotions are perfectly normal," Rachel continued. "They're okay to feel, and okay to admit, especially to the counselor who's going to help you through your pregnancy."

Sara was listening to Rachel with fear, certain that she was going to be disqualified. Suddenly, as the words sank into her brain, her eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. "You mean...?" she started to ask, still a little fearful that she hadn't heard correctly.

Rachel moved from the wing chair to sit beside Sara, and she wrapped her arm around Sara's shoulder. "Congratulations. You've been accepted into the program."

"Really! I'm in?" Sara was beside herself with joy.

"Really. As soon as you're done celebrating, we need to review the plan rules, and then you need to sign the contract. After that, I'll send you down to Tina for your checkup and to get you started on your meds."

Twenty minutes later, Sara was led to Dr. Tina's office, where she was greeted with a hug.

"We did your physical the other day," Dr. Tina began. "If you have any questions about the procedure, I'll be happy to answer them now, or at any time as we progress. Okay?"

"Okay, Dr. Martelli," Sara answered.

Dr. Tina frowned. "Don't tell me you're going to be like your sister!" she scolded. "We're family around here. We go on a first-name basis. Doctor's orders, got it?"

Sara nodded, feeling both welcomed and chastised at the same time. "Okay, Tina," she answered nervously.

"At least you're not as formal as your sister!" Tina said with a grin. She pulled up Sara's chart. "We'll do one month of regulated cycle, and then see how that goes, okay? If things are going well, we'll schedule your transfer. If not, we'll do another month."

Sara smiled. "I understand. I'm taking an Anatomy and Physiology course this semester, so I'm looking forward to being a little lab experiment."

Tina laughed. "Have you picked a major yet?"

Sara shook her head. "No."

"Do you know that the Foundation has very good grants and scholarships for those who decide to go to medical school, if they sign a contract to work the Foundation after they graduate?"

"Really?" Sara sounded intrigued.

"If you've ever thought of being a doctor, or a nurse, it's an option you might want to consider." She smiled. "I can see you as a doctor," she added. "You're bright and curious enough, and you show a lot of empathy. I think you'd make a fantastic doctor."

Sara was delighted by the suggestion. "I'll think about it."

"Okay. Now we need to give you a shot, and then you can be on your way."

Twenty minutes later, her rear still sore from the shot she'd received, Sara knocked on Tommi's door.

Katie didn't even look up from her book. "Come in," she called.

Sara strode in hesitantly. "Tommi is out?"

"She walked down to the library," Katie answered. She noticed that Sara seemed to be on edge about something.

"Oh. I just brought back her keys." Sara dropped them on Tommi's desk, and then flopped down in Tommi's chair. She winced at the pain in her buttocks.

"Have you been working out or something?" Katie noticed Sara's tiny grunt of pain.

"Or something. You guys got plans for dinner?"

"Nah," Katie answered. She turned to her little sister. "You seem kind of pleased with yourself. And a bit nervous."

Sara tried to hide her joy. "I've just had a good day." She decided to change the subject, and quickly. "Brian called this morning to see if Tommi had said anything about their date last night."

Katie's eyebrows perked up. "Really? What did you tell him?"

"What can I tell him? Tommi isn't telling me any more than I suppose she's telling you!"

Katie shook her head. "He's nuts about her."

"Yeah," Sara answered. "I think she likes him a lot more than she's comfortable admitting - even to herself."

"Yeah, I agree, but I'd suggest you don't try to convince Tommi of that. Not unless you want to upset her."

"He'd be really good for her."

"Don't let Erica hear you say that," Katie laughed, "unless you want a fight."

"How would your ... I mean, how would Mom and Dad feel if Tommi were to get serious with Erica?" Sara asked slowly.

"That's a hypothetical question I'm not even going to try to answer," Katie deflected the inquiry. "Now, why are you so smug?"

"Who said I'm smug?"

Katie laughed. "Because you have a grin like the cat that ate the canary, that's why. Out with it."

Sara shrugged. "I've just had a good day," she tried to parry.

Katie shook her head. "I'm not buying it. You're up to something. You borrowed Tommi's car, which means that you had to go somewhere. When you borrow her car, you don't drive very far, based on the mileage Tommi says you're putting on it. You've made several more trips than normal in the past few weeks. You're sore, and it looks like it's your rear that hurts, like you ... got a shot. You're" Katie's eyes widened as the pieces snapped into place. "You're in the program, aren't you?"

Sara started a denial, but stopped. Katie was her sister. She couldn't lie to her. "Yes," she said softly. "I signed my contract today, and I started my medications. That's why I'm sore - Tina gave me a big hormone shot right in my butt!"

"What does Tommi think of it?" Katie asked slowly.

Sara sighed deeply. "Tommi doesn't know."

"_Yet_. She _is_ going to find out. If I were you, I'd find a time to tell her - soon. Very soon." Katie's words were somber, even foreboding in their tone, as if Katie could see some dark future if Sara were to ignore them. "Before she finds out for herself."

"You're distracted again," Dee said as they looked through racks in the maternity shop.

"No, I'm not," Tommi retorted quickly.

"Oh? So why did you say you hated one blouse, and, when I held the same blouse up two minutes later, you raved about how nice it looks?"

Tommi sighed. It was no use arguing the point; Dee had caught her. "Okay, so I _am_ a bit distracted."

"Brian again?"

Tommi knew that her motives were transparent to Dee. She decided against playing innocent or asking the obvious question of how Dee knew. "Yeah," she replied simply.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Tommi let out a lonely chuckle. "That's why I'm here, isn't it?"

"Do you want to play twenty questions, or just come out with it?" Dee teased.

"It's easier if I just get to the point. We ... um, that is ... " Tommi stammered, not quite sure how to say what was on her mind.

"You did it, right?" Dee was now highly interested, both as a friend and as a paid mentor.

"Yeah," Tommi felt herself blushing a bit.

"And?" Dee's voice was less professional and more gossipy-curious than Rachel's.

Tommi shrugged. "It was ... good" She got a far-off stare for a few seconds. "It was very interesting. Different from what I imagined, but ... good. Real good."

"And?"

Tommi sighed. "And what? I got a little scared by how far we'd gone in our relationship, and I asked Brian if we could back off a little bit."

Dee winced visibly. "Sounds like you went further than you intended."

"Yeah, you could say that."

"So, now what?" Dee held up another blouse.

Tommi took the blouse and held it in front of herself. She considered for a moment before wrinkling her nose. "I don't think it's my color." She handed it back to Dee. "Now? Now I've blown it," she said, self-disgust in her voice.

"Not necessarily," Dee commented quickly. "The big question is, do you love him?"

Tommi shook her head. "I don't know," she wailed softly. "I really don't know. I mean, I like him. He's fun, and he treats me well, but" She shook her head. "I guess I do - some. But it really doesn't matter anymore."

"Problems?" Dee noted to herself that Tommi sounded overwhelmed, maybe even depressed.

"I saw him in the student center yesterday morning. With another girl." Tommi sounded unhappy. "I couldn't see who it was, but I could tell they were very deep in conversation."

"That doesn't mean anything," Dee tried to help. "Could be someone from a class, or a friend."

"They were holding hands." Tommi sighed heavily, closed her eyes, and shook her head as her gaze slowly lowered. "If I was starting to have any feelings for him, I blew it. It's too late."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Every heard of fighting for the guy you want?" Dee flipped through a few outfits, eyeing the colors and designs critically. "This isn't bad for a clearance rack. What about the girl _you_ were with? Have you considered whether you'd be happier with her?"

"I don't know," Tommi said softly. "I suppose I need to concentrate on having this baby first, and then I can sort out my love life. If there's anything left of it, that is."

Dee held up a blouse to herself. "I think I like this one. What do you think?"

Tommi stared at the blouse. It was royal blue, with lace trim, and looked very nice. "I like it," Tommi commented. "It's pretty."

"Thanks." Dee draped the blouse over her arm. "Now that you've tried both, how do they compare?"

"Now _you're_ curious!" Tommi commented with a laugh. She saw Dee's expression and knew why Dee had asked the question. "You've never tried it with another woman, have you?"

Dee shook her head slightly. "No."

Tommi got the far-off look again as she arranged her mental notes. "It's hard to compare. Erica was ... fiery with passion. A tigress. She knew what buttons to push, and she kept pushing them." Tommi remembered how she'd felt with Erica. "She was both tender and aggressive, and it was very exciting."

"How is she to spend time with? I mean, not in the sack?" Dee clarified.

"She's fun, and friendly. I guess I haven't spent as much time with her one-on-one as I have with Brian."

"And in comparison?" Dee was paying close attention to her answer. It wasn't clear if it was from her duties as a mentor or from lewd curiosity.

"Brian was super considerate. I could tell that he was thinking of me first in everything we did. It was very tender, and I'd have to say that Brian was more intimate somehow. A bit clumsy, but more intimate." Tommi shook her head. "It's hard to compare. The experiences were too different."

"So, would you do it again?" Dee asked lightly.

Tommi laughed again. "With whom?"

Tommi stuck her head out the half-opened door when she heard Sara's voice in the hall. "Got a minute?" she asked.

Sara nodded. "Sure," she said. She waved at Ashley. "I'll catch up in the cafeteria." She followed Tommi back into her room. Almost automatically, she sat down on Tommi's bed. "What's up?"

Tommi frowned as she slumped into her chair. "I was going to ask you the same thing. We haven't talked much lately."

Sara shrugged. "We've both been pretty busy."

"I noticed that you've been borrowing my car more often," Tommi noted. "Not that I mind, but I'm just wondering if everything is okay."

"Sure." Sara didn't sound convincing.

Tommi noticed. She got up and started pacing. "If there's a problem, how am I supposed to help you, if you won't tell me?"

"Tommi," Sara tried to sound calm, "I know you want to help, but, sometimes, I can handle things on my own. I'm not a little kid anymore."

Tommi dropped her gaze and sank back into her chair. "I know," she said softly. "It's just ... I never felt like I had a little sister to care for. If there's a problem, I want to help. When I see you regularly going off-campus, it makes me afraid that there's some kind of medical problem." As she spoke, her eyes suddenly widened. "The mileage - it's the same as when I go to the clinic!" Her jaw hung open. "You're going to the clinic? You're signing up for the program?"

Sara felt a surge of panic, but she was trying to not show the emotions. "What are you talking about?"

Tommi stood, astonished. "I know you were talking with Rachel a lot, and I know you were interested. You're in the program, aren't you? How could you do that without talking to me about it?"

Sara felt her lower lip trembling. She knew that Tommi would eventually find out, but she hadn't anticipated that Tommi's reaction would be so vehemently opposed to the idea. "I've got to catch up with Ashley and the girls for lunch." She stood and walked out, pausing the doorway, but not looking back. She desperately wanted Tommi to tell her that it would be okay if she did participate. She needed Tommi to tell her that it was okay for her to start making decisions about her own life, and that Tommi would support her.

Neither came. Sara sighed heavily and walked out the door, closing it firmly and loudly behind her.

Tommi's eyes watered, and she felt very uneasy. She and Sara had never had a major argument until now. She didn't know if her hormones were making the issue seem larger. All Tommi knew for certain was that she really hated feeling so disconnected from her sister.

After staring at the closed door for almost two minutes, constantly wiping at the tears, Tommi grabbed her purse and walked out the door.

Tommi was so distracted by her emotions that she nearly rear-ended a car as she drove, and even that barely registered. She parked her car and hurried into the clinic, hoping that Rachel was free, not thinking that she could have called and ensured that Rachel had a few minutes to talk.

"Tommi," Suzie called from her desk, a very concerned expression on her face. "Are you okay?"

Tommi took a moment to focus her attention on Suzie's question. "Huh? Oh, yeah," she said softly. "Is Rachel in?"

Suzie shook her head. "I'm sorry, but Rachel flew out last night for a meeting at Foundation headquarters. She won't be back in the office until tomorrow. Is there someone else who can help you, or do I need to send Rachel a message?"

Tommi shook her head sadly. "No." Her gaze dropped to the floor, and she slowly turned toward the front door.

"Tommi," Suzie called urgently, "do you need to talk to someone?"

Tommi stopped and slowly turned her head. "I need to talk to Rachel," she repeated.

"Would it help to talk to me?" Suzie offered. "Or somebody else?" She was already typing an urgent message to Dr. Tina on her computer. She'd never seen Tommi this low, except when Sara lost her financial aid the year before. Without Tommi's knowledge, the software took Suzie's message and turned it into an urgent text message.

Suzie rose from her workstation and quickly strode to Tommi's side. She placed her hand on Tommi's arm. "Why don't we go sit down in the break room?" Suzie suggested. She guided Tommi back into the clinic, away from the exit door.

As the two were walking toward the back, Dr. Tina burst through the door. She flanked Tommi and helped Suzie guide her back to a break room.

As they sat down, Dr. Tina asked, "Are you okay, Tommi?" The concern in her voice was genuine.

Tommi was on the verge of tears. "I ... I don't know," she muttered, staring down at her hands in her lap.

"What happened?" Dr. Tina asked softly.

"Sara ... and I ... had a fight," Tommi sobbed. "We've never had a fight before. She's ... she doesn't need me!"

Dr. Tina put her arms on Tommi's shoulders for reassurance. "Sara does need you, and she does love you. But she's also legally an adult, so she is sometimes going to decide things for herself. I remember when my little sister did that the first time. It felt like she didn't need or want me, but it wasn't real; it was just my emotions speaking."

Tommi looked up. "I think she's" She couldn't continue. Finally, after a few moments of struggle, she blurted out, "Did she sign up as a client?"

Dr. Tina shot Suzie a quick warning glance that, fortunately, went unnoticed by Tommi. "If Sara did sign up, would that be so bad?"

"I did this one so she wouldn't have to," Tommi protested. "I wanted to take care of her."

"What would you do if she signed up after you graduated? Or after she graduated? What would be the difference?" Suzie asked. "Or is it that you wanted to be the protective big sister that you'd never been, and now you feel like she's rejecting you?"

"Your first fight has to be very difficult for you, especially since you weren't close when you both were younger. Siblings argue and fight, though." Dr. Tina rubbed Tommi's shoulders. "It doesn't make it any easier, but arguing is normal. You'll get through this."

Tommi tried to nod in acknowledgement of Dr. Tina's advice. "I need to know. Is she going to be a host mother?"

Dr. Tina sighed. "I'm sorry, Tommi, but you know the rules. If she were, I couldn't tell you. If she weren't, I wouldn't know it to tell you." She patted Tommi's arm. "I'm sorry."

Tommi sat alone at the table in the coffee shop. Everyone in the dorm was out, either at the gym, in class, or at the library. She really wished she had someone to share coffee with. The way things were going, she felt all alone.

Sitting at the counter, Erica noticed Tommi, and she waved. Erica frowned when Tommi didn't notice her, so she walked confidently over to Tommi's table.

"Hi, Tommi," Erica sang sweetly.

Tommi looked up, startled. "Oh, hi, Erica." Then Tommi noticed the curvy red-haired girl trailing close behind Erica.

Erica noticed, from Tommi's appearance, that Tommi had most likely been crying. Still, there were pleasantries to observe. "Tommi, this is my friend Trudy. Trudy, Tommi."

As Tommi extended her hand to shake with Trudy, she noticed immediately that Trudy's eyes were spiteful and angry, despite the pleasant smile she put on. Her grip was icy and harsh. Clearly, Trudy was not happy to meet Tommi. Tommi guessed that Trudy was Erica's

current girlfriend, and that Trudy's icy demeanor came from knowledge of Erica and Tommi's earlier tryst. "Nice to meet you," Tommi said simply.

"Likewise," Trudy said through her false smile. She released Tommi's hand and interlocked her arm with Erica, leaning her head on Erica's shoulder. "I understand you two live in the same dorm?"

"Yes," Tommi answered simply. She felt her stomach knot again for some reason she couldn't put her finger on.

"And ... are you the one who did the surrogate mother thing?" Trudy answered.

Tommi was conscious of the fact that she was showing - a little. "Yes," she said through a false smile. "This one is my second, actually."

Erica patted Trudy's hand. "I'd like to talk with Tommi a bit. I'll catch up to you in class."

Trudy smiled at Erica. "Sounds good," she said. She wrapped her arms around Erica and gave her an exaggerated kiss, while one hand squeezed Erica's bottom. "So you don't get lonely," Trudy said with a grin. She walked off, wiggling her bottom at Erica in an exaggeratedly sexy way.

"Interesting girl," Tommi said, trying not to sound sarcastic but failing. The parting display had made it abundantly clear that Trudy did know and that she was letting Tommi know that Erica was hers.

"Yeah," Erica said simply, "she's very nice ... and fun." She sat down opposite Tommi. "I've noticed that you seem very pre-occupied lately. Is something wrong?"

Tommi sighed. "Everyone thinks that something's wrong."

Erica laughed. "Well, you have been sulking around a lot for the last few days, not talking to anyone, so I would imagine people have a reason to worry about you."

Tommi considered for a moment. "Yeah, something's wrong. It's Sara."

"Oh? She seems to be doing okay."

Tommi scowled at Erica. "I think she's been going to the clinic to get into the host-mother program."

"That's wonderful!" Erica squealed with delight. She noticed that Tommi was frowning. "Isn't it?"

"No!" Tommi retorted immediately. "She shouldn't have to do that!"

Erica seemed puzzled. "It's okay for you to be a host mother, but not for her?"

"That's different."

"How is it different?" Erica asked bluntly.

"It ... it just is!" Tommi answered.

Erica started to reply, and suddenly her eyes widened with a dawning realization. "You did your second pregnancy so she could come to school here, didn't you?"

Tommi tried to deny it, but she failed to be convincing.

"Oh, my, that's so sweet and loving," Erica cooed. "You wanted to take care of her now because you never did before, right?" She shook her head, smiling sadly. "I bet she knows exactly what you did, though. She's smart enough to figure it out."

"I hope not," Tommi said, sounding quite worried. "We already had a big fight, and if she finds out that I was trying to help her" She stared at the table top. "I'm going to lose my little sister."

Tommi rapped lightly on Sara's door, feeling nervous, impatient, fearful, and a host of other unhealthy emotions. She had to talk to Sara, but she wasn't quite sure how.

After a few moments, the door opened, and Sara stood, peering out at Tommi. Her expression was guardedly neutral. "Yes?" she asked simply.

"May I come in?" Tommi was formal and polite.

"Sure," Sara said. She strode back to her desk and sat down, returning her attention to her books.

"I ... I don't like arguing with you," Tommi began hesitantly. "It doesn't feel very good."

Sara turned and stared at Tommi for several awkward seconds. Finally, she spoke. "I don't like it, either. But more than that, I don't like being treated like I'm still a little girl," she added emphatically.

"I'm sorry," Tommi apologized, hoping that Sara was in the mood to accept her apology. "I'm kind of new at the big-sister thing."

"No kidding," Sara said, her words dripping with sarcasm. "And you're pretty new at the dating thing, too."

"Is that what's bothering you? The fact that Brian and I aren't getting more serious?"

Sara crossed her arms over her chest. "What's wrong with Brian? He's sweet, and he treats you like a queen. He's smart. I don't understand why you're pushing him away?"

"You're on his side, aren't you?" Tommi accused.

"I'm not taking sides," Sara replied quickly and angrily. "But he's a great first guy for you to date."

"That's my business," Tommi shot back. "Our ... relationship was moving way too fast, and I wasn't very comfortable." She changed the subject to what she was concerned about. "What's up with you and the clinic?" she demanded.

"Moving too fast? What is that supposed to mean? Were you scared about having sex? Or are you scared because maybe you're starting to love him?" Sara parried and returned to her topic.

"That's none of your business!" Tommi yelled at Sara.

"And if I go to the clinic, that's none of your business!" Sara angrily replied.

"You don't have to volunteer," Tommi continued. She figured she'd won control of the argument.

"Why not?" Sara stood toe-to-toe with Tommi, her arms crossed angrily and defiantly. "If it's okay for you, why isn't it okay for me?"

"That's different! I had to pay for college!" Tommi shouted. "You don't!"

"It's not all about the money," Sara countered. "It's about control, isn't it? You think you have to be the big sister taking care of the little kid, don't you? Well, it doesn't work that way! I'm a grown woman, and I can do what I want or need to do!"

"But ... I'm not trying" Tommi sputtered, not knowing how to rebut Sara's argument.

"Yes, you are! Starting with the scholarship you arranged for me! Did you think I wouldn't figure it out?" Sara's words cut Tommi to the heart.

"I just ... wanted to help!" Tommi said weakly. Tears were flowing freely down her cheeks. "Can't a big sister do that?"

"Not if the price includes telling me how to live my life," Sara snapped.

Tommi stared at her little sister, not knowing what to say or how to say it. Finally, as the tears continued, she fled from Sara's room, running down the hall and down the stairs to her own floor. It took some fumbling to open the door, and when she got into her room, she flopped face-down on the bed, her body wracked with sobs.

Katie sprawled back on her bed, looking across the room at Tommi. "I'm sure it's your imagination, or maybe it's hormones again. Things can't be as bad as you're imagining."

Tommi shook her head slowly. She wasn't crying - for now - but she had been. "Nothing is going right!" she protested weakly. "Everything is crashing down around me, and I can't do anything about it!"

"Okay, let's start with Sara. She's pretty mad at you right now."

"It's my fault, too!" Tommi snorted. "I was trying to help her, and now she won't talk to me!" Her voice had an edge of self-pity.

"Sisters fight, remember?" Katie reminded Tommi. "You need to keep in mind that Sara is eighteen and legally an adult. You can't stop her from doing things."

"And I pushed Erica away. Now she's got a girlfriend and barely has time to talk to me!" Tommi complained.

"A girlfriend? Are you sure?" Katie was certain that Tommi was exaggerating.

"Some red-haired girl was hanging all over Erica at the coffee shop, and she made a very big scene to make sure that I knew Erica was hers."

"You're jealous," Katie observed, hiding her amusement at Tommi's display of emotion.

"I'm not jealous of some air-headed bimbo!" Tommi snapped back.

Katie shrugged, while she smiled inwardly. Tommi was jealous. Someday, Katie and Tommi would have a long discussion and confront that reality. "I didn't think you were involved with Erica."

"She's pretty cold to me. Distant. I've lost a friend," Tommi explained bitterly.

"Okay, so you've lost a friend - or you think you have. That's not the end of the world."

"I think I pushed Brian away, too," Tommi said softly. "He's gotten pretty cool toward me, too." She lowered her gaze to her hands crossed in her lap. "I saw him with another girl."

"You have some ... feelings for him, too, don't you?" Katie asked lightly. She knew the answer; the trick would be to get Tommi to admit it to herself.

Tommi closed her eyes and shook her head sadly. "I suppose. I like him. Maybe I like him more than just as a friend."

"And for Erica?"

Tommi sighed. "I don't know. I think so. Some, at least."

Katie shook her head sadly, sighing. "No wonder you feel lost. You're probably confused about which of the two of them you have stronger feelings for, or you should be attracted to. The extra hormones are making you feel more vulnerable emotionally, and you feel like you've lost both of them."

"And Sara. I lost her, too!"

Katie shook her head. "No, you didn't. You two had your first real argument, but you'll get over it. You're sisters, after all. Siblings argue once in a while, but then they make up and go back to being best friends."

"Says an only child," Tommi spat bitterly. Instantly, she regretted her words, spoken in a fit of self-pity. "I'm sorry," she apologized quickly.

Katie bit her tongue, lest she lash out at Tommi for the hurtful thing she'd just said. After mentally counting to ten, she decided she was calm enough to speak. "See? I know that deep down in your heart, you didn't mean that, but your emotions got the better of you. The same is true for both you and Sara."

"But why can't she accept what I want to do to help her?" Tommi practically begged for an answer.

Katie shrugged. "I don't know. Is it possible that she really admires you and just wants to emulate you?"

Tommi pondered Katie's words for several seconds. "I never thought of that," she said slowly. "Do you think I owe her an apology?"

Katie knew she'd made progress helping her sisters reconcile. "Probably."

"I think I can do that," Tommi said slowly. "Now what about the other issues? What about Erica and Brian?"

Katie smiled. "I'm going to guess that you'd like some companionship, maybe even a lover, right?"

Tommi blushed but nodded. "But I blew it. I chased both of them off."

"Why?"

Tommi's eyes widened. "Why?" She realized that she hadn't thought of that simple question. "Because ... someday I want a long-term relationship and to have my own baby," she admitted softly.

"Brian would be a good father," Katie observed.

"Yeah, Tommi answered, almost wistfully. "But Erica would be a good co-mother, too" Tommi added quickly.

"If you decided on Erica," Katie noted.

"Yeah. But I guess that would rule out having my own, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe not," Katie offered. "You could always get inseminated, and I read about some research by the Morris Foundation where they created viable sperm from a donor's stem cells. With that technology, you and Erica could even have each other's babies."

"Are you trying to encourage me to choose Erica?" Tommi asked, her voice mirthful but also somehow sad. "I chased her off, remember?"

"Who you choose is up to you," Katie said simply.

"What would Mom and Dad," Tommi paused, rolling the words "Mom and Dad" off her tongue slowly, savoring them, "think if I settled into a lesbian relationship? That would cause problems, wouldn't it?"

"You can always talk to them and find out. I'm pretty sure that they'll be more concerned about your happiness than some traditional old gender boundary."

"Yeah, I guess I can add that problem to the list," Tommi said, nodding. "Mom's really not going to like me calling, if all I have are problems."

"She'll love getting to play mother; don't worry about it."

Tommi sighed heavily. "I guess I've learned a lesson here, didn't I?"

"What's that?"

"I need to enjoy life and not get scared. I chased off two very good friends because I was afraid."

"You may not have chased them off, you know," Katie commented hopefully.

"If both of them were still interested," Tommi observed wistfully, "I'd have to either date them both equally, or date neither of them, until I made up my mind which way I want to go."

Katie laughed. "The guy gets you Mondays and Fridays, and the girl gets you Wednesdays and Saturdays! That sounds like an interesting social calendar!"

"Hi, Dad," Tommi spoke into her phone nervously.

"Hi, kiddo," Roger spoke easily to his new daughter. "Is something wrong? It sounds like you're unhappy."

"No, things are going okay. Well, mostly okay."

"Are you sure?" Roger asked again.

"I really need to talk to Mom, if she's available."

"I suppose it's something that needs a mothers' touch?"

Tommi laughed. "Yeah, it's mostly girl-things. I wouldn't want to embarrass you!"

"Sometime, I wish you'd call just to talk to me. It's kind of lonely having girls who need to talk 'girl things' with their mother and not to talk with me!" Roger's protest was feigned and lighthearted.

"Okay, I promise next time I call, it'll be just to talk to my Dad!"

"Okay. Love you, kiddo. Here's your mother." Roger handed the phone to Ronnie.

"Hi, Mom? I ... need some advice."

"That's what a mother is for, dear," Ronnie answered easily. "Now what's bothering you? Hormones and pregnancy again?"

Tommi could hear the elation in her Mom's voice at being asked for advice. "No, it's ... lots of things."

"I suppose you already spent time talking with your sister," Ronnie predicted.

"Yeah, Katie and I talked a lot."

"And Sara? You've talked to Sara about what's on your mind?"

"No, I haven't. That's one of the problems. Sara and I ... we had a big argument."

"That happens. Even the best sisters don't always see eye-to-eye." Ronnie was choosing her words carefully, so she wouldn't upset Tommi. She could hear the strain in the girl's voice.

"That's what Katie said, too. She said it's normal, and we'll get back to being best friends, but it doesn't feel right. It hurts, and I feel kind of empty."

"I'm sure it does. What happened?"

"I guess it started when I kind of confronted Sara about her becoming a host-mother at the clinic."

"That's wonderful!" Ronnie said tentatively. "Isn't it? Or is that what's bothering you?"

"She shouldn't _have_ to do it!" Tommi protested.

"Does she know about the scholarship?"

"Yeah, she knows. I think that's one of the things that got _her_ mad." Tommi confirmed.

"You know," Ronnie tried to be non-judgmental, "Sara might see it as you controlling her, even indirectly. She _did_ have to put up with a lot of that growing up."

"I just wanted to help her. I didn't mean to upset her!"

"I know, honey," Ronnie cooed. "Sometimes, the best of intentions still cause fights and disagreements and hurt feelings."

"I'm learning that pretty quickly," Tommi replied meekly.

"I bet, if you ask her, that she loves the dickens out of you for wanting to help her, and for putting yourself through a second pregnancy for her. But I bet there's also a part of her, deep inside, that she may not even be aware of, that's scared to death of feeling obligated to you."

Tommi laughed. "That's just what Katie said."

"Like mother, like daughter," Ronnie replied.

"It's really hard, too. We had just gotten a special relationship, and then I went and blew it. I feel like it's all my fault."

Ronnie laughed. "It would have been something, sooner or later. It's impossible for people to get along perfectly all the time! The important thing is that both of you work out your differences. Keep talking, settle your disagreements, and focus on how much you two love each other. If you do that, you'll do just fine."

"Thanks, Mom," Tommi said into her phone. "You know, I don't think I'll ever get tired of saying 'Mom'."

"You're welcome, honey. Try to keep your chin up and focus on how much you love each other."

The phone rang again and again, futilely, until Tommi finally hung up in frustration. It wasn't like Sara to not answer her cell phone. In fact, she hadn't bothered to respond to the messages Tommi had left on her voicemail, either. Tommi sighed as she walked slowly out of her room and trudged up the stairs.

After a knock on the door, Ashley opened it and peeked out. "Oh, hi, Tommi," she said, but her voice sounded less than enthusiastic, even furtive.

"Is Sara in?" Tommi asked bluntly. "I need to talk to her."

"Uh, no," Ashley replied. This time, there was no disguising the unease in her voice. She was trying to hide something from Tommi.

"Do you know where she is?" Tommi continued to try to get answers.

"I think she's in the library," Ashley mentioned. She wasn't a convincing liar.

"Okay," Tommi decided that Ashley did know where Sara was, but wasn't going to tell her. "Can you tell her I'd like to talk to her when she gets back?"

"Sure. Night." Ashley closed the door quickly, as if to cut off an interrogation before she spilled her secrets.

Tommi sighed and walked to the dorm lobby. Katie was in their room studying for a test, and Tommi didn't want to disturb her. After pacing around the lounge area for a few minutes, Tommi walked upstairs and retrieved her jacket.

"Are you going out?" Katie asked taking a momentary break from her books.

"Yeah. I'm feeling kind of restless," Tommi answered unenthusiastically.

"Did you get a chance to talk to Sara?"

Tommi shook her head. "She's out."

"Oh. Well, I know you two will get things worked out eventually."

Tommi tried to keep from laughing derisively. She didn't have nearly as much confidence as Katie had. "We'll see." She pulled the door shut behind her and walked from the dorm.

Tommi wasn't sure where she was walking; she just needed to be out, alone with her thoughts. She knew she was in a melancholy mood, but she didn't want any company, making forced attempts to cheer her up. Right now, Tommi didn't want to be cheered up. She wanted to work through her feelings, no matter how unpleasant or even painful that process might be.

Tommi found herself at the fountain. In the moonlight, it was an other-worldly place. Without their summer robes of green foliage, the trees were shadowy alien creatures lifting their scraggly arms upward against a dark blue sky, as if to worship the white orb floating overhead.

She sat on the edge of the fountain, listening to the splashing and burbling of the water and watching the silvery sparkles as drops and waves reflected the moon's rays. It was easy to imagine the fountain was alive, a watery creature struggling mightily to reach the heavens, to touch the moon, failing and falling and trying again as if locked in a Sisyphean task.

Her mood matched the eeriness of the scene. Her problems were clawing at her, just like the trees clawing at the sky, trying to drag her into a dark pit of depression. She hadn't realized that there were things she should reach for, goals beyond just having a baby, like love and companionship, but now, she found her situation embodied in the fountain, forever destined to reach for a goal that could never be grasped, and yet, unable to give up trying.

She had friends, to be sure, and her new family, but at the same time, it seemed like there was no companionship, no deep love, no hope for the future. Even the precious life she carried in her womb, that she loved without knowing, and cared for in the most intimate way possible, was destined to be taken from her without her every seeing or touching or holding it, leaving Tommi alone and wondering if she, too, might someday experience the love she so longed for.

She'd been afraid, and that fear had cost her relationships, cost her the love she so dearly craved. As a result of the fear and rejection she'd felt as a child, she didn't feel equipped to overcome her fear, to take a chance, to hope and reach, and, if rejected, to pick herself up and try again.

Now her fear had tainted what had been a perfect relationship with her sister. Tommi realized that she truly feared losing Sara. All of the complications and dangers of pregnancy didn't bother her; she accepted her own fate. But Sara? Tommi was afraid of losing Sara, and, in her fearing, she'd pushed Sara away.

Eventually, despite her jacket, Tommi started to feel chilly. Still feeling overwhelmed, she trudged slowly back toward her dorm, knowing she could collapse exhausted onto her bed and let the dream world temporarily whisk away her troubles.

As she came around the corner toward the main entrance, she spied a familiar car in the parking lot, in a visitor's spot. Puzzled, Tommi stopped, and, feeling a morbid curiosity, she backed herself into the shadows and watched.

It took a few minutes, but, eventually, the drivers' door opened. The driver circled the car and opened the door for the passenger, and then offered a hand to assist that passenger in standing. Tommi watched as the passenger paused before she lifted her arms up around the driver's neck and kissed him.

Tears gushed forth, as Tommi ran away from the main entrance. She ducked into one of the side entrances, and, still crying, ran down the hall into her room. Without a word, she flopped face-first on her bed, sobbing hysterically.

Katie turned from her books as soon as Tommi burst in. She heard the crying. "Tommi," she asked immediately, concerned, "are you okay?"

Tommi didn't answer. She just lay on the bed sobbing.

Katie crossed the small room and sat on the edge of Tommi's bed. She placed her hand on Tommi's shoulder for comfort. "Tommi, what's wrong?"

"Everything!" Tommi sobbed between tears.

"What happened?" Katie had seen Tommi upset before, but never to this extent. She was worried about her sister.

Tommi didn't look up from the bed. "Ashley ... wouldn't tell me ... where Sara was!" she cried. "I knew ... she was lying. And ... I ... just ... saw..." she tried to say between sobs, "Sara ... coming ... home ... from a date ... with Brian! And she ... kissed him goodnight!"

Chapter 25 – Delivery again

"Hey, Sara, wait up!" Tommi called to her sister. Tommi couldn't exactly run to catch Sara, since her pregnancy was just past seven months. A fast waddle was the best speed Tommi could manage.

Sara paused on the sidewalk and turned, her face impassive. She seemed to be deliberating whether she should, indeed, wait for Tommi, or just ignore her and continue on. It was an accurate and unnerving performance. After a few seconds, she shifted her weight, crossing her arms just right, to let Tommi know she was highly impatient and didn't really want to talk.

"It seems like you've been avoiding me," Tommi puffed as she caught up to Sara. "Are you going back to the dorm right now?"

"Yeah," Sara answered icily. "I'm done for the morning."

"Me, too. Can we sit down and talk?" Tommi asked. "Please?" She was almost begging.

"I've got a paper I need to work on." Sara's excuse was lame, and she knew it. "But I suppose we can talk for a bit."

Tommi noticed a brief flicker of a second emotion on Sara's features. She wondered briefly if Sara felt guilty about kissing Brian, or if there was something else. Tommi considered whether she'd bring it up later – after she apologized to her little sister.

The walk back to the dorm was awkward. Every time Tommi tried to say something, Sara either pretended not to hear or ignored her.

Finally, when they got in Tommi's room, Tommi turned on her little sister. "Sara, would you please listen to me?"

Sara shrugged, as if she didn't care one way or the other what Tommi had to say. "Okay."

Tommi sighed and shook her head. Sara didn't exactly seem receptive to a serious discussion or an apology. "I'm trying to tell you that I'm ... concerned about what you're doing," Tommi began hesitantly.

"No shit!" Sara interrupted harshly. "You want to run my life, too, I suppose?" Her sarcasm was unmistakable.

"Sara," Tommi pleaded, "would you please let me talk? I'm trying to say ... I...." She stopped, trying to find the right words. "I ... I'm sorry if you thought I was interfering in your life."

"You should be!" Sara snapped. "Didn't you think that, maybe, just maybe, I'd had more than my life's fill of someone trying to run my life?"

"I just wanted to help!" Tommi said softly.

"Did you stop to think that maybe I wanted to do something on my own, to prove to myself that I was good enough? That I was capable?" Sara's voice still had an edge, but it was dulled from her previous comment. "After being told for years that I wasn't capable? Did that ever cross your mind?"

Tommi stood, too stunned to reply. Sara's anger was clearly fueled by a lot of things, and Tommi wasn't sure she could unravel them all.

"Maybe you should be the one asking for advice and help," Sara continued, her expression angry and her words reproving. "You keep pushing people away. Why? What are you afraid of?"

Tommi's eyes widened. This was not how she'd expected her apology to be received – with counter accusations and criticism of her behavior. "But" she stammered, not knowing how to respond.

"You've got feelings for Brian that you're afraid to admit to yourself, don't you?"

"That's none of your business," Tommi countered. "Why are you trying to set me up with Brian?"

"What's wrong with him?" Sara continued to press the issue. "He's very sweet."

Tommi's mood change instantly. "You should know," she snarled, her eyes glaring with fury, "the way you kissed him."

Sara's mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. "But ... that was just ..."

"Save it for the jury!" Tommi practically screamed. "Is this some Machiavellian plot to get Brian for yourself by pushing him at me until I get stubborn and push him away for good? Is that your twisted game?"

"It wasn't a date!" Sara tried to defend herself, tears flowing freely as she realized that Tommi had been badly hurt by what she'd seen. "I ... don't know why I gave him a kiss!"

"And that was you holding hands with him in the coffee shop the other day, too, wasn't it?" Tommi felt her own tears gushing forth, falling like tiny rivulets down and off her cheeks. She turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind herself.

Sara stood, not even bothering to wipe at her own tears, and realizing that she'd hurt Tommi very, very badly. She trembled at the thought that, maybe, she'd hurt Tommi badly enough that they might never recover the special close relationship that they'd so recently come to have.

Katie tugged at Tommi's arm, trying to encourage Tommi to stand and follow her. "You need to go."

Tommi sat in her chair, stubbornly, not budging. "She doesn't want me," she said. Her voice echoed the pain at being left out.

"You two hurt each other pretty badly," Katie acknowledged. "But you're still family, and you still need each other. You have to go to her."

"If she needs me, why didn't she let me know when she was doing the transfer, so at least I could be with her in recovery?"

"Would you knock off the self-pity, the 'my-sister-doesn't-want-me' crap and go?" Katie begged. "She's scared and alone, and she needs you, even if she won't admit it!" She rolled her eyes. "You two are so much alike. You're both too damned stubborn!"

Tommi considered Katie's words carefully. Was she reacting from being hurt, or was Katie right? Was she just being obstinate? She sighed. "Okay," she finally said as she stood.

On the way to the clinic, Katie tried to get Tommi to talk about Sara and her issues, but Tommi wasn't feeling very talkative. Katie, however, knew there was an issue she needed to press. "I hope you can apologize to Sara."

Tommi snorted in disgust. "Why? Last time I tried, she wouldn't listen."

"You need to apologize because you were wrong, and because she's your sister," Katie reminded her.

"Maybe someone should tell her that sisters don't" She stopped, not wanting to tell Katie more.

"Maybe you should remember what you told us earlier this year, that we shouldn't keep score, remember?" Katie rebutted. "If you love her, you'll let her know that you're sorry you made her feel like you were running her life, and you'll do it without expecting an apology in return. Don't play tit-for-tat! Otherwise, the two of you will never get your differences patched up!"

Tommi sat, stewing, and contemplating Katie's words. "Okay," she finally said, as Katie pulled into a parking spot in front of the clinic.

Inside, Tommi and Katie knew exactly where to go. They stopped at the nurse's station. "Hi, Deb," Tommi said, trying to sound cheerful, even as she trembled inwardly with fear of what their meeting with Sara would bring.

Deb looked up from her computer. "Hi, Tommi. This is a change – seeing you here as a visitor rather than as a patient!"

Tommi nodded, trying to smile. "Can I see Sara?"

Deb nodded. "She's in room four. I don't suppose you need directions?"

Tommi grinned. "I remember it well. That was the room I was in for labor and delivery, wasn't it?"

"I didn't think you'd ever forget that," Deb smiled.

Katie had visited Sara earlier, and Tommi knew the inside of the clinic well, so they walked side-by-side down the corridor. Tommi smiled knowingly to herself, when they passed a very pregnant woman walking to try to speed the labor. Tommi had been in that exact position almost a year earlier.

Katie walked directly into the room, but Tommi paused at the door and peeked in. "Hi," she said meekly.

Sara turned from Katie, surprised, and tried to smile. "Hi," she echoed.

"Thought you'd like some company, and I was getting curious about how you were doing," Tommi tried to make light conversation.

"Katie and Ashley have been trying to keep me company," Sara said in a nonchalant tone. "But I'm glad you came."

"I hope they're taking good care of you," Tommi said lightly.

Sara nodded, smiling a bit. "I can't complain about the service."

Tommi grinned. "If you do complain, they'll pamper you half-to-death!" She sat down beside Sara's bed. "How did the transfer go?"

"Pretty well. The baby is eleven weeks gestational age. Tina was a little concerned, but she said I did okay."

"Good. So you've got ten days here, and then another two weeks of bed rest in the dorm, right?"

Sara stiffened slightly as Tommi told her what was in the future. "Yeah, and then four to five weeks of no lifting. I've already got Ashley and some of the girls lined up to help carry my books."

"Don't forget me," Tommi said, sounding a little hurt. "I'll help any way I can. After all, I've been through it twice, so I know what you'll need." Tommi saw Katie wince at her statement.

Sara turned slightly, away from Tommi and toward Katie. "I think I'm going to enjoy being pampered here for about ... a day. I expect it's going to get old really fast," Sara commented to Katie.

The rest of the visit was a disaster for Tommi. Sara barely noticed that she was in the room, directing all her remaining conversation to Katie. Even when Tommi tried to apologize again for interfering, Sara didn't seem to notice her.

After another few minutes, Tommi excused herself under the pretense of a chat with Rachel. In truth, she went to a break room and sat, letting tears flow down her cheeks as she wondered why she'd even bothered. It was clear that Sara didn't want her to visit, and wasn't accepting her apology.

"Hey," Katie called from the door, startling Tommi. "Time to go."

Tommi nodded, then stood and mutely walked beside Katie to the car. After Katie pulled out of the parking spot, Tommi sighed. "What happened?"

"You just had to say it, didn't you?" Katie chided her.

"What?" Tommi was genuinely puzzled.

"That comment about having done two surgeries," Katie explained. "Didn't you think of how she might interpret that?"

Tommi's mouth hung agape as she shook her head for a moment. "What? All I was doing was letting her know that I'd help!"

Katie sighed. "Would you stop for a second and think about how Sara might interpret it? Maybe she thinks you're still being the controlling big sister who's going to tell her what to do and what not to do. Did you consider that?"

Tommi shook her head slowly. "So what am I supposed to say? Or am I supposed to shut up and say nothing?"

Katie shook her head. "Maybe," she said honestly. "She should have been happy that you were interested in her, and her progress, and that you were concerned about her, and that you accepted her contract! I get the feeling that there's something else."

Tommi nodded. "I bet she's still feeling guilty about dating Brian," she said slowly.

"Could be." Katie focused momentarily on not having an accident when someone cut her off.
"Just do us all a favor."

"What?"

"Keep your mouth shut about your experience for the next few weeks, and focus on Sara. Let her be the center of attention. Let her experience everything new and exciting, without you making her feel like she's second fiddle."

"How do I do that? Pretend it never happened?" Tommi asked, incredulous at the suggestion.

"Why don't you try just shutting up?" Katie replied.

Tommi settled down on the stool and took a long sip of coffee. She'd decided to skip the pastry this morning, despite Jillian insisting.

"I take it things with Sara still aren't going well?" Jillian surmised.

Tommi nodded. "She was very cold and rude to me when I went to visit her yesterday," she said sadly. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I just want to help her."

Jillian put her hand on Tommi's as a gesture of support. "I know. I know how much you love Sara." She sighed. "I wish I could tell you how to patch things up."

The two noticed a figure stopping at their table. "May I join you?" Erica asked simply.

Tommi smiled. "Sure."

Erica set her coffee and pastry on the table, dropped her backpack on the floor, and sat down on the stool. "I haven't seen you around for a few days."

Tommi shrugged. "Been busy, I guess."

Jillian sensed that Erica wanted to have a private conversation with Tommi. "I hate to eat and run," she said out of the blue, "but I've got to get to the library." She stood and picked up her backpack. "See you tomorrow?" she said as she gave Tommi a quick hug.

"Sure. But I've got to ask you to please not tempt me with the pastries again! I spend too much time in the gym as it is!"

Jillian smiled. "Deal." She turned and strode easily from the coffee shop.

"So, where's your ... girlfriend?" Tommi asked Erica after Jillian was out of earshot. She was trying to be conversational, but the question had a sarcastic tone that was beyond mere curiosity.

Erica shrugged. "Trudy doesn't own me," she answered simply

Tommi sipped her coffee. "It looked to me like she thought she did!"

"Jealous?" Erica said teasingly. She saw Tommi's expression, and realized that she'd hit the mark. "You are jealous!" she said, sounding both surprised and delighted.

Tommi shook her head. "No," she said quickly. She saw the knowing grin on Erica's face. "Well, maybe a little," Tommi admitted slowly.

Erica's smile broadened. "Trudy was just a fling," she explained. "I got lonely, and, well, she was there, and you"

Tommi reached across the small table and put her finger on Erica's lip. "Shhhh," she said soothingly. "I didn't ask for all the details."

"So, have you decided anything yet?" Erica continued. "Apart from the fact that you're jealous? Which, if you hadn't guessed, delights me to no end!"

Tommi sighed heavily. "I thought I had," she said. "But my life has gotten very complicated lately."

"Oh? How?"

"Sara and I aren't speaking. She joined the program and had her transfer, and she accused me of trying to control her just because I'm worried about her and wished she hadn't joined the program."

"But you do wish she hadn't joined the program, right?" Erica interrupted.

Tommi nodded. "I don't want to lose her, and, as good as the staff is, it's still risky. I had it set up so she wouldn't have to do something like that."

"I see," Erica started. "It's okay for you to take risks, but not for her?"

"It's different!" Tommi tried to protest, but even as she spoke, she knew the words sounded hollow and feeble.

"How is it different?"

"It just ... seems like it should be different!" Tommi said. "And she's accusing me of pushing Brian away on top of everything else."

"Oh?" Erica tried hard to conceal the elation from her voice, but she failed.

"I know you care for me," Tommi continued. "And I know Brian is nuts about me. I guess, in different ways, I care for both of you, too." She shook her head. "I'm just ... confused. I don't know what I want for the future."

Erica sensed an opportunity. "Maybe, if you're trying to figure out what you want, you should let me take you out on a couple of dates, so you can better judge which way you want to go."

Tommi's eyebrow rose. "Interesting suggestion," she observed cautiously.

Erica laughed. "I know it sounds silly."

Tommi's next comment surprised Erica. "No," Tommi countered. She put her hands gently atop Erica's. "It sounds very sensible and practical. When are you planning to ask me out?"

As she walked slowly along the sidewalk, Tommi spied Brian ahead of her. He was walking along a different path than she was, so he didn't see her – yet. She knew it was only a matter of time before he glanced over and saw her. She debated slowing her pace so he wouldn't.

She was too late. "Hi, Tommi," Brian greeted her, even as he changed direction and came to her side.

"Hi," she answered, feeling a bit nervous. She'd been avoiding Brian after witnessing Brian kissing Sara.

"Been busy, I take it?" Brian asked, trying to start a conversation.

Tommi shrugged. "Same old, same old. You know how they pile the work on at the end of the semester."

"Yeah," Brian agreed with a smile. "It seems I'm spending most of my time in the computer labs these days."

"Except when you're out on dates," Tommi said, not even trying to keep the acid from her voice.

Brian was surprised, and his reaction showed it. "I'm ... I'm not sure I follow you."

Tommi shrugged. "I just figured you'd been dating a little lately?"

"What are you talking about?" Brian asked, confused by what she was saying.

"Just that I saw you a few days ago," Tommi said straightforwardly, "coming back to my dorm late, and then helping the passenger out of your car, and kissing her. Kissing my sister, to be precise!"

Brian's eyes widened. "I ... I took her for a late appointment," he stammered, not quite knowing how to address her accusation. "She didn't want to borrow your car again."

"Uh, huh. So you kiss all your passengers like that?" Tommi said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I took her out for dinner, since it was a late appointment. When we got back to the dorm," he explained, "she kissed me!" He was sounding desperate. "Tommi, you have to believe me! It wasn't a date! I didn't mean to kiss her!"

"Dinner sounds like a date," Tommi commented acidly. "Good-night kissing sounds like a date!"

"Okay, I'll admit that I shouldn't have taken her out to dinner," Brian agreed, "but we spent the time talking about you! I wanted her help in planning a surprise for your birthday!"

"Right," Tommi said warily. It was clear that she didn't believe Brian's story; it was too convenient, and it didn't explain Sara's guilt.

"Really," Brian pleaded. "You've got to believe me! I fell in love with you, not your sister! I mean, Sara is a wonderful girl and all, but you're the one I'm crazy about!" His eyes widened, as he saw Tommi's expression.

Tommi's eyes were wide with surprise, and her shoulders hunched forward before she doubled over. Her breathing suddenly became shallow and fast, and she was grimacing in pain – severe pain.

"Are you okay?" Brian asked, panic in his voice.

"This is ... too early ... for labor," Tommi panted, her face contorted with agony. "Something's ... wrong!"

Brian took her arm to lend her support. "What do you need to do?" he asked urgently, already glancing around for a bench or seat. There were, unfortunately, none nearby.

Tommi looked near collapse. Brian couldn't support her, so he helped her ease down onto the grass next to the sidewalk. She rolled on her side, doubled over in pain. Brian knelt beside her, feeling slight terror. He looked around quickly and saw a girl standing a few feet away and staring at them. "Get campus security!" he ordered. "Now!" He saw the girl nod and run off.

"Get an ... ambulance," Tommi gasped. "I need to go ... to the clinic." It seemed that her every word was a major effort.

"An emergency room ..." Brian started to say.

"The clinic - the hospital side!" Tommi repeated. "They're set up ... for this." Her voice seemed weaker with each word and with every passing moment.

"Okay," Brian said nervously, as he dug for his cell phone.

"My phone," Tommi urged. She was faint and struggling to stay conscious. "It's got the clinic number on quick dial. Call them and let them know I'm coming."" Her voice trailed off into a faint murmur.

Brian felt awkward, but he retrieved Tommi's phone. A call to the clinic's emergency dispatcher got an ambulance on the way, and alerted the staff that Tommi was having some type of emergency.

Brian grasped Tommi's hand, holding it tightly. "Hang on, Tommi," he pleaded, tears starting to flow. "Help is coming. Stay with me, please." He was terrified; she seemed so weak and unresponsive, and her complexion was ghostly white. He stole a quick glance from her face, to see if there was any indication of discomfort or distress, and he paled. Tommi's slacks glistened crimson with fresh blood.

Sara and Katie ran into the clinic and directly to the nurse's station. "Where's Tommi?" Katie demanded of the nurse.

The nurse frowned. "You can't run around the clinic like ..."

Rachel had been alerted by Suzie, as soon as Sara and Katie came into the clinic, and she was close behind the sisters. "It's okay, Beth," she said. "I've got this one."

Sara turned to Rachel. "Where's Tommi? Why won't anyone tell us anything?"

"Hold on. You haven't given anyone a chance, yet," Rachel said, trying to sound soothing. "Tommi is in the OR right now. You can't see her."

Sara sank into a chair, her face somber. "How bad ...? When ... when can we see her?" She was afraid to finish the question.

Deb had heard the commotion and came to the station. "Tommi had some serious complications," she explained. "We've got the best doctors in the business taking care of her right now."

Rachel nodded. "Let's go to the break room," she suggested. "We can sit and talk, and we won't be in the middle of the activity. Beth and Deb will know where we'll be, so they can bring word as soon as they know anything."

The walk to the break room seemed miles long. As soon as they sat, Sara repeated her question. "When will you know anything?"

Deb glanced at Rachel. She shook her head sadly. "I don't know."

"What ... what happened?" Sara continued. Katie was sitting woodenly, listening to every detail.

"Tommi had a separation of the placenta from her uterus," Deb explained. "That's why she was bleeding so badly. She's lost a _lot_ of blood. We don't know yet how the baby is doing. We have to stabilize Tommi first, and then we'll take care of the baby."

Katie nodded, her expression guardedly neutral to hide her inner turmoil. "I'm going to call Mom," she said, her voice quavering. She walked into the hall, already working the buttons phone.

"Is she going to be ... okay?" Sara was starting to cry, dreading the thought of losing her sister.

"Like Deb said," Rachel replied, "we've got the best obstetricians and surgeons available." She leaned close to Deb and whispered, "I think you better get to the OR. Tina is going to need all the help she can get, and you're her best scrub nurse."

Deb nodded mutely and hurried from the break room.

Sara leaned forward, her elbows on her knees and her face buried in her hands, as tears streamed down her cheeks and fingers. "You've got to take care of Tommi," she said softly. "You can't let anything happen to her."

"We're doing everything we can," Rachel answered as she sat and put her arm around Sara's shoulders. "We're doing everything we can."

"Did Brian come in with her?"

Rachel nodded. "He was with her when she collapsed. He rode in with her in the ambulance. He wouldn't let go of her hand until we were moving into the OR." She shook her head sadly. "He's pretty devastated, and he blames himself. He thinks that, somehow, he caused some distress to Tommi that caused this. I've got one of the counselors talking to him right now."

"He really loves her."

"Yeah," Rachel acknowledged. "And right now, he's terrified of losing her, just like we all are."

Katie came back in and sat down next to Sara. "I called Mom to let her know," she reported softly. "I also called Jillian."

Sara nodded mutely, her face still in her hands as she continued to cry.

A while time later, Jillian entered the break room. She saw Sara and Katie sitting, very concerned expressions on their faces. "How is she doing?" Jillian asked hesitantly.

Katie shook her head. "We don't know."

Deb popped her head back in. "Tina says we're going to have to deliver early by C-section. The placenta tear is too big to repair for this stage of pregnancy." She disappeared back into the hall. Her footsteps weren't reassuring; she was running in a clinic that was known for being very laid-back.

Jillian sank into a chair. "It's my fault," she said to herself. "This is all my fault." She shook her head slowly. "What did I get Tommi into?" After staring at the floor for a few long silent moments, she glanced at Rachel. "Do you have a chapel?"

"We just finished refurbishing it two weeks ago. I'll show you the way." She stood and guided Jillian out of the break room and down the hall to the new chapel. In a few moments, she was back. "Can I get you anything?" she asked Sara and Katie.

"No," Katie replied softly.

The girls sat in the break room with Rachel, keeping silent vigil. The clock ticked with agonizing slowness; minutes seemed like hours. Finally, Sara asked Rachel, "Where's the chapel?"

"It used to be break room three," Rachel answered quickly. "Down the hall toward the nurse's station, take the first left, then the third door on the left. Do you want me to show you?"

Sara shook her head. She'd find the chapel. She walked stiffly out the door and followed the directions. At the door of the chapel, she paused, then silently went inside and took a seat.

Jillian was kneeling at an altar, her rosary beads in her folded hands. She was praying softly.

If the circumstances hadn't been so dire, Sara would have noticed more of the chapel. There were several back-lit stained-glass panels around the room, lending a spiritual air. Between them were several rows of pews. The altar was set a step higher than the floor, with a railing surrounding it. It was at this railing that Jillian knelt.

Sara wiped at her tears, listening to Jillian praying. While there was an urgency in Jillian's voice, there was also a calm reassurance, as if she knew that her prayers would be answered. Sara found herself almost swept up in it with Jillian; if she had known the rosary prayers, she would have joined in.

After a few minutes, the prayer stopped, and Jillian glanced around. She seemed surprised that Sara was in the chapel with her. Jillian stood and moved back to the pew Sara was in, sitting beside her.

"Why?" Sara asked simply. She was confused by the concern Jillian displayed, in some ways even more than Sara had shown. "Why do you care so much about her? She's not even family."

"She gave me everything," Jillian answered simply, "without asking anything in return. Because of her, I got my father back. I got to keep my faith. That's just the way she is." She looked at Sara. "But you know that," she added.

"Oh."

"She's my best friend," Jillian continued. "If she can give so much to me, the least I can do is pray for her."

Sara sat, stung by Jillian's words. Jillian, a friend, was acting more charitable and caring toward Tommi than Sara had been, at least lately. She felt ashamed at how she'd been fighting with Tommi, of how she'd knowingly spurned Tommi's apologies – not once, but three separate times – and had hurt Tommi in the process. After a bit, when the peace of the chapel had calmed Sara's frazzled nerves, she decided to go back to Katie. "I'm going back now. You want to come?"

Jillian shook her head. "No," she said simply. "This is a time for family. I'll stay here and keep praying for Tommi."

Sara nodded, then stood and walked back to the break room and sat down with Katie. "Any updates?"

Katie shook her head. "Nothing." She leaned over and hugged Sara. "I'm scared." She was clinging very tightly to her youngest sister, and she trembled as she fought to control her fears.

Sara nodded, wiping at the seemingly never-ending stream of tears. "So am I." The tears she didn't catch spilled down her cheeks onto Katie's shirt; neither girl noticed or cared.

"I don't want anything to happen to her," Katie sobbed, really breaking down for the first time since they got to the clinic.

"Jillian says she'll be okay," Sara said, trying to comfort and reassure her oldest sister. "She said Tommi gives so much that God wouldn't let anything bad happen to her."

Katie shook her head uncertainly. "I wish I could be so positive." She looked at Sara. "You know that Tommi really loves you, don't you?"

"Yeah," Sara admitted. "Sometimes she just has a funny way of showing it."

"She was really hurt seeing you kiss Brian," Katie continued. She was forcing the discussion away from Tommi's ongoing surgery. "She's still trying to figure out the direction for her life. She does love Brian, even if she won't admit it to herself. But she also loves Erica. She's very confused about things."

"I kind of figured as much."

"That's why she felt so betrayed when she saw you kissing Brian," Katie continued. "She also gets the impression that you aren't very grateful for her help."

"Well, it felt like she was setting me up for a control thing," Sara countered defensively.

"I know you got a lot of that from Liz and your ma," Katie said quietly. "But that's not Tommi's way."

"Funny," Sara gave a self-deriding half laugh. "That's exactly what Jillian said a couple of minutes ago."

"Tommi just wants to help, because she loves you more than anything. More than me, more than Erica or Brian."

"I wish she'd see I'm not a little girl. I wish she'd understand that I love her and admire her enough that I wanted to be like her," Sara was crying again. "Can't she see that?"

"Maybe she can't see it," Katie explained softly. "Maybe you need to tell her. You need to let her know that you love her and admire her and want to be like her, even if you're not a little kid anymore."

Sara's tears burst forth from a trickle to a torrent. "It's my fault that Tommi did her second pregnancy. It's my fault that she's lying in that operating room."

Katie wrapped her arms around Sara and pulled her head onto Katie's shoulder, letting the distraught girl cry. Katie's tears, momentarily abated, flowed again. She loved her sister a lot, like Sara did. She was as worried about Tommi as Sara was. And there was nothing either of them could do except to wait.

Sara rushed into the room and threw her arms around Tommi, who was lying, still groggy, on the bed. "Don't you ever scare me like that again!" Sara cried, her tears flowing as she hugged her sister.

Tommi winced at the discomfort of Sara leaning across her. "I won't," she said weakly.

Sara noticed Tommi's grimace of pain. She straightened up, looking sheepish. "Sorry," she said as she wiped at her tears. "Does it hurt?"

Tommi nodded slowly. "Yeah. And I'm still all doped up with pain killers."

Deb walked calmly past Katie and Sara to Tommi's bedside and took Tommi's vital signs. After dutifully recording the data, she patted Tommi's hand. "How are you feeling?" she asked, trying to sound cheerful.

Tommi closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she tried to smile, but even that was an effort for her. "Weak. Sore."

"Considering what you've been through, that's understandable," Deb answered. "I'm going to continue my rounds, but I'm just a button away if you need anything."

"Thanks," Tommi said softly.

As Deb started to leave the room, Tommi realized there was something she didn't know. "Deb?" she called out.

Deb returned to her bedside. "Yes?"

"The baby?"

Deb smiled and patted her hand again. "The baby is doing fine. Tina said your body did an unbelievable job of keeping the baby alive and healthy. She's a healthy little girl."

"Thanks." Tommi sank back against her pillow, her eyes closing in relief that her pregnancy and ordeal hadn't been in vain.

Katie took her turn giving Tommi a hug, but she was a little less enthusiastic and gentler than Sara had been. "I agree with what Sara said. Please don't do that again." Like Sara, she, too, was crying.

"Okay," Tommi answered softly.

"Got room for one more?" Jillian called as she peered into the room.

"Sure," Katie answered for Tommi. She glanced over and saw that Tommi seemed to be dozing again. "But Tommi's pretty tired."

Tommi's eyes opened a little. "I'm not asleep," she insisted quietly. "I'm just resting."

As Jillian strode to Tommi's bed, Katie moved a bit toward the foot of the bed, so Jillian could talk to Tommi. Katie didn't let go of Tommi's hand, however. On the other side of the bed, Sara was clinging tightly to Tommi's hand and not budging from the bedside.

"Hi," Jillian said simply. "How are you doing?"

Tommi smiled. "I'm going to have Katie make up a sign so I don't have to keep answering," she joked.

"At least they didn't remove your sense of humor," Katie said with a smile.

"I'm so glad everything turned out okay," Jillian said, wiping at the tears that suddenly formed in her eyes. "I've never prayed so hard in all my life, as when you were in surgery."

"Thanks," Tommi replied. Her eyes, too, were misting, but she was too tired and weak to dry them.

Jillian noticed, and took a tissue to help Tommi dry her eyes.

"We just got word that the baby is doing well, too," Sara added, knowing that Jillian would be curious.

Jillian looked like she was going to collapse with relief. "Thank God," she said with heartfelt emotion. "I was so worried about both of you."

"You know you're going to miss a couple of weeks of classes, don't you?" Katie asked Tommi. "Even with those rapid-heal drugs they've got you on, you really went through an ordeal, and Dr. Tina said you'd be on bed rest for at least two weeks."

Tommi sighed. "I guess I'll have to write off two of my classes, then."

"What do you mean, write off classes?" Jillian asked, frowning.

"I've got major projects and tests scheduled in some of my classes, and there's a rule about no make-up on those," Tommi answered.

Jillian frowned. "We'll see about that!"

Tommi spent some of her precious energy and put her hand on Jillian's. "Please don't do anything," she urged her friend. "Promise me?"

"But ... it's the least I can do!" Jillian protested.

"No. Please?"

Jillian sighed in frustration. She knew she could fix things in a heartbeat, if Tommi would let her. "Okay."

"Thanks." Tommi let her hand drop. "I'm sorry I'm not better company right now, but I want to sleep some."

Sara leaned over and gave Tommi another hug. "I'll be here with you."

Katie nodded. "Me, too."

"K." Tommi let her eyes drift shut. In seconds, her breathing became more regular and more relaxed as sleep took hold of the weary girl.

Sara finally let go of Tommi's hand. She glanced around, and then pulled a chair to Tommi's bedside. She sat down, watching over her sister, as if somehow, her presence and attention would help Tommi heal more quickly.

Katie turned to Jillian. "You didn't exactly promise, did you?"

Jillian's expression was both pained at being doubted and guilty at being caught. "I agreed, didn't I?"

Katie laughed. "You didn't _say_ that you promised, though."

"I can't let her suffer for my mistake," Jillian said firmly.

Katie sighed with exasperation. "I know you're going to do what you're going to do. But please don't hurt my ...," she glanced at Sara and corrected herself, "_our_ sister. Even if you have good intentions!"

Jillian nodded slowly. "I understand." She turned and left, pausing at the door to look at Tommi. "I'll stop by later to see if she's awake and wants to talk."

After Jillian left, Katie stood suddenly. "I'm going to stretch my legs for a minute." She walked out to the nurse's station.

Deb looked up as Katie leaned on the desk. "Can I help you?" she asked pleasantly.

"Can I talk to Dr. Tina?" Katie asked. Deb checked a computer display, and nodded. "I'll show you to her office. You can wait there. She should be done with her current patient in a few minutes."

Inside the office, Katie slumped wearily into a chair. It had been a very long ordeal for her and Sara. Tommi had been in the operating room for six of the longest hours of Katie's life. She was sure it felt even longer to Sara.

As Deb had predicted, Dr. Tina came into her office within two minutes. She was back in her lab coat, having shed her very bloody surgical scrubs. "Don't get up," she said as Katie started to rise. "I know you girls must be exhausted."

"Yeah. I bet you are, too."

"What can I do for you?" Dr. Tina asked bluntly. She was too tired for chit-chat. "I suppose you have some questions about Tommi's surgery and her condition?"

Katie simply nodded. "How bad was she?"

Dr. Tina bit her lower lip. She _shouldn't_ tell someone else about a patient, but she knew Katie was legally family. "Very bad," she said. "Very bad."

"What does that mean?"

Dr. Tina sat back, feeling very tired herself. "Tommi coded on us three times during the surgery. Legally, technically, she died three times, and we brought her back three times." She shook her head. For some reason, her eyes were watering, and she wiped at the moisture. "We almost lost her. It was very close." Her voice cracked, betraying her affection for Tommi as a dear friend. "I don't think we could have managed a fourth."

Katie was thoroughly shaken by Dr. Tina's candid description of just how bad Tommi's condition had been. "What's her future? Does this mean she can't ever have children? You do know that she wants to have children of her own someday."

Dr. Tina shrugged. "I don't know if she will be able to. My crystal ball quit working a long time ago. Medically, her next pregnancy – assuming she gets pregnant – is going to be considered very high risk, until proven otherwise."

Katie dabbed at her own tears. "Thank you for saving her."

Dr. Tina shook her head. "Don't thank me. There's someone else who gets all the credit." She glanced upward with her eyes; her intent was very obvious.

Brian peeked cautiously into the room. When he saw that Tommi appeared to be sleeping, he sighed heavily. "I guess I'll come back later," he said softly to himself.

Tommi opened her eyes at his soft words. She hadn't been sleeping, but merely resting. "Hi," she said softly when she recognized him, startling him.

"Hi," Brian said. He wasn't sure quite what to say. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," Tommi said weakly, "thanks to you." She tried to smile. "You don't have to stand in the doorway. Come here."

Brian padded softly to Tommi's bedside. "You look a lot better than the last time I saw you." His voice was choking at the frightening memory.

"A bit closer, please. My throat is still sore, and I can't talk very loud."

Brian bent over the bed until he was a few inches from Tommi. "You scared me," he admitted, his eyes misting. "I've never felt so helpless in my life."

Tommi mustered a bit of strength, and she lifted her arms to encircle Brian's neck. She pulled him down as she raised her lips toward his. After a long, heartfelt kiss, she let her head plop back on her pillow. "Thank you," she said.

The dam holding back Brian's tears burst; he began to cry openly. "Please don't ever do that again," he said as he hugged Tommi.

"I don't plan on it," Tommi said softly. She let her tired eyes close for a few moments. "Dr. Tina told me that I was lucky you were with me," she said. "She said you saved my life."

Brian was shaking his head, trying to deny what she'd said. "But, if I hadn't"

"Shhh," Tommi interrupted. "You didn't cause anything. It's not your fault. It was going to happen, regardless of whether I was upset at you kissing Sara or not."

"But"

"Tommi shook her head gently. "It wasn't your fault! And I believe you – about it being an innocent thing."

"I'm so sorry," Brian repeated. He lifted his head so he was staring directly into Tommi's eyes. His hands rested gently on her cheeks. "I love you."

Tommi smiled. "Is this where I'm supposed to say, 'I know,' like in Star Wars?" She closed her eyes and rested for a few moments, before she looked at Brian again. "Have you been here since I came in?"

Brian nodded. "Yeah," he admitted. "I ... couldn't leave."

"Do me a favor."

"What?"

"Go get some rest," Tommi replied lightly. "I've got a lot of staff to take care of me, so I'll be okay. You can come and visit any time, but you need to take care of yourself."

"Okay." Brian sounded humbled, even hurt at her request.

"Brian," Tommi continued, "I'm not chasing you away. I'm glad you stopped by. But I'm very tired, and I don't feel very talkative right now. I like talking with you, but right now, we both need some rest. Go get a nap, clean up, get something to eat, and come back later tonight. I'm not going anywhere."

Brian smiled at her feeble joke. "Okay," he answered. "I'll be back later, then. I think I know where I can find you." He leaned over, gave her another kiss, and, with a faint smile, strode from the room. After talking with Tommi, his heart was lighter. He paused in the doorway, looking at her, and realized that she was already asleep. He blew her a kiss before leaving.

"Knock, knock." The voice at the door was as familiar as it was unexpected, and the face peeking in Tommi's room was a pleasant surprise.

"Mom?" Sara cried with delight, as she leaped from her chair. She enveloped Ronnie in a huge bear hug. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

Ronnie smiled. "When one of my girls is in trouble, my place is by her side." She pried Sara from her, so she could go to Tommi's bedside.

"I'm glad you're here, Mom," Tommi said, giving her mother a weak smile. She gave Ronnie a kiss on her cheek when Ronnie bent over to hug her.

"As soon as I heard what happened, I made some arrangements at work and caught the next flight I could."

Tommi smiled. "They're going to be keeping me here for a few days, but the staff is fantastic. They make such a fuss over me that I really don't need ..."

"Oh, pooh!" Ronnie scoffed. "Can they give you motherly love? I don't think so."

"I'm glad you're here, but you can't just leave Dad home alone! I've got friends to help," Tommi protested.

"I'm here, and that's the end of that sort of talk!" Ronnie announced firmly. She turned to Sara and Katie. "You two have probably spent the last few days right here, and I bet your studies are suffering. You can go get some rest and get caught up. I'm here to make sure our girl is okay."

Sara nodded slowly, accepting Ronnie's logic; she truly felt exhausted.

Katie felt the same. "Let's go, Sara. Mom has spoken."

Sara laughed, the first time in days that she'd felt light-hearted enough to laugh. "Yeah."

"And I'm going to take you two out for a real meal tonight," Ronnie added before the girls ducked out the door. "You've probably been living on junk food, and you need a real, healthy meal! I think we can trust the staff for an hour or so, don't you?"

Katie nodded. "Okay."

Ronnie waited until the girls had gone before returning her attention to Tommi. "This has been a rough one, hasn't it?"

Tommi nodded. "Not quite what I signed up for."

"Are you thinking about hosting another baby?" Ronnie's perception was uncanny.

Tommi nodded sheepishly. "Yeah."

"I wish you wouldn't," Ronnie said softly. "This one was too close."

Tommi sighed. "But ... someday, I want my own children. I ... have to know that I can do that, especially after ... this one."

"I understand," Ronnie said softly. "And I can't stop you. But I can ask you to wait a bit, so you can heal some more, before you try again."

Tommi nodded. "Yeah, I've already figured that they wouldn't let me rush in to host another baby."

"I get the sense from what you and your sisters say that you're confused about a few things."

Tommi frowned. "I'm not sure I understand. I know I'm going to stay a woman. I like it more. It feels right." She smiled. "By the way, I'm going to get a little cosmetic surgery so I look a little more feminine. Soften my nose, maybe soften my chin, and get rid of my little Adam's apple."

Ronnie chuckled. "Just like a woman to be worrying about her looks. But I was talking about relationships."

"Oh," Tommi answered. She suddenly felt awkward. How was she supposed to talk about sexual relationships with her mother?

"I understand you've been dating a young man."

"Brian. Yeah, we've dated some." Tommi's answer left a lot of openings to explore, and hinted at something more.

"And?"

Tommi looked away from Ronnie's eyes, embarrassed. "We've dated. And ... we"

Ronnie nodded knowingly. "I kind of figured so. This is the point we'd normally talk about precautions and sexually-transmitted diseases and such, but I know the staff here have already gone over that. Besides, there wasn't much chance of you getting pregnant when you were already carrying a baby!" She paused to watch Tommi's reaction. "Do you like him?"

Tommi thought for a moment, and then nodded. "He's very sweet and caring. He treats me like I'm a goddess."

Ronnie smiled. "Reminds me of when your father and I were dating. Do you love him?"

Tommi thought for a few moments before she spoke. "I think I kind of do – in a way."

"Does he make your heart flutter when you think of him?"

Tommi paused before answering. "Some," she admitted softly.

"How about Erica?"

Tommi's jaw dropped. She thought that was a secret. "How did you know?"

"A mother has her ways," Ronnie answered with a smile.

Tommi nodded slowly, acknowledging Ronnie's guess. "Yeah, we dated once. It was ... a one-night stand. At least, it was supposed to be."

"But?"

Tommi shook her head as she stared at the foot of the bed. "I ... really like Erica. She's sweet, she's fun. She's passionate."

"Have you dated her more than that once?" Ronnie's question floored Tommi.

"No. I was ... scared ... of what happened. And I didn't know what you and Dad would think if I was ..."

"The word is 'lesbian', dear," Ronnie finished with a knowing smile. "You know, I get the feeling that you love Erica, too."

Tommi nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"Does she make your heart flutter?"

Tommi sighed. "In a way," she replied after thinking a moment. She sighed. "I saw her with another girl in the coffee shop, and I was ... jealous." Her admission came hard – mostly because she'd never really admitted it to herself. The admission forced her to think about her true feelings for Erica.

"And maybe you need to give her a chance on dating, the same as you have with Brian?"

"Yeah. She asked for the same thing." Tommi scowled. "What if I decide I love Erica? What will that mean? Won't you and dad be disappointed?"

Ronnie shook her head. "The most important thing is my daughter's happiness, dear."

"Oh." Tommi had a lot to think about. "It may be complicated, though."

"Why's that?"

Tommi frowned. "I think Sara is starting to fall for Brian."

Ronnie grimaced. "That could get messy."

"It already is messy." Tommi sighed. "I saw them together a couple of times. He claimed that they were working on a surprise for me, but then I saw her kissing him." Tommi's voice was tinged with pain.

"Oh, dear," Ronnie winced. "I suppose you felt betrayed by Sara, or maybe jealous of Brian?" She was doing her best to keep her motherly sympathy on full display for her daughter's sake, even as she realized that the situation was far worse than she'd imagined from prior phone conversations with her girls.

Tommi she nodded slowly. "Yeah. To both."

"Not again!" Katie complained softly. "I thought you were done with all those hassles."

Tommi nodded. "Me, too." She sighed; two and a half weeks after her surgery, just days after getting off bed-rest, and only a day after resuming classes, Tommi had another summons to the Dean's office.

"Got any clues what this is about?"

Tommi shook her head. "Nope. Unless" She frowned. "Jillian promised me."

Katie winced visibly. "Technically, she didn't promise," she said. "And you were pretty groggy from the medicines, so you may have thought she made a promise that she didn't make."

Tommi scowled. "Jillian knows how I feel. She wouldn't do this, would she?"

"There's only one way to find out, kiddo." She pulled on her shoes and stood. "Let's go find out."

"You're coming with me?" Tommi protested.

Katie laughed. "Mom's orders. For the next week or so, you're not lifting anything, or walking any distance alone."

Tommi sighed. "I guess she means well, and it's probably for my own good."

"And don't you forget it!"

The two walked slowly across campus. Despite weeks of recovery and the rapid-heal protocols, Tommi was still frighteningly weak. She'd lost a lot of blood, and she had the trauma of her emergency C-section, as well; her body could only recover so fast.

When they got to the Dean's office, the secretary greeted Tommi warmly. "Please sit down, dear. I know you've had a trying time. The Dean will be with you...."

"Right now," the Dean spoke from the doorway his office, where he was standing, as if he'd been waiting for Tommi. "Please come in." He held the door for Tommi and Katie, closing it behind them. "Have a seat and make yourselves comfortable. Can I have my secretary get you anything to drink?"

Katie gave Tommi a disbelieving glance; after the early horror stories of dealing with the Dean, these pleasantries were unexpected to Katie.

Not so, apparently, to Tommi. She seemed relaxed. "I'll pass, thank you," she replied easily. Her eyes were fixed on Jillian, seated across from her. "Hi, Jillian."

"I'm glad to see you up and about," the other girl replied with a warm smile.

"It's nice to be out of a hospital bed."

The Dean interrupted and sat down. "Now, I understand that your medical condition interrupted some crucial lab projects and a test, is that correct?" He got straight to the point.

Tommi nodded. "Yes, sir. Those professors told me that there would be no make-up on either the lab work or on the test."

The Dean smiled. "One good thing about my position is that I can overrule inflexible policies when they don't make sense. And since you were in a hospital after surgery, it only makes sense to permit make-up work. Does that sound fair?"

Tommi nodded. "But ..."

"But nothing. How much of a time extension do you need? You were out, what, three weeks?" He glanced at Jillian for confirmation.

Tommi frowned at Jillian. "I don't expect any special favors," she said, trying to sound stern but polite.

The Dean nodded. "Okay, let's put our cards on the table." He sat back, and for a few moments, bit his lower lip as he contemplated what to say. "I noticed how concerned Jillian was for your health. I know she considers you her best friend, but her concern seemed quite ... excessive. I also know about her pregnancy, and the, um, coincidence of your contract and Jillian's condition." He smiled. "Even if Jillian hadn't confirmed it, I knew that you were carrying her child. True?"

Tommi glanced nervously at Katie, looking for some sign of how to handle this. Katie, however, was as clueless as Tommi. She looked back at the Dean. "True," she admitted softly.

"And you lied to me when I asked you earlier, didn't you?"

Tommi nodded again.

The Dean smiled unexpectedly. "I think I understand why. You didn't want any special favors. You were afraid that I'd give you some undue attention, right?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"And, truth be told, I probably would have," the Dean confirmed. "I respect your decisions and your reasons for them. But that's behind us now."

"So ... the make-up time?" Tommi was worried that it was his version of payback.

The Dean shrugged. "You could call it returning a favor. Or you could see it from my perspective and call it putting a few arrogant, obstinate professors with indefensible policies in their place."

"Is this the end of it then? No more favors?"

The Dean nodded. "If you consider this a favor, then yes, this is the end."

"And what's the part you aren't telling Tommi?" Katie asked cautiously.

The Dean smiled at her. "Observant. Very observant." He leaned back. "The girl you gave birth to was adopted by my son and his wife. They'd had ... problems. Very conveniently, your emergency early delivery messed up the schedule at the Foundation to get the social work, interviews, and such done for the original prospective parents, so my son was able to make arrangements to adopt, since they'd already done the work and were already on another waiting list. They named her Anastasia, by the way. Anastasia Marie."

Katie nodded her understanding. "Um, how large was the donation to the Morris Foundation?"

Jillian's and Tommi's eyes widened in surprise at Katie's blatant question.

The Dean, however, laughed. "Not exactly diplomatic, but ... let's just say that a small donation, plus some funding to allow one of our biology labs to work with the Foundation, plus inviting Dr. Morris to be the commencement speaker – it all greased the skids, so to speak."

Katie laughed. "I bet you could have gotten the Foundation to cooperate with just the commencement speaker gig. You know that the Foundation wants to spread its message, and commencement would be a perfect opportunity."

The Dean nodded. "Maybe. But this was one I couldn't take a chance on. So, I pull a few strings, called in a few favors, and Mark and Julie get to adopt a healthy baby girl. Everything stays in the family."

"Family re-unions are going to be weird," Tommi observed. "What will the baby call Jillian, 'Aunt-Mom'?"

The Dean laughed, as did Jillian. "Maybe. I guess we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Jillian looked at Tommi. "I hope you don't feel like I betrayed you when I talked to Dad," she said fearfully. "I only wanted to help you."

Tommi smiled at her friend. "I know. I'm glad things all worked out in the end."

"Not quite all," Jillian commented. "But I think we can fix that, too."

Tommi was perplexed. "What?" she asked.

The Dean smiled. "I understand a host mother goes through some significant separation issues, when she doesn't ever get to see or hold the baby she's carried."

Tommi nodded, her expression grim. "Yeah," she confirmed nervously, her lip trembling at the memory of the separation pain of her first baby. She hadn't wanted to be reminded of _that_ aspect of her service.

"We all talked – Jillian, Mark, Julie, and I – and we all feel that, with the critical role you played, you have a special place in little Anastasia's life. Julie said she'd be happy for both you and Anastasia if you want to visit and get to know the girl you cared for. Kind of, to be her Aunt Tommi."

Tommi's eyes started watering. "Thank you," she stammered. "That's very generous. I'd like that. I'd like that very much."

Tommi decided that stadium seating in a movie theater, while comfortable and giving a good view, had a definite drawback. She felt a little drowsy. Even the noise of the patrons standing and noisily shuffling toward the exit wasn't penetrating her tranquil mood.

Then again, she reminded herself, it might be the company. She let her head turn slightly to her right. A smile crossed her face, when she saw Erica smiling at her. Erica's eyes were alight with joy, and the contented look on her face was positively radiant.

"Where to now?" Tommi queried. "Or is that a surprise?"

"Could be a surprise," Erica answered enigmatically. "Or we can skip all that and go straight back to my room for a night of hot sex." She grinned at the last part.

Tommi feigned shock. "You don't think I'm going to put out on a first date, do you? Remember, you don't have hormones working in your favor now."

Erica laughed. "In that case, why don't we leave this place and go get some dessert?" She suggested a restaurant.

Tommi's expression told Erica that was a bad idea even before Tommi could speak.

"Maybe the chocolate bar?" Erica quickly substituted a suggestion.

Tommi relaxed. "That sounds good."

Erica and Tommi walked to Erica's car at a leisurely pace, arm-in-arm. While it was nice to be close to Erica, Tommi was still weak, and having the extra support was a bonus. Besides,

when she leaned her head onto Erica's shoulder, she could smell Erica's sweet enticing perfume.

Erica was ensuring that Tommi saw her at her best. She wore a tight-fitting blouse with a scoop neckline to better display her cleavage, which was enhanced by a push-up bra. A short skirt showed practically all of Erica's long sexy legs, and her heels gave her stride an alluring swing. She'd done her strawberry-blond hair in a French braid, giving her a sophisticated and yet naughty look. With her perfectly-applied makeup and lip gloss, Erica was the complete sex-kitten. She was so enticing that Tommi had tasted the slight strawberry flavor of her lips several times during the movie.

In comparison with Erica, Tommi was attired more simply. Her skirt was a bit longer, and her blouse a bit more modest. Tommi wore her hair in a simple ponytail for convenience. She wore no perfume, and little makeup – not that it mattered to Erica. She also wore simple flats; heels were out of the question for a while longer – at least until she got more strength and endurance back.

Tommi and Erica sat in the chocolate bar talking until the owner asked them to settle their account so he could close. Embarrassed, the two girls walked back to Erica's car. Once seated inside, Erica turned to Tommi. "Now what?"

Tommi giggled. "Shall we find another place to get thrown out of?"

Erica laughed at her comment. "I wouldn't say we were thrown out. I guess it's late. Shall I take you home?"

"Unless you're having as much fun talking as I am."

Erica smiled pleasantly. "I thought it was just me. And yes, I'm thoroughly entranced just sitting with you and chatting."

Tommi smiled. "How about if we go back to your room, since your roommate is home for the weekend? We can sit and talk all we want, without worrying about the place closing."

"Or not talk?" Erica suggested, raising her eyebrows.

Tommi laughed. "Let's not plan on anything, okay?" She was choosing her words carefully so she didn't hurt Erica. "I'm having fun getting to know you, and talking about ... things."

Erica nodded, the smile never fading from her face. "Deal. I'll ... I'll handcuff myself, so I don't attack you!"

Tommi grinned wickedly. "You're assuming that I'm not into that sort of thing!"

Erica was very sensitive to Tommi's desire that they get to know each other better. She didn't put any moves on Tommi, nor did she make any untoward suggestions, apart from the unintended double-entendres of their conversation, to which both girls laughed. She knew that Tommi was still recovering, and had to be very careful not to overdo things.

Tommi, for her part, was surprised by Erica's life story. She hadn't known that Erica was an Army brat who had lived in Japan, Hawaii, and Germany. She'd been around the world, and spoke both German and Japanese. Because of that nomadic life, she had a very strong desire to settle down in one place and raise a family, not moving around like she'd done growing up. She was the oldest of three, with two younger bratty brothers, or so Erica described them.

Thin shafts of sunlight through the blinds announced to Tommi and Erica that it was no longer late; it was very early in the morning. "Wow!" Erica said softly. "I didn't realize what time it was!"

Tommi sipped from the cup of tea Erica had made for her. "I should be asleep on my feet, but I'm surprisingly not very tired." She smiled at Erica. "It must be the company."

Erica grinned. "Must be. You suppose the girls will be gossiping about why you didn't come home last night and what you did?"

Tommi laughed. "Let them. I'm a grown woman, and I can do what I want."

"Your thought patterns and attitudes are becoming more and more female all the time. Did you notice?"

Tommi nodded, smiling. "When I started the program, Dr. Tina told me that prolonged exposure to female hormones would permanently alter my brain functions. Not in a huge way, but in subtle ways. I guess that means I'm adapting."

"And your other thoughts? Like about guys?" Erica asked hesitantly.

Tommi shrugged. "I don't know. Sometimes, I feel like being with guys is gay, and I prefer being around girls. Sometimes, it feels like I'm starting to be attracted to guys."

"Like Brian?"

Tommi was surprised by Erica's comment. "I wasn't thinking of him in particular," she replied cautiously.

Erica dropped her gaze, staring into her hands. "I know you like Brian. I know he's nuts about you, too," she explained, her voice melancholy. "I know you dated him a whole bunch. Everyone has seen the way you kiss him. Some of us were even speculating about whether you and he ... you know. I didn't tell," she added softly.

Tommi sighed. She'd hoped to avoid this topic. "Brian is ... okay. He's safe. He isn't some guy on the prowl for a piece of ass. And yes, I know he has fallen in love with me."

"You're still dating him?" Erica asked sadly.

Tommi nodded. "Yeah."

"Does he know that we're dating, too?"

Tommi shook her head slowly. "I don't think so. Not yet, anyway. I ... need to tell him."

"So, I get the odd days, and he gets the even days?"

Tommi laughed. "Katie actually suggested that!"

"Having you half of the time is better than having you none of the time," Erica tried to put a positive spin on Tommi's arrangement.

"Brian knows that I'm confused, and that I'm trying to sort out my feelings. He still hopes I'll fall head-over-heels in love with him."

"And?" Erica was afraid of the reply, but still felt compelled to ask.

Tommi let her head hang forward, shaking it slightly. "I don't know," she said softly. "I like him. I suppose I even love him a little. But I don't know if I could fall into a permanent relationship with him. He's safe, and gentle."

"And I'm?" Erica looked down into her folded hands, afraid of what Tommi might say.

Tommi turned to Erica and gently lifted her chin, until they were staring eye-to-eye. "You're fiery, passionate, and adventurous. You're daring, sexy, and bold, all in one."

Erica didn't know how to react. "I can be tender and gentle, too," she whispered.

Tommi leaned forward and boldly kissed Erica. It was a long, involved, passionate kiss that left the two breathless when they parted lips. "Sometimes fiery and daring is good," Tommi said with a smile.

Erica kissed Tommi again, this time with even more passion. When they parted, Erica sat back, and her expression became sad. "I'm really going to miss you after you have your surgery."

"Surgery?" Tommi was confused.

"You know," Erica continued, her voice cracking. "To change back to Tom."

Tommi's eyes widened as she listened to Erica. "Oh, shit!" she swore as she realized that no-one knew, apart from Sara and Katie. "I completely forgot!" She shook her head. "I'm not changing back!" she said boldly. "I'm staying Tommi forever! There was so much happening, I _totally_ forgot to tell everybody!"

Erica launched herself at Tommi, kissing her with a more intense passion than she'd ever mustered. Erica's fingers ran through Tommi's hair and across her cheek. She held Tommi tightly as she continued to kiss her friend.

Eventually, the two paused. "That's the best news I've heard in ... forever!" Erica announced breathlessly. "There's only one thing that would make me happier!"

Tommi smiled sadly; she knew what Erica hoped to hear next. "Erica, I can't say it. I really like you. Damn, I think I love you. But I don't know. Not yet."

Erica nodded. "At least, there's hope, since you're staying Tommi. And you can bet I'll fight for your love every step of the way."

Tommi nodded. "I know you will. And I'll figure out what I want – sooner or later. But for now, how about we just enjoy dating?"

Erica felt the lump in her throat. Tommi hadn't told her no, but she hadn't said yes, either. She didn't know exactly where she stood, but at least she had a chance now.

After Tommi slipped out into the hall to go back to her own room, Erica stood, staring after the departing love of her life. "I'll be here, waiting for you, no matter how long you take," she said softly to herself. "I can't help it. You stole my heart."

Chapter 26 – Sisters

Tommi suddenly lifted her head off Brian's shoulder and turned toward him. "Would you please stop fidgeting," she whispered. "How am I supposed to feel comfortable and relaxed when you're squirming all over the place?"

"Sorry," Brian apologized in a hushed voice. Like Tommi, he didn't want to disturb the other patrons of the movie. "I guess I've got a few things on my mind."

Tommi lifted her head and kissed his cheek. "I thought you were supposed to be thinking only about me," she pouted softly.

"Maybe that's the problem," Brian countered. "Maybe I'm worrying too much about 'what ifs' and what your future holds, now that you've had the baby."

"Shhh!" Someone behind them firmly indicated his displeasure with Tommi and Brian's conversation.

"Sorry," Brian whispered an apology over his shoulder.

Tommi took the initiative and wrapped Brian's arm around her shoulder. Then she nestled her head back against his shoulder and chest, while she took his free hand in one of her hands.

Tommi knew instantly that Brian was nervous and tense. Still, she'd come prepared; she was wearing that wonderful perfume whose aroma wove an intoxicating spell around Brian every time she wore it. By moving her head a little bit, she made sure that Brian couldn't avoid its sweet vapors.

It seemed to be working; for the rest of the movie, Brian seemed to relax. Once the movie was over, however, his nervousness came back. As they exited the theater, Brian's posture was stiff, his movements wooden.

As Brian buckled his seat belt, Tommi decided to take some initiative. "Brian," she pleaded, "are you going to be like this all night?"

"Sorry," Brian apologized in an unconvincing tone. "Should I take you back to your dorm?"

Tommi shook her head. "How about some coffee and dessert?" she suggested.

A few minutes later, they were seated in their favorite all-night restaurant, and they had ordered."

"Brian," Tommi said softly, "there's something I need to tell you."

Brian stiffened visibly. "Oh?" he asked, his voice cracking as he anticipated bad news.

"It's not bad news. At least," Tommi corrected herself, "you should find part of it very good news."

"So it's a good news, bad news thing?"

Tommi sighed. "I guess it depends upon your point of view." She paused, trying to figure how to say what she intended to say. "There's something you've really wanted since we started dating. At least one of your wishes is coming true."

Brian's eyes widened. "You mean you're ..."

Tommi nodded. "Tommi Sue is staying," she said bluntly. "I've decided not to change back."

"So that means ...?" Brian was happy, but still uneasy. He was waiting for the bad news.

"It means that you have a chance," Tommi answered. "But there are ... complications."

"Such as?"

"I'm not sure of my sexuality," Tommi explained cautiously. "And," she looked down at her cup, "you really hurt me when you kissed Sara."

Brian nodded slowly as he sighed. "I know," he said, resigned to possibly losing Tommi over that one mistake. "I shouldn't have taken her out to dinner, and I certainly shouldn't have let

her kiss me." He hung his head in shame at his mistake, knowing that he'd really damaged their fragile relationship. "I wish there was some way I could undo all that mess."

The silence between them was awkward. Brian wanted to hear Tommi say that she forgave him. Tommi wasn't sure what to say; she was afraid that if she spoke, her hurt or anger would come out again, creating more problems.

After a few moments, a thought occurred to Brian. "Does that mean you were jealous?"

Tommi looked up sharply, staring at Brian for a few seconds, before she resumed her study of her half-empty coffee cup. Her head nodded slowly. "Yeah," she admitted, "I guess - a little bit."

"So ..." Brian stopped, unwilling to speculate further.

"I guess ... I like you more than I've ever admitted before. I guess I ... love you ... some." The last words were a faint mumble.

Brian did hear the words. He started to smile, but he saw Tommi's posture, and he had heard the tone of her voice. "But?"

Tommi shook her head. "But I don't know." She looked up, directly into Brian's eyes. "I'm not sure if I'm straight or gay," she said softly. "Sometimes, being with you feels so right and so natural, but sometimes, I feel attracted to girls." She shook her head sadly. "I can't commit until I know."

"Is that why you're dating Erica?" Brian asked slowly, his voice echoing the anguish in his heart that he had a serious rival for Tommi's love.

Surprise showed in Tommi's eyes. "You ... know?"

Brian nodded. "I suspected for a while, and, the other night, when I stopped by the dorm to see if you might want to go out for a walk, I saw you coming home with Erica."

Tommi nodded, her eyes starting to leak tears. "I ... care for both of you," she admitted. "I love both of you as dear friends. And more." She wiped the tears from her eyes, a futile gesture against her sorrow. "I have to know which way I am most comfortable. I need to know who I am." She looked down again, tears still trickling down her cheeks. "I know one of you is going to get hurt," she said softly. "I can't help it that you both fell in love with me."

Brian turned away quickly, and Tommi saw him lift his hand to his face. She knew that he had shed at least one tear over her. "I'm trying hard to understand," he said when he turned back to face her.

Tommi wiped at more of her own tears. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "Sometimes, when I think that I'm going to hurt you, I wish I'd have never had the procedure in the first place. That way, you would have never met me, and you wouldn't have fallen in love, and I wouldn't be hurting you." She wiped her cheeks again. "This isn't fair to you," she cried.

Something inside Brian felt great sympathy at her anguish. She did love him, of that he was suddenly quite certain. She was more concerned over how her actions hurt him than of her own pain. Brian reached a sympathetic hand across the table to take Tommi's, to offer some comfort to her, in the same way she wished to comfort him.

"I'm not giving up on you," Brian said. "I love you, and I'm not giving up on you. I know that you need to date Erica and me both to better understand yourself." He shook his head. "No matter how much I want to be, I can't be selfish and ask you to commit before you know. I can't hurt you by asking you to choose before you're ready."

"You're so sweet," Tommi said as she looked into his eyes. "You're so thoughtful and caring. You don't deserve the kind of trouble I'm causing you."

Brian tried to smile, to cut through the sadness. "This could all work out great, if, maybe, Erica is bi."

Tommi laughed through her tears at his wildly absurd proposition. "You could always ask her."

Brian's eyes widened. "No, thanks," he said quickly. "I heard how she treated a guy on Spring Break."

Tommi laugh sounded odd through her sob. "That was just Sara's wild story."

Brian shook his head. "I'm not going to take a chance. If you're done with your dessert, too, maybe I should take you back to your dorm?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah," she answered. "Or we could take a nice moonlit stroll around the fountains, and maybe sit under the stars for a bit."

Brian smiled. "You are a romantic."

"One of my faults, I guess."

"It's one of the many things I like about you." Brian stood and offered his hand to Tommi. "And I like the idea of a moonlit stroll. Anything to spend more time with you."

The girls were sprawled around Tommi's room, as was customary, having their Thursday night bull session. Even Katie joined in, since the semester was winding down, and she was, for once, ahead on her projects and papers.

Christine seemed a bit down. "Finals start next week," she announced needlessly.

The reaction was far from positive. "Why'd you have to remind us?" Ashley pouted.

"Oh, like it's suddenly a state secret, and nobody's supposed to know?" Christine defended herself. "It's just ... another school year almost done."

"Yeah," Katie echoed. "I'm going to stay here this summer. I've got an internship at the Morris clinic, and then I start on my Master's degree in the fall."

"You're a glutton for punishment," Erica said with a laugh. "Isn't one degree enough?"

Katie smiled. "At least, I'll be around to help Sara this summer."

Kim thought for a moment. "You're due in ... October?" she asked Sara.

Sara shook her head. "Early November."

Linda whistled. "You're going through the summer pregnant? Girl, I'm glad I'm not in your shoes!"

Sara shrugged. "I'll be okay. I'll be taking summer school while I'm here, so that'll keep me inside most of the day."

Tommi sighed. "I'm going to miss all the fun. I'm going home to take a summer off. I still need time to rest and get my strength back."

Katie laughed. "You just want to lounge around the pool and have Mom wait on you hand and foot all summer!"

"You're just jealous," Tommi rebutted.

After more discussion of summer plans, Katie glanced at Tommi. "Don't you have something you need to say?" she asked Tommi.

Tommi glanced around. All eyes were focused on her. Everyone's curiosity had been piqued, and they all wondered what the new announcement was. All the girls had been betting on whether Tommi would stay, or whether Tom would return.

Strangely, Ashley had been the most insistent, or hopeful, depending on how one looked at it, that Tom would return. When pressed late one night, Ashley confessed to Sara that she was hoping Tommi would go back to being Tom. He'd learned so much about being a woman that he'd be the ideal guy. As a guy, Tom would be very sensitive to the needs of his girlfriend or wife. Sara laughed; she accused Ashley of trying to plot to get Tom as a boyfriend. All Ashley could do was to admit that it was her hope and dream.

Tommi looked uneasy at having to speak. "I've been spending a lot of time considering my future after I had the second baby," she said. "With everything that was going on, I kind of forgot to tell anybody. Especially after" She paused, looking at the floor, while memories of the emergency flashed through her brain. After a couple of awkward seconds, she looked up. "Anyway, I decided, and Tom isn't coming back - ever. I'm Tommi Sue forever."

For a few seconds, the girls pondered her words, wondering with shocked expressions if they'd heard her correction. Erica was grinning, since she already knew what Tommi had decided.

"You mean ... you're staying Tommi?" Ashley finally blurted. She sounded disappointed.

"Yes," Tommi confirmed, grinning from ear to ear. "I'm Tommi, now and forever!"

After a whole bunch of happy tears and hugs, Christine's curiosity got the better of her. "When did you decide?"

"Just before Spring Break," Tommi said.

"And you didn't tell us?" Linda exclaimed with faux pain in her voice.

"Things got pretty hectic," Tommi confessed sheepishly. "I was pretty busy, after all. And I didn't quite know how to tell you all."

Ashley noticed Erica's grin. "You knew!" she accused Erica. "You knew, and you didn't tell us, either!"

Erica laughed. "I only found out the other night," she explained, "and I was sworn to secrecy."

"A little 'pillow talk', huh?" Kim joked, and then had to dodge real pillows thrown by both Tommi and Erica.

"So what happens? For your future, I mean?"

Tommi shrugged, a thin smile on her lips. "Job opportunities for female engineers are better than for men. It's actually a benefit. The clinic and Dad's lawyers are handling all the paperwork to make it legal and permanent. Within a month or two, I'll be permanently, completely, legally Tommi Sue Snyder."

Katie smiled and gave her sister a hug. "I really like the sound of that – Tommi Sue Snyder. I'm so glad you decided to change your name, too."

"Wow!" Dianne commented. "Talk about a busy semester! You decide to stay a girl, you get adopted, you have the baby the hard way, and you're changing your name!"

"When did you have any time for studying?" Ashley joked.

Tommi looked at Sara. "I think Sara has an announcement, too."

Sara glowered at Tommi for putting her on the spot. "We're both having our names legally changed. Once the paperwork is done, I'll be Sara Louise Snyder." She received the congratulations well, considering that she felt upstaged by Tommi.

"Katie, are you still awake?" Tommi called softly.

"Yeah," Katie answered.

"Was it my imagination, or was Sara upset tonight?"

Katie sighed. "You did put her on the spot."

"I just wanted to share a special moment with our friends," Tommi protested.

Katie propped herself on one elbow, staring across the darkened room toward Tommi's bed. "You could have had one announcement about staying Tommi," she began, "and let Sara have the spotlight about the name change."

Tommi winced at Katie's words. "I suppose," she muttered.

"Don't take this wrong," Katie said hesitantly, "but when you get excited about something, you tend to get diarrhea of the mouth."

"Do I?" Tommi asked after thinking for a moment. "I know I get excited, but"

"You could have let Sara tell the news about your name changes. You might have let her be in the spotlight over that one, so she doesn't feel like she's always in your shadow."

"Does she feel like that? Did she tell you?" Tommi asked softly.

Katie shrugged, a gesture unseen in the dark room. "I don't know. I'm just telling you what she might think. It's what I'd feel if I were in her shoes."

"I didn't think of that," Tommi said. "Maybe you need to kick me or something to get me to stop talking."

"Or something," Katie chuckled. "Now let's get to sleep. We've both got early tests tomorrow."

"One more thing."

"What is it?" Katie sounded exasperated at Tommi's need to talk this late.

"Ashley seemed ... disappointed, didn't she?" Tommi suggested.

"Yeah, I noticed that."

"I wonder why? She and I were great friend and great roommates last summer. I thought she'd be as happy as everyone else."

"Maybe you should talk to her," Katie replied.

Tommi frowned. "You know something, don't you?"

Katie debated herself on playing dumb, or pleading that it was too late. In the end, she realized that Tommi wouldn't shut up, until Katie told what she knew. "Ashley had a crush on you."

"I don't get it. She's straight."

Katie laughed softly. "It's not like that. I think she really likes you as a friend, and she was hoping that you'd change back."

Tommi's eyes were wide with surprise. "You mean ...?"

"Yeah. If you had changed back, I think you'd have found her pursuing you for romantic purposes."

Tommi wrinkled her nose in a mixture of disgust and bewilderment. "That's ... weird!"

Katie laughed again. "Think about it. If you had changed back, you'd be probably the best guy in the world at understanding and being sensitive to women. You've proven that you like children, and she is very interested in being a mother. And you and Ashley are already friends, which would be a good basis for a romantic relationship."

"Oh." Tommi thought for a moment. "I suppose that makes sense in a kind of strange way." She thought again. "Why is it that I keep hurting people who get too close to me?"

"You're just a very likeable person, and people fall in love with you. There's nothing you can do about it."

One bright June day, early in the summer semester, Sara felt a peculiar twinge in her abdomen as she sat down on the toilet. Almost immediately, she realized that it was something to do with the pregnancy, something that she'd never experienced before.

The spotted blood on the tissue paper truly got her attention. She immediately cleaned herself, and then after washing her hands quickly, hurried down the hall. Ashley drove her to the clinic in record time.

Dr. Tina did an ultrasound, and a pelvic exam. She did some blood work, as well. At the end of all the testing, Sara was confined to bed rest in the clinic while she got some hormone shots to stabilize her pregnancy.

It didn't help. The next day, Sara miscarried.

"Thanks for stopping by," Sara said as she lay in her bed. The clinic was normally a very happy place; this was one of the rare exceptions.

Brian smiled. "I thought you'd like to see a friendly face," he said. From behind his back, he produced a vase of bright, summery flowers and placed it on her bedside table. "And I thought some color might help brighten your day."

Sara looked at the flowers, and she felt a tear well up in the corner of her eye. "Thanks," she said softly.

"I wish Tommi was here," Brian said simply. "She's a lot better at listening and helping than I am."

Sara gave a half-hearted laugh. "And here I thought you were to talk about me, not about how much you miss her."

Brian seemed surprised. "I didn't figure that she would be an appropriate subject right now," he explained quickly. "How are you doing?"

Sara shrugged. The life seemed to have vanished from her, the spark in her eyes extinguished by her grief. "I don't know," she said honestly. "I really don't know." She started crying – again. "I'm a failure," she bawled. "I cost a baby his life because I'm a failure as a woman!"

Brian ignored her hysterics. Rachel had warned him that Sara was going to experience significant grief and guilt. He leaned over the bed and put his hand on Sara's cheek. "You are not a failure," Brian said firmly, but reassuringly. "Rachel and Dr. Tina told me that there was nothing you could do!"

"But I couldn't carry a baby!" Sara cried. "I can't ..."

Brian shook his head. "Most miscarriages are caused by problems with the baby, not the mother," he explained softly. He wiped gently at her tears. "It wasn't your fault. Now are you going to believe Rachel and Dr. Tina and Dr. Phillips, or are you going to doubt yourself?"

Sara wanted to believe him. "I suppose you did some research of your own, too?" she said, trying desperately to sound light-hearted, but not quite succeeding.

Brian blushed. "Well, yeah." He glanced around, found the catch, and lowered the bed rail so he could sit on the edge of the bed.

Sara sat up and wrapped her arms around Brian. He awkwardly hugged her; he knew she needed comfort and reassurance. He could feel the wetness of her tears on his shoulder.

"I never cried when Ma died," Sara said softly. "Not like this. I haven't felt like this since ... Dad ... died."

Brian closed his eyes momentarily, trying to imagine the sense of loss that Sara had felt. No matter how much he wanted to empathize with Sara, he couldn't. He had never experienced such a significant loss. "I can't begin to understand," he said. "But I know it hurts."

Sara hesitated as she stared at her phone. She'd already tried two other numbers with no success. She started to dial the number, but then hung up. After a few seconds, she started again, but, once more, she hung up. On the third attempt, she kept her nerve and let the phone start ringing.

"Hi. It's me."

"I know it's late. I just ... I need to talk to someone."

"No, they're not here. It's just ... me." Sara was sniffing some as tears threatened to overwhelm her.

"I ... I ..." Sara broke down crying. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I ... I can't ... stop."

"Okay," she sniffled. "Okay. I can ... meet you ... at the door." She wiped at her tears. "I'll see you in ... in a few minutes."

Sara hung up and let her phone fall to her bed. She wiped at the unending stream of tears, as she convulsed with sobs. After a few minutes, she rose, wrapped her robe around her, and padded out the door, still crying and still wiping at her tears. She rode the elevator down to the lobby, walked down the hall, and stopped at the side door, where she peered through the glass into the dark night. Eventually, she saw a figure approaching, and, as soon as she recognized Brian, she opened the door.

Without waiting, Sara wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder as she continued to cry. For several long minutes, Brian just held her while Sara gave vent to her grief. When she let go of the embrace, she looked up, her reddened eyes showing her gratitude. "Thanks for coming," she murmured.

Brian nodded. "No problem."

"No problem?" Sara asked, half laughing and half crying. "It's the middle of the night, and you had to come running over, and you say, 'no problem'?"

"What are friends for?" Brian replied.

"Can we go inside? I don't ... want to be alone right now."

Brian nodded. "Sure." He followed Sara back to her room.

Ashley and Sara had set up their beds in bunks, leaving one side of the room empty. This spot, they had filled with a sofa. Sara sat down on one end of the sofa, and Brian eased himself down on the other. "I ... sometimes I get scared when I'm alone," Sara explained, still wiping at tears. "I feel like ... nothing will ever be right."

Brian saw the helpless, vulnerable girl, and he knew he was alone with her in a situation that others could gossip about. But he also knew that she needed help, and, right now, there was no-one around to help her except him. He scooted closer and wrapped his arm around her. She, in turn, leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I remember my little sister used to get scared of being alone sometimes," Brian said softly. "I used to hold her, so she felt safe and secure. Is that what you're feeling?"

Sara looked up at Brian. "Yeah," she said. The tears were slowing. "Your little sister was lucky to have a big brother like you." She looked back down, staring blankly across the room. "I was trying to sleep," Sara said after a long silence. "And I kept having nightmares about" She didn't have to finish.

Brian reached across, and with his fingers, gently moved Sara's hair back off her face and behind her ear. "Shhh," he said softly, as he rubbed her cheek tenderly. "You're going to be okay." In his heart, he wondered if he was lying. Sara had been having a lot of counseling with Rachel, yet she was still having severe attacks of grief.

For a long time, they sat in silence in the mostly-dark room, with Brian holding Sara and stroking her cheek. Eventually, her breathing became slow and regular, and Brian figured she'd gone to sleep.

After a while longer, he let his hand drop from her cheek, and he slid it under her legs. In a maneuver he'd learned from caring for his little sister, he scooped her up onto his lap, her head still resting on his shoulder. Slowly, carefully, so as not to disturb the sleeping girl, he shifted forward, until he was on the edge of the sofa. He stood slowly, thinking that, when he used to care for his little sister, she had been much smaller than Sara. Fortunately, it was only a few steps to the bed, where he gently lay Sara down.

As she was placed on the bed, a startled cry escaped her lips. Her head snapped up, and she looked around, confused.

Brian sat down beside her. "Shhh," Brian said softly, as he stroked her cheek again. He sat down on the edge of the bed next to Sara. "It's okay."

"Please don't leave me," she pleaded, as she laid her head back on her pillow, her voice small and frightened.

Brian sighed. He knew he shouldn't be there, especially overnight, but Sara needed someone. He rubbed her cheek again. "I'm here. It's okay."

Sara settled down again, slowly drifting back into a fitful sleep, with Brian watching over her and comforting her.

A shaft of sunlight stabbed Brian's face, and he winced. He tried to pull his arm to block the ray, but it felt trapped. As the fog of sleep lifted, he recalled where he was.

They were in Sara's bed. She was sleeping soundly, resting her head on his chest, pinning his arm under her. Her arm was draped around him, her hand dangling free. He was dressed in the same jeans and T-shirt he'd pulled on, when Sara called. She was still in her nightshirt and robe.

Brian let his head slump back down on the pillow. There wasn't much he could do, until Sara woke. Eventually, however, his bladder warned him that he needed to get up. He began to shift, trying to wriggle out from beneath her.

At the disturbance, she stirred. Sara stretched, then, realizing that Brian was beneath her, she rolled off him and onto her back. "I guess I wasn't dreaming," she said in a soft voice.

Brian shook his head. "No, you weren't."

She lifted her lips and kissed him, just a bit, then more and more eagerly, until they were locked in an emotional exchange.

After a few moments, Brian broke the kiss. He felt awkward. This was Tommi's little sister he was kissing. And yet

"Thank you for being there for me," Sara whispered as she kissed his lips again. She was eager to kiss him more, but he backed his head away to make it impossible.

Brian felt severely conflicted. He pictured Tommi in his mind to help clear his thoughts, thoughts of passion with Sara. "I'm glad I could help."

After a moment, Sara asked awkwardly, "Um, did we ... um, you know?"

Brian smiled. "No. I behaved myself."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed.

Brian was surprised. "Did you ... dream that we did?"

Sara's crimson blush betrayed her secret. She looked down toward his chest, avoiding his eyes. "It seemed so real. The dream, I mean. I guess I wasn't sure."

Brian slowly sat up. "I think I need to use the restroom first," he said. "And then maybe we need to talk?"

Sara nodded mutely. She'd come to the same conclusion.

A few minutes later, they were seated on the sofa. "Sara," Brian began, "I ... we shouldn't ... that is, I shouldn't kiss you," he stammered.

Sara wasn't even looking at him. She nodded her agreement. "Yeah," she muttered.

"I'm crazy about Tommi," Brian continued, sounding like he was trying to convince himself as much as Sara.

"I know."

"This looks ... wrong," Brian explained. "What would she say if she saw us now?"

Sara nodded slowly. "I know. It'd tear her up." She looked at the floor, shaking her head. "I just made my life a lot more complicated," Sara finally said.

Brian stared at her, confused. "I don't understand."

"You remember the first day we met? When you started flirting with me?"

"Yes. And?"

Sara sighed. "I guess I got a little bit of a crush on you then."

"Oh."

"Silly, isn't it?" Sara tried to laugh at herself.

"Not really," Brian replied. "Actually, for a guy who didn't date much in high school, it's kind of flattering."

"I know I was pushing so much for you to be dating Tommi because I know you'd be good for her," Sara continued. "But at the same time, I felt a little ... jealous."

"Sara, please don't," Brian begged her to stop.

Sara didn't listen. "I've started to care for you," she admitted. "Last night, you were so tender and comforting. I can't help it. I've fallen in love with you." She looked up at Brian, her eyes moist and sad and full of love.

Brian looked at her, before he turned away suddenly. "You're trying to mess up my life, too, aren't you?" he asked. "Because I" He stopped abruptly, afraid to complete the sentence he'd started, even though his meaning was obvious.

Sara sighed. "I can't hurt my sister." She shook her head. "I think you'd better go. Before" She left the sentence unfinished, but her meaning was obvious.

Brian nodded and stood. "If you need anything, call me," Brian offered as he stopped in the doorway. "But" He looked down, not knowing quite what he wanted to say. Instead, he walked out of Sara's room, closing the door behind him.

Sara wiped at her tears. "Don't worry, Tommi," she said to herself, "I promise I won't get in your way. No matter how much it hurts, I'll stay out of the way."

"Why not?" Sara demanded, her arms crossed defiantly, as she sat staring disapprovingly at Rachel.

Rachel had seen this reaction before. "Sara," she began, trying to sound very calm and compassionate, "I understand your desire. But it's the Foundation's policy to wait a bit, just to make sure you have time to heal."

Sara shook her head angrily, scowling. "I've had time!" she countered sharply. "I know you need hosts desperately. I'm ready."

Rachel sighed. She'd seen this too many times – a host mother miscarries, then she either demands to immediately try again or she withdraws and is never seen again. Sara was certainly in the first category. "You had a very traumatic experience," Rachel explained to bolster her argument. "According to every standard of clinical psychology, you need time to heal emotionally, to grieve, before you try again."

"Fuck that!" Sara cursed loudly. "I want to do another one now!"

Katie, sitting on one side of Sara, put her arm on Sara's. "Why don't you listen to what Rachel has to say," she said, trying to mollify Sara's frustration.

Sara turned to Tommi, on her other side. "What do you think?" she demanded. "I suppose you think I should give up on the whole idea!" Her words dripped with sarcasm and scorn.

Tommi glanced nervously at Katie; she'd never seen Sara so upset before. "Sara," she said, her voice quavering as she tried to remain calm, "this is your decision, not mine. What I think shouldn't matter." The words were incredibly difficult to say; every fiber of her being wanted her to scream that, of course, Sara shouldn't try another one. Tommi had been coached at length by Katie, and she somehow managed to keep her true feelings in check.

Sara's eyes widened; she had expected that Tommi would be most vociferous in trying to get her to slow down and wait. Slowly, she turned to Tina.

Tina took her cue. "I'm with Rachel," she said simply. "As a doctor, I know that you need time to let your hormones to re-stabilize. Even if you demanded to start today, there's not a doctor in the program that would even think about another transfer for at least three months."

"So I'm done," Sara said bitterly. "I'm no good as a woman."

Rachel sighed, but tried to be positive. "No one is saying that," she chided gently. "If you knew the statistics about"

"I've read the damned statistics!" Sara snapped back. "I know how common it is!"

Rachel allowed her to vent before continuing. "If you've studied the statistics, you know that, on a second pregnancy, you are no more likely to miscarry than on the first. You know that the chances of a successful pregnancy after a miscarriage actually seem to be a tiny bit higher."

Sara digested the lecture without blinking; her eyes were narrowed in anger, and her lips were tightly pursed. She turned to the one last person in the room. "What do you think?" she asked.

Brian wondered why he was present; he felt awkward in this discussion, but, since he was Sara's friend, and he had seen her through many episodes of distress and depression, he hadn't tried to weasel out of being there. "I agree with Rachel," he said slowly. "I think that you still have a little grief to work through, and that your body isn't ready."

"Fine!" Sara snarled. "I'll wait, like you're all insisting. And, meanwhile, I get to deal with feeling like a failure, too! Does that factor into your statistics and psychology?" she demanded of Rachel. She glowered at the floor in front of her in anger.

Katie rose from her chair and stepped between Tommi and Sara. "Would you two just knock it off?" she demanded angrily.

"She started it," Sara snapped back.

Tommi got an innocent, "who, me?" expression; she was bewildered as to how the argument had actually started. The sisters were just sitting in Katie's apartment when Sara took one of Tommi's comments wrongly and began to snipe at her.

Katie had had enough. "Shut up, both of you!" she ordered. "You're both sniping at each other, so it's not either one of your faults. I'm sick of it!"

"Sorry," Tommi apologized to Katie. "I'll try to keep it down."

"No!" Katie roared. "You two have been practically at each other's throats, since before spring semester ended. I've had enough! It's way past time to get to the bottom of all of this and to get it behind us."

"Sheesh," Sara grumbled. "Now you're sounding like Mom."

Katie turned on her. "And with good reason. If she was here, you'd get the same lecture! Now we're going to get all of what's bothering each of you in the open, so we can move on. Got it?"

Sara nodded. "Yes."

"Got it," Tommi added softly, still glaring at Sara.

"You're both hurting inside!" Katie chided them. "The problem is, you're both so focused on your own pain that you can't see that your sister is hurting, too! Part of your pain is that you're terrified of losing the special relationship you had, but you don't know how to get past that pain and reconcile!"

Tommi and Sara just exchanged sour looks.

Katie sat down. "Tommi," she began, "I know you feel unappreciated for what you've done for Sara. I know you wanted to help, and instead you feel like your effort was thrown in your face. Right?"

Tommi didn't stop glaring at Sara. "Yeah," she admitted softly.

"And I bet you're blaming yourself for what happened to Sara, aren't you?"

Tommi nodded. "She wasn't supposed to know about the scholarship. I just wanted to help her get out of ... that place."

Katie turned to Sara. "Sara, when you found out, did you thank Tommi?"

"No," Sara said with a frown. "She was"

Katie cut her off. "No. You'll get your chance. Do you think it hurt Tommi that you didn't say thank you after you found out?"

Sara closed her eyes and nodded very slightly. "But ..."

"We'll get to that one, too, she reminded Sara. "So maybe, Tommi thought you were ungrateful? And that hurt her more?"

Sara's eyes opened as she mulled over that angle. She hadn't considered it before. "Maybe"

Katie turned to Tommi. "Tommi, did you ever consider that Sara might feel like she was being manipulated and controlled again, just like she had to deal with ... back there?"

Tommi shook her head. "No."

"Did you think that maybe Sara would look on the scholarship as you thinking that she couldn't take care of herself? That you still thought she was a helpless little kid?"

Tommi shook her head again.

"Would you have considered it a sign that you couldn't take care of yourself?" Katie asked.

Tommi started to answer, but she paused. Her head lowered. "I guess so. I didn't think of that."

"No, you didn't," Katie chided. "You barged into her life without asking, did something that you thought was selfless, and ended up hurting Sara, even though you were trying to help."

Tommi nodded mutely.

"How did you feel when Sara kept trying to get you to go out with Brian?" Katie asked. "I suppose you felt like she was trying to manipulate you into staying a girl, right?"

"Yeah," Tommi acknowledged. "It was just the same as when Ma tried to manipulate us."

"Sara, did you consider how Tommi might feel to your efforts at being Cupid?"

Sara shook her head silently.

"But you were doing it, firstly, because you wanted to keep a sister, and, secondly, because you wanted Tommi to be happy, right?"

"That's all I wanted!" Sara exclaimed softly.

"But you didn't think of how Tommi would react, did you? That, maybe, she'd feel the same way as you, that she was being manipulated by someone?"

Sara shook her head.

"Okay," Katie said. "I'm going to let the two of you explain your feelings to each other. I'm going to referee. Rule number one – you cannot accuse your sister of ill intent. You can only tell her how you felt about something she did, and why you felt that way. Rule number two – when one of you is speaking, the other one cannot interrupt. Rule number three – you have to end each statement with some positive comment about your sister. Got it? "

Tommi nodded. Sara said, "Yeah."

Tommi started. "Sara," she began.

Katie interrupted her. "Look at Sara when you're talking, not at the floor."

"Sara," Tommi restarted, gazing uneasily at Sara. "I only wanted to help you get out of ... there. When you found out, you seemed a little angry, and that hurt me. It made me feel like you didn't appreciate what I was trying to do. It made me feel like you didn't really appreciate me!"

"And something positive?" Katie coached.

"I was never so happy with our family, until after you and I started getting close. I knew I'd do anything to keep you happy."

"Your turn."

Sara looked at the floor for several seconds before turning to Tommi. "When I found out what you did, I was both happy and angry. I felt like you were setting up to control me, like Ma and Liz used to do. At the same time, I was so touched that you'd do something like that for me. I guess I forgot to tell you the last part. I really do appreciate it."

Tommi spoke again. "When you had problems, I felt like it was all my fault. I felt like, if I'd been more careful, you wouldn't have found out, and you'd about be happy and innocent. I felt like I failed. But I still love you."

Sara looked down. "I feel like it's my fault that you nearly died with the second baby," Sara said, her voice cracking. "If you hadn't done that for me, we wouldn't have nearly lost you. I blamed myself, and I guess it came out as anger directed at you. I was so afraid that I was going to lose you, and I couldn't stand the thought, because you're so special to me. And then I had my miscarriage, and I felt like a total failure. I think I started resenting you, because you'd had two babies, and I couldn't even have one. I felt ... inadequate and inferior. I shouldn't have taken my anger and disappointment out on you. I'm sorry. You're such a caring and giving person that I wanted to be like you."

Tommi paused, thinking. She hadn't considered that Sara might blame herself for Tommi almost dying. "I'm sorry," she said earnestly. "I'm so sorry for everything. I love you, and I really don't like feeling so angry and isolated from you. I need you." She slid across the sofa toward Sara and wrapped her in a bear hug.

"I'm so sorry, too," Sara added. "I appreciate you more than I sometimes say. I love you."

After several moments, the sisters broke apart. Tommi felt that there was something else that needed to be said. "Is there something about" She cut off when she felt a kick in her calf. She glanced at Katie, who was grimly shaking her head, indicating that Tommi should just shut up.

Tommi decided to heed Katie, before she got kicked again.

Sara had gone back to her own dorm room, leaving Katie and Tommi in the apartment that Katie had rented for the summer. Since Tommi was just up from Florida on a short trip, Katie had insisted that Tommi stay with her, rather than get a hotel room. It would give them time to talk, Katie had said.

"So, what do you think of Brian?" Katie got right to the point.

Tommi shrugged. "I like him."

"And do you love him?"

Tommi thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"But?"

Tommi grinned as she shook her head. "You know me too well. I don't know if I could settle down and raise a family with him."

"What about Sara?" Katie seemingly changed the subject.

"I thought we went through all of that."

"No, not you and Sara. How do you think Sara feels about Brian?"

Tommi's eyes widened. "Sara ... and Brian?" She shook her head. "I ... I never thought of that."

"You know that Brian helped Sara a lot right after her miscarriage, don't you?"

Tommi shook her head. "No, I didn't know that." She considered the thought. "I know she always thought very highly of Brian. But ... are you suggesting that she fell for him?"

Katie shrugged. "I'm not sure. I think she might have."

"Wow!" Tommi whistled. "_That's_" a new wrinkle."

"Yeah. And how are you going to handle it?"

Tommi sighed. "I don't know."

"How about Erica?" Katie asked.

"Same thing. I love her, too. I don't know how to choose."

"You better start thinking," Katie warned her. "You may be competing with your sister for Brian's affection, and, if you make either Erica or Brian wait too long before you make up your mind, you may find they're no longer available."

Tommi stopped by the clinic as the new fall semester started.

Suzie was ecstatic to see her. "How are you?" Suzie asked happily as she gave Tommi a quick hug.

Tommi shrugged. "I've had a busy summer," she explained.

"Tanning and lounging by the pool, I hear," Suzie kidded her.

Tommi laughed. "Lounging is hard work!"

"So, is this just a social call?"

Tommi smiled. "Actually, I wanted to talk to Rachel, if she's available."

Suzie smiled knowingly. "Are you thinking of hosting another baby?"

Tommi nodded. "Yeah. But I'll probably wait a bit, at least until Sara has hers."

"Well, I know Rachel's free, since her lunch appointment cancelled. Go on back."

Tommi walked back and knocked on Rachel's door. "Hi," she called into the office.

Rachel looked up, and then beamed with joy. She practically bounded across the floor to embrace Tommi. "How was your summer?"

Tommi nodded. "It was okay. Very restful."

"Good. That's just what you needed. You look much better than when you left for the summer. The rest was good for you. So what brings you by? Just visiting?" Rachel indicated they should sit on the sofa.

"Not entirely," Tommi answered easily as she sat down.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I'm planning on signing up to be a host again."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Rachel beamed. "Of course, you know that any pregnancy will be considered high-risk after what you went through. That'll mean a lot more attention by the staff."

"The staff that I so enjoy visiting with?" Tommi laughed. "The staff that pampers me until I almost can't stand it? I don't think it'll be a hardship. But I want to wait, until after Sara finishes her pregnancy."

Rachel smiled. "That's very considerate."

"So, when is she going to start?" Tommi asked, curious.

"You know I'm not supposed to tell you about other clients," Rachel chided her. "But, since you're family, she's on the hormones. She's due for her transfer in about two weeks. We're going to give her an older baby, to minimize the possibility of transfer shock to the baby. Tina wants to get a baby in the eighteen to twenty-week age range."

Tommi smiled. "Good. At least she won't be carrying a baby through the summer." She sighed. "That was _so_ uncomfortable!"

"Hi," Dr. Tina called from the doorway. "Can we come in?"

Tommi was confused by the word 'we', until she saw Tina's volunteer assistant, standing behind her.

"Sure," Rachel said with a smile. "We were just visiting."

Dr. Tina strode into the office and sat down in one of the wing chairs. Her assistant walked over to Tommi, bent down, and hugged her warmly.

"Sara's a great assistant," Dr. Tina beamed. "She's so attentive and curious."

Sara was blushing. "I'm just an assistant go-fer," she said modestly.

Dr. Tina put her arm around Sara's shoulder. "Do you want to tell Tommi, or should I?"

Sara seemed surprised. "I'll tell her," she said.

Tommi was confused. "Tell me what?" She glanced at Rachel and Dr. Tina, both of whom were grinning.

Sara smiled. "I was accepted into the Foundation's medical scholarship program. I'm going pre-med, and then I'll go on to med school to become a doctor!"

Tommi leaped up and hugged her sister. "Congratulations! That's great!" she exclaimed happily. "You're going to make a great doctor!"

"It's going to take quite a few years," Sara said cautiously. "And I have to get good grades, so I'll be studying a lot."

Tommi shook her head. "You're smart. You'll do fantastic."

Dr. Tina beamed with pride. "I hope that, one day soon, Sara will have an office just down the hall from mine."

Chapter 27 – Epilogue

Three sisters milled about the room among the other girls. Two of the sisters were wearing outfits that matched the others – deep maroon dresses with puffed lace sleeves and handkerchief hems, and their hair was stylishly done. All of the girls' makeup was applied perfectly, as befit the occasion.

The third sister was the exception. She wore a long satin gown, with a lace over-bodice and a plunging neckline. Her long sleeves were lace, puffed at the shoulders, ruffled at the wrist, and the dress spilled down behind her on the floor. The lacy bodice was decorated with faux pearls. Everything was white, except the rubies in the ruby and diamond necklace the girls wore – the necklace that matched those of her sisters.

Katie smiled at the girl in white. "You make a lovely bride," she said to her sister. "I'm so happy for you."

The third sister grinned. "You're so beautiful. I'm so glad things worked out this way."

The bride blushed. "You two are just saying that."

Ronnie sidled up to her daughter and gave her a peck on the cheek. "No, they aren't. You are lovely!"

"I wish Ashley could have been here," the bride said wistfully.

The bridesmaid laughed. "So do I. And I know she really wanted to be here. It wasn't her fault that her babies decided to arrive two weeks early."

"With her nice, round, pregnant belly, she'd have fit in perfectly with a lot of our friends from the clinic!"

The bridesmaid laughed at the mental image. "She wanted a loving husband and her own babies. It looks like she got her fairy-tale ending."

"I don't know about that," Katie interjected. "Two would have been enough for me without adding twins! She's going to be one very busy mom!"

The bridesmaid grinned broadly. "She already is busy, and she's loving it!"

A knock sounded on the door of the bride's room. Katie opened the door a crack, and when she recognized the person knocking, she smiled. "Hi, Rachel," she greeted warmly.

"I wanted to say, 'hi' before things get started," Rachel explained. "But if everyone is too busy..." Not unexpectedly, Rachel was visibly pregnant – again.

Katie stepped aside so she could enter. "Not too busy for you! You had a big role in getting us here today."

Tommi and Sara practically bounded over to Rachel. Tommi wrapped her in an enthusiastic hug. "I'm so glad you could make it." She stepped back and gave Rachel a once-over. "Look at you! What is this, number seven or eight?"

Rachel's smile had the glow of a happily pregnant woman. "Actually, it's only number six. With all the paperwork and other responsibilities of being director, I had to slow down a bit.

But, at least, I made 'Ace' status with the last one!" She smiled at Tommi. "You should do one more. You know the benefits of being an 'Ace', don't you? Host five babies, and in return, you get lifetime free health care at any of our clinics or hospitals, lifetime use of the spas, special recognition in our 'Hall of Fame', one prepaid vacation,"

Tommi laughed. "I know, I know! You don't need to sell me on the idea. It is tempting, but right now, my life is... hectic. On the other hand, you know I enjoy being pregnant, so I haven't discounted helping another one or two babies – after I get a few things settled."

"Okay. I'll talk to you later." Rachel said with a wink. She looked at the three sisters. "Everything looks so beautiful," she complimented.

"I'm so glad you're here!" Sara added as she hugged Rachel in her turn.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world. You two are very special to me."

Tommi had a mischievous smile. "Because I was such a good client?"

Rachel laughed. "Yes, but at times, you were one of my most challenging clients!" When Sara laughed, Rachel added in a scolding but friendly manner, "You weren't exactly a walk in the park, either, my dear!"

"You're pretty special to me, too" Sara acknowledged. "To both of us." She glanced around at the other girls. "I've got to finish getting myself ready," she excused herself, before scurrying off to continue her preparations. She knew Rachel was here primarily to talk to Tommi.

Rachel turned to Tommi. "I just wanted to make sure that you know how special a friend you are, and how much I respect you for everything that you've done. You are a very special person."

Tommi blushed. "I really don't think" she started to protest.

Rachel pooh-poohed her objections. "Nonsense. Do you know many lives you've touched, or how many people you've helped since we first met? It's almost ... magical. You've affected so many lives in very positive ways."

Tommi's cheeks were rosy, and not from her makeup. "It wasn't anything special," Tommi tried to say humbly.

Rachel would have none of it. "Nothing special, my foot! You gave four babies a chance at life! And shall we start with the other lives you've touched? To start with, there was Jillian and her father – you helped them become a family again. And that sorority girl ... Stephanie? You helped her find her faith again. Let's not forget Sara. You helped your mother find comfort after years of heartache. You helped me! Then there was that girl who was about to commit suicide. And ..."

"Okay, okay," Tommi interrupted, beet red from embarrassment. "I give up! Maybe I have helped a few people!"

"Tommi," Rachel scolded her in a friendly manner, "You're like an angel who is always at the right place at the right time."

Tommi shrugged, helpless before Rachel's onslaught of compliments. "I just like to help," she protested meekly.

"And you succeeded magnificently!" Rachel said as she hugged Tommi again. "By any measure, you're a very special young lady!" She gave Tommi a hug and a quick kiss on her cheek. "I wish we had more clients like you."

Tommi had an 'aw, shucks', expression. "I'm just glad I can help a little."

Rachel turned and glanced at Sara. "Both of you have been wonderful friends. I'm so glad you invited me to help you celebrate. Thank you – for everything." She wiped at her cheeks. "Now look – I'm already crying, and I'm not supposed to do that until the wedding actually starts! I'd better go, you can finish getting ready. There are a lot of people you two don't want to keep waiting!" She gave Tommi another quick hug, turned, and walked out of the bride's room, pausing in the doorway to smile at Sara and Tommi once more.

Tommi walked over and hugged Sara tightly. "She's right, you know. You are very special – and not because of what you did as a host mother. You're a very special friend and sister," Tommi said, wiping at her tears. "Darn! I'm going to smudge my makeup!"

Sara laughed. "You are, too. I'm so glad you're my big sister. Until a few years ago, I'd never have dreamed we'd be doing this together."

Tommi smiled. "Neither did I. But I'm glad. It wouldn't be the same any other way."

Katie interrupted her sisters. "Dad is outside waiting."

Tommi and Sara both smiled. "I still love the sound of that," Tommi admitted with a grin. "Mom and Dad. I don't think I'll ever get tired of saying it or hearing it."

Ronnie hugged Tommi and Sara. "And we'll never get tired of hearing you say it," she promised. She was crying tears of happiness.

"It was a little hard to get past Roger and Ronnie," Sara admitted. "After all this time, I still get choked up a little every time I say Mom or Dad." Her voice nearly cracked with emotion. She hugged Ronnie. "I love you, Mom."

Tommi hugged Ronnie from the other side, sandwiching her between her girls. "I love you, too."

"I love you girls." Ronnie enjoyed the embraces, but she slowly pried the girls apart. "You two still have a lot to do to get ready," she said lightly.

As she started repairing her makeup, Tommi asked Katie, "Is Dennis finally getting serious with you?"

Katie shrugged. "I hope so, but you never know. Guys are so afraid of commitment!"

Sara laughed. "Maybe he'll get ideas from today."

"If this wedding doesn't scare him off first."

Tommi smiled. "I suppose I shouldn't have threatened that I'd hurt him if he ever hurt my big sister!"

Sara laughed. "You threatened him, too?" She meekly shrugged her shoulders toward Katie. "Sorry. Then again, if Tommi and I didn't scare him off with our threats, maybe he is serious."

Tommi nodded. "He seems like a nice guy."

Katie changed the subject. Today wasn't about her. It was about the bride and the wedding. "Brian is a very lucky man."

Tommi and Sara exchanged smiles.

"He better treat my sister right," the bridesmaid said in a feigned warning tone. "If he doesn't"

The bride smiled and hugged her sister again, crying happy tears again. "I know he'll take care of me," she said. "And I know I can always count on you and Katie." She backed away from the embrace. "I promise I won't let this interfere with our special sisters' relationship," she said solemnly.

The bridesmaid laughed. "Well, you might not be able to help it – at least for the honeymoon and the first few months. But you can text me, call me, or e-mail me any time you want!"

The bride hugged her bridesmaid sister again. "Thank you for not being jealous," she said simply.

The bridesmaid smiled. "How could I? It was obvious you two were crazy about each other."

"You know he still loves you, too?" the bride asked.

The bridesmaid nodded solemnly. "I know. And I suppose a part of me loves him and probably always will. But he loves you more – a lot more." There was a certain lilt of sadness in her voice as she acknowledged the truth.

The bride looked at her sister warily. "This isn't another one of your stupid selfless sacrifices, is it?"

The bridesmaid laughed. "No. I'm happy. And I know you'll be happy, too. I'm very happy for you. Brian will treat you like a princess. He's a super guy."

The bride snickered. "I know I've heard that line somewhere before!"

The bridesmaid just smiled. "You didn't copyright it, so I stole it. I hope you two make me an aunt real soon," she joked. "Now go add the title of Mrs. to your title of Doctor!"

Sara hugged Tommi again. "I'm not a doctor, yet! I've still got to finish my residency!" She turned as Ronnie began fussing with Sara's hair yet again.

Tommi glanced around at the milling bridesmaids. She had a moment, she decided. Without anyone noticing, she ducked out the door.

Before Tommi got a step outside, she heard a little girl's happy voice. "Aunt Tommi!"

Tommi turned and saw a very happy little girl running toward her. She stooped, stretching out her arms in anticipation of the hug she knew was coming her way.

"You look so pretty, Ana," Tommi complimented the girl as she hugged her. "And you're getting so big! Look at you!"

Anastasia beamed. "Mommy said to tell you that we're going to have a party tomorrow, and that I was supposed to bring you. Pop and Aunt Jill are going to be there, too! You will come, won't you? Please?" she pleaded in her adorable little-girl way.

"Now how could I resist an invitation from my favorite niece?" Tommi smiled back at the girl. She let her arms drop and stood up, turning her attention instead to the girls' adult companion.

Jillian embraced Tommi with no less enthusiasm than Anastasia. "It's so nice to see you. You look lovely."

"She's growing so fast!" Tommi exclaimed. "She's such a pretty girl. She takes after her mother," she added softly enough that Ana wouldn't overhear.

Jillian blushed at the compliment. "You are coming for lunch tomorrow, right? We all figured that you'd be busy with the reception and family stuff tonight."

"You know I wouldn't miss it. I don't get to see everyone as often as I'd like. Your dad should know how busy grad students can be. Some days, it seems like I live in the lab."

Jillian laughed. "How much longer until you finish?"

Tommi shrugged her shoulders. "If everything goes well, I should be defending my dissertation sometime next spring."

"And then what?" Jillian was curious.

Tommi smiled. "Thanks to your dad's work with the Morris Foundation, they're setting up another research lab here at the university. I've already got an offer to work there."

"Sounds exciting. You really like it here?"

"I've got friends and family close by. Yeah, I like it."

"I better let you focus on the wedding. Sara will be really mad if she has to wait even a minute because I was keeping you. We can talk later?"

Tommi smiled. "Definitely. You are coming to the reception and the dance, right? And I'll be at the lunch tomorrow, so we'll have lots of time to visit." She bent down and gave Ana a quick hug. "I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay. I love you, Aunt Tommi."

"I love you too, Ana."

Tommi watched as Jillian escorted Ana out, so they could be seated. Tommi smiled, then turned around, looking for someone.

She was back out of the main traffic flow, sitting on a bench, waiting for Tommi, looking radiant and pregnant. She rose and glided over from where she'd been sitting. "I was hoping I'd see you before things started," Erica said as she slipped her arms around Tommi and pulled her for a kiss.

Tommi enjoyed Erica's passion, how she put every fiber of her being into every single one of her kisses. It was like she never tired of showing the depth of her love through her hugs and kisses. Tommi didn't mind at all. She hoped she was always putting herself as much into her displays of affection. Eventually, though, Tommi broke off the kiss. "I have to finish getting ready."

"And I'd better go get a seat," Erica said with a smile.

"I don't think I've thanked you often enough for waiting for me," Tommi said. She glanced down and rubbed Erica's round belly.

Erica grinned as she patted Tommi's tummy; Tommi wasn't showing nearly as much as Erica. "How could I not wait for the girl I fell madly in love with? You stole my heart!"

"I guess now you understand what I went through in college," Tommi laughed.

Erica smiled. "I'm so happy they have the process so I could be pregnant with your baby. So we could be pregnant with each other's babies. Maybe I'll show you just how happy later!" she added with a wicked grin.

"So, is it true that your hormones make you insatiable during pregnancy?" Tommi joked.

Erica feigned a pout. "I thought I was insatiable _all_ the time!"

"You are, my love," Tommi said as she kissed Erica again. "Now, if you can control yourself for a while, I've got to join the line so Sara can get married."

"I love you," Erica cooed.

Tommi smiled, then blew her a kiss, as she slipped back into the bride's room. Everything _had_ turned out okay – for everyone. All those years ago, she'd have never believed it could happen, but things had turned out well – even though it had been a very interesting ride with a few challenges. Tommi realized that she'd gladly do it all over again.

FIN