

Desperate Measures

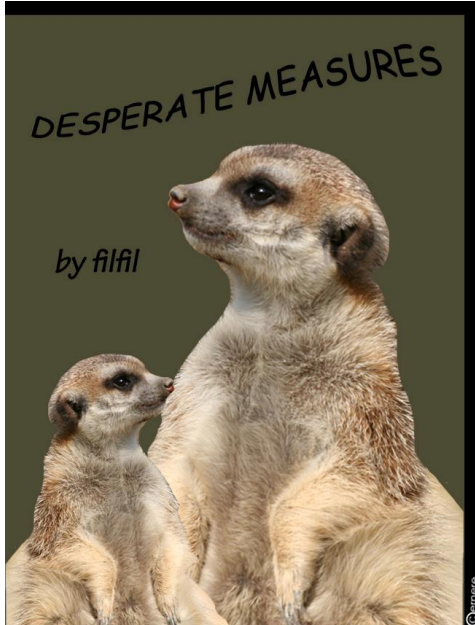
Genre: Original/Erotic Romance. This is a sequel to “Desperate Housewife.” It may be wise to read that story first.

Rated: R

Disclaimer: No disclaimers are required. The characters and this story are mine.

Sexual Content/Violence: Sex? Yes, absolutely.

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In case you want to let me know how and if you liked my story, please write to filfil67@yahoo.de and/or visit my website at www.filfil.de

Chapter 1

Heavy rain beat a staccato rhythm on the taxi's roof. The downpour hadn't stopped since early morning, and now, after dark, Springfield's streets morphed into shallow lakes reflecting passing cars' headlights like glittering disco balls.

In the backseat, Gillian leaned her head against the cool window. She watched the run-down houses and wavering forms outside the taxi without interest until they passed a woman with long hair and a powerful walk. Sylvana! She pressed her palms to the window, then sunk back. No. A child clung to the woman's hand.

Gillian closed her eyes against the painful memories that blazed up inside her: the disappointment in Sylvana's expression as Gillian's snobby friends hurled insults at her and the shock when she realized that Gillian didn't stand by her side.

This moment had been one of the most painful in Gillian's life. She had failed the one adult person that had begun to really mean something to her. Even now she couldn't understand why for goodness' sake she hadn't said or done anything to defend Sylvana.

Frozen. She had been totally, utterly frozen by fear back then. Completely unable to move or to speak the only thing she could think about was what would happen if her friends found out about the nature of their relationship. The memory of her failure, of her cowardice felt like an ever thickening cover of frostbite around her heart. She had betrayed Sylvana's trust and probably destroyed whatever they both could have had.

The taxi halted, hurtling Gillian back to the present. She forced her eyes open.

"Here we are, ma'am. That's fifty-four dollars." The driver turned in his seat to face her.

Gillian tried to get a look at the buildings outside. "This is 24 Hammond Street?" she asked, unable to see properly through the rain-smearred window. What she saw however confirmed what she knew about this part of Springfield. It wasn't the safest place in town.

"Yes, ma'am."

So, that was it then. With slightly shaking hands she took sixty dollars out of her wallet and handed the bills over. "I guess this isn't the most populated area of town, right?"

"No, ma'am. It sure isn't."

With her luck she would become the victim of a mugger as soon as the taxi left. Gillian sighed. "Thanks. Keep the change, please."

The driver took the money and furrowed his brows. "Are you sure you don't want me to wait for you, ma'am?"

Gillian bit her lip and looked out the window. She didn't want to appear like a wimp. On the other hand, it would be nice to have someone close-by if she needed to get away in a hurry.

She forced a smile. "You know, that isn't such a bad idea." She handed him another thirty dollars. "How long will that keep you?"

"At least twenty minutes, ma'am." He took the money and turned off the taxi's engine. "Let's say I'll wait for half an hour 'cause I need a break anyhow and this place is as good as any."

"Are you sure?" Gillian put her wallet back into her purse.

"Yep." He settled more comfortably into his seat, clearly prepared to stay a while.

"Thank you." Gillian couldn't help smiling. *At least I've lucked out with the taxi driver.* Half an hour should be more than enough to find out if Sylvana was in her favorite club and, more importantly, if she wanted to talk to Gillian. *And if not? What do I do then?*

Hopelessness gnawed on her like a terrier on a bone.

She was tempted just to turn around and leave. Instead of walking into the lion's den, she could be at home within the next forty minutes and enjoy a good book or watch something relaxing on television. There was always tomorrow. She could try to get hold of Sylvana on the phone. Maybe it would be easier to talk without seeing each other face to face.

Coward. Trying to find the easy way out again? It wouldn't work and she knew it. Sylvana hadn't answered any of her calls so far. Why should tomorrow be any different?

Get a grip. You came here to talk to her. She got out of the car and opened her umbrella with stubborn determination.

A waft of cold, wet air welcomed her outside. She shivered, cursing her decision to dress up. The black Vera Wang dress wasn't made for this kind of weather, but she wasn't above female tricks to gain her lover's favor. *Don't fool yourself, ex-lover is more likely.*

Clinging to her umbrella as if it was a lifeline, she looked up at the neon sign on the building in front of her. "The Labrys." *Couldn't the owner have been a bit more creative?*

She had no idea what was expected her inside. Her knowledge of what a lesbian club looked like came from *The L-World*. And somehow she doubted that Sylvana's favorite turf had much to do with one of those stylish clubs.

Gillian shook her head. Setting foot in a lesbian club was not something she had ever considered in the past. Back then she had been a straight wife whose biggest challenge had been to adorn her husband's arm at special occasions, and to live a seemingly perfect suburban life until the day her husband died.

No, that's not true. Until the day I found out about his affairs and mistresses. That day had changed her life in more than one way.

Hesitating in front of the club's door, she felt almost sickened by her stomach's churning. She took a deep lungful of damp air to help clear her mind and calm her nerves.

"I'm not sure the door will open through sheer will power. At least it didn't yesterday," said a sultry voice behind her.

Gillian nearly jumped out of her skin. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

She gripped the keys in her pocket, prepared to fight any potential attacker behind her.

Clenching down on the icy panic in her belly she turned around.

The pouring rain and shadowy darkness made it hard to see more than a bulky form. Her knees weakened with relief when she realized that the person standing before her was a tall, black woman with a friendly, lopsided grin on her face.

"Sorry if I scared you, honey, but you're blocking my way," the stranger said, taking two steps to stand under the shelter of the eaves. "What lousy weather. Wouldn't believe it's already April."

Gillian's heart still galloped. She took a second glance at the stranger. Even in the dim light she could see that the woman was broad-shouldered. She wore a black leather jacket, blue jeans, and black steel-toe boots. Her soaking wet dreadlocks were plastered to her head.

A grunt of appreciation nearly escaped Gillian's throat. *Wow*. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stand in the way." Gillian's face grew warm when she realized that she had likely been observed staring at the door like a mouse hypnotized by a snake.

"No problem." The tall stranger opened the door before she said over her shoulder, "Do you want to come inside and have some fun downstairs, or would you prefer to continue flirting with the unresponsive door?" She gave Gillian a wink.

Is she flirting with me? "I... I know that I must look stupid. It's only that... well, I've never been to this particular kind of club before." Gillian shuffled her feet, then immediately regretted her action when a wave of cold water seeped into her stilettos.

The other woman shrugged. "Everyone was once a first timer, honey. I learned there isn't much to be afraid of if you stick to a simple rule."

"And that would be?" Gillian tilted her head.

The stranger closed the door again and leaned against the frame. She took her time to look Gillian slowly up and down.

Gillian suddenly felt a lot warmer.

"The most important rule in life is: be very clear and upfront about what you want. That is the best strategy for getting what you want and avoiding what you fear," the woman said.

Gillian shook her head. "It sounds too easy."

"As a matter of fact, it is easy. It's just that women have a tough time with this 'cause we are taught to be friendly and understanding rather than open and honest." The woman shrugged a second time. "I personally find that this little rule makes my life a lot easier."

Open and honest? Surely it couldn't be so easy, Gillian thought. On the other hand, her whole life felt like a fake when viewed through such a lens. False pretenses and indifference had killed her relationship with her husband long before he died. Guilt and lies had driven a wedge between her and Sylvania. It couldn't hurt to try something different for a change.

Gillian gathered her courage and walked toward the door. "All right, I'm in."

"Good for you." The stranger opened the door. "By the way, I'm Skyler and I would very much love to buy you a drink."

Caught by surprise, Gillian did not know how to respond. *So she was flirting with me.*

Skyler's dark eyes twinkled as she waited patiently for Gillian's reply.

Open and honest she said. There's no time like now. Let's try it. Gillian graced Skyler with a gentle smile. "Sorry, but I'm here looking for my..." she swallowed, unsure what to call Sylvania. "For someone," she concluded with as much firmness as she could muster.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it? Openness and honesty work just fine with me. Though I hope whatever or whoever you are looking for is worth it."

“She is.” Gillian was surprised about the determination in her voice.

“Then I hope you’ll find her here tonight. And if not... you know where to find me.” Skyler’s grin had a good-natured leer in it.

Gillian couldn’t help chuckling. “Thank you, Skyler. But if I can’t find her here, I’ll be going home.” She starred at her feet. “But I hope that you’re going to find some fun tonight.”

Skyler snorted. “Oh, I have no doubt about that. I’m packed and ready to go.”

Gillian tilted her head in silent inquiry but got no response from Skyler except another wink.

Straightening her shoulders, she made her way through the entrance, past Skyler and down the stairs. The music and Cher’s smoky voice seemed loud after the quiet outside. The tang of cigarette smoke and sweat welcomed her to the faintly lit room where a dirty-brown bar in desperate need of a fresh paint job dominated the left side of the room. Posters of half-naked women hung on the walls around the bar. Memories of high school boys’ lockers flashed through Gillian’s mind.

Whatever she had expected, this wasn’t it. *This is what a lesbian club looks like?* She took a deep breath, suddenly unsure if her being here was such a good idea.

Her gaze was drawn to the women at the bar. The majority of the customers appeared to be the epitome of big bad dykes, women her mother would have warned her about had the old lady the slightest inkling about her daughter’s hidden desires. *This isn’t a good moment to think about Mother*, she shook her head.

The crowd was a mixture of young and old women uncommon in the fancy places Gillian usually frequented. Many women were dressed in jeans, leather pants, and motorcycle jackets. Most drank their beer right out of the bottle, exactly the same as Sylvana. Gillian felt a pang in her chest at the reminder of her lover.

A wolf whistle echoed from the bar.

Gillian winced in response. *This feels like walking into a group of horny teenage boys.*

“Don’t let them get to you.” Skyler appeared beside her. “Most are tough on the outside but marshmallows on the inside. And they treasure a good-looking, classy woman like you.”

Skyler gave her a light slap on the shoulder before she walked to a small table. A woman with muscles like Rocky Balboa greeted her. *Is she even female?* Gillian remembered the “women only” sign at the club’s door. *She must be, but why would a woman choose to look like that?*

Cher’s song finished. For a moment, only the soft, unintelligible chatter of many voices could be heard, then a woman in the tightest leather pants Gillian had ever seen got up from her barstool and went over to the corner jukebox. She threw money into the machine, and soon Cher started another song.

One of the women sitting at a table close by called loud enough for everyone to hear, “Hey, Sheryl, if I have to listen to Cher one more time I’m going to help you to your very own plastic surgery.”

Laughter and hollers came from the bar. Gillian relaxed slightly, reassured by the good-natured banter. Torn between hope and anxiety, she started to look for Sylvana. Not seeing her familiar form at the bar, she turned to watch the couples swaying to Cher’s *Love Can Build a Bridge* on the dance floor. Sylvana wasn’t among them. Gillian clenched her fists against the sick feeling in her stomach.

She had walked halfway around the platform when she finally found the person she was looking for. All breath left her lungs. She felt as if someone had sucker-punched her right in the solar plexus.

Sylvana wasn’t alone.

Not aware of anything else that was happening around her Gillian stared at the scene in front of her. This was one of her nightmares in Technicolor, only that what happened between Sylvana and the blonde on her lap wasn’t a movie. The slut in a cheap excuse for a dress couldn’t possibly get any closer without crawling into Sylvana’s body.

She has already replaced me. Gillian leaned heavily on the back of a chair. Tears blurred her vision. She had tormented herself with pictures of Sylvana suffering from the pain she, Gillian, had caused. And here Sylvana was, playing cozy with another woman. Already. She obviously hadn’t wasted any time with shedding tears over what happened.

All her plans of asking Sylvana for forgiveness, her hopes of reconciling crumbled to dust. There was no future for them. This was it.

“Did you think she would weep over you, Gillian?”

Gillian turned around and looked into the cold brown eyes of a woman with long blond hair. A woman she had never seen before.

“Excuse me?”

The stranger took Gillian's arm in a death grip and pulled her toward the bar. “Come over here before you make a fool of yourself or Sylvana. Sit down.” The woman pointed at an empty barstool, then waved the barkeeper over. “Here, T, give us two Jack Daniels. Two fingers, straight.”

“Got you covered, Janet.” The barkeeper walked away to get their drinks.

“I don’t drink whiskey, especially not with women I don’t know.” Gillian glared at Janet. She couldn’t believe her insensitivity. “And don’t you dare touch me again!”

Janet glared back at her. “What? Jack Daniel’s too cheap for you?”

The bartender returned, setting shot glasses in front of them.

“Drink!” Janet said. She chugged down her own drink, then slammed the empty shot glass down on the bar.

Gillian didn't touch her glass. She brimmed with outrage. Sylvana might have crushed her hope but that didn't mean she would allow a stranger to push her around. The remains of her pride and dignity blazed alive. She stepped away from the barstool. “Who do you think you are?”

“My name's Janet. I'm responsible for Sylvana meeting you, which I deeply regret. So I'd say this is very much my business. Now drink up.” Janet pointed at Gillian's full shot glass.

Gillian opened her mouth and closed it again. *This is Janet, Sylvana's best friend? Shit.* Her behavior made clear that she knew what had happened. Could this evening get any worse? Gillian sat down on the barstool. *Ah, what the hell.* She took the glass and gulped down the amber drink. The whisky burned a trail over her tongue and down her throat. She did her best not to grimace and failed miserably.

“Are you here to mock Sylvana?” Janet gave Gillian a warning look. “I saw you come with Skyler. Looks like you already found someone new.”

“No, I... I'm not here with Skyler. I just met her outside. I came in to talk to Sylvana.” Gillian hated how defensive she felt and sounded. *I don't need to justify myself to Janet.* She sat straighter, toying with the empty shot glass. “But that is none of your business.”

“Talk to her? Now? Maybe you should have talked to her when your friends accused her of being a damn bully hitting on a chaste housewife.” Janet leaned closer, glowering at her. “Do you enjoy jerking people around?”

Every single word hurt like a slap in the face. Gillian bit back the sharp words that burned on the tip of her tongue. What good would it do to infuriate Sylvana's best friend? Staring at the row of bottles on shelves behind the bar, she desperately wished for another whiskey. But maybe it would be wiser to get drunk at home. She didn't have any reason to stay anyhow.

“What? Nothing to defend yourself?” Janet asked.

“If it was in my power to undo what happened, I would. But I can't.” Gillian glanced into Janet's hard eyes. “I made a mistake, a mistake that I deeply regret, but I came here tonight to talk to Sylvana, to apologize for the hurt I've caused.” She darted a glance at the table where the blond slut was still plastered to Sylvana like mold on marmalade.

Janet slapped a hand on the bar. “Tell me something, Gillian: what was Sylvana to you? Cause I really don't get it.”

“She is, not was.” Gillian hesitated, unsure how to explain what she hadn't put in words before. Love wasn't the right label for hours of hot sex and some good conversation, but “casual fling” wasn't true either. She had come to care a lot more for Sylvana than she expected. “I feel a lot for her. And I... I don't want to lose her.” This much was the truth. Anything else would remain a painful dream, always ready to haunt her future.

Once again, her gaze was drawn to the small table where Sylvana and the blond slut played “easy to get” with each other. Gillian bit her lip hard enough to taste blood, but the minor pain didn’t help dull the agony of betrayal she felt inside.

Everything she had thought important in her life faded when compared to the thought of losing Sylvana and what they had together. Neither her social status, her money nor her so-called friends were able to make her as happy as simply being together with Sylvana was. And what had she done? She had thrown away what maybe could have been. Gillian forced herself to rub the shot glass’s rim with her index finger when what she really wanted to do was to throw the glass and see it smash into a thousand pieces, the way her heart felt right now.

“Seeing her with another woman... it hurts. A lot,” Gillian said in a low voice, certain it was still loud enough for Janet to hear. *And it hurts on a totally different level than hearing about Derrick’s mistresses*, she added silently, picking up the empty shot glass. “Can I have another one?” One more drink couldn’t hurt.

Janet shook her head. “No, first you have to tell me how important Sylvana is to you.”

“Very important.” She had no idea why she even answered Janet’s question.

Janet snorted. “Is that why you pretended not to know her?”

Gillian cursed inwardly. Hearing those words hurt nearly as much as reliving the painful minutes again and again in her memories. “She told you?”

“Yep, though I nearly had to beat it out of her.”

The lyrics to Cher’s *Love Can Build a Bridge* suddenly sounded like mockery. Gillian remembered her behavior with revulsion. But what had been the odds of meeting her blue-collar lover in one of Springfield’s fanciest cafés? She felt the same depth of shame now as she had when she’d seen the pain on Sylvana’s face, quickly shuttered but unforgettable, an image burned into Gillian’s brain that haunted her awake and asleep.

“I panicked.” Gillian’s neck muscles tensed.

“Excuse me?”

“I said I panicked.” The urge to get up and leave grew. There was no way Janet or Sylvana would understand. How could they when in hindsight she didn’t understand her reaction back then?

“Why for God’s sake? Did you believe Sylvana would hump you in front of your friends?”

Shame was replaced by a burning anger. “That is none of your business,” Gillian snapped.

Janet leaned an elbow on the bar. “So what, Gillian? Did you believe coming here dressed to the nines in that little black number would be enough to make Sylvana crawl back to you?”

“No, I...” Gillian inhaled around the knot in her throat, “I only wanted to talk to her.” She didn’t need to tell Janet that she had indeed hoped that Sylvana might forgive her. That she had dreamed about them becoming maybe even closer than before.

Laughter echoed from a nearby table, distracting Gillian from her thoughts. A group of three women, each pierced in various parts of their faces, got up to leave. They oozed a raw sexuality that left no room for misunderstanding what they were up to.

Gillian felt out of her league. This wasn’t her turf. *Why have I come? This will lead to nothing.* A heavy weight settled on her shoulders.

“I don’t get you, Gillian. I really don’t,” Janet said, shaking her head. “But I have to give it to you...you have balls showing up here tonight.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t matter anymore, does it?” Gillian stared at her empty shot glass.

“You’re serious about Sylvana?” Janet asked, arching an eyebrow. “I mean serious enough to grovel and beg and not do the same shitty thing again?”

“I would, but what’s the point?” Gillian nodded at Sylvana’s table. “She’s found a substitute. Maybe this is just as well.”

“Oh, come on, Gillian. Sylvana is as drunk as a skunk. And little Barbie over there is just hoping to get laid.” Janet snickered. “It seems she’s not aware that even Sylvana is in no shape to provide that kind of service tonight.”

For a moment, hope blossomed in Gillian. She looked into Janet’s brown eyes that had lost some of their coldness. “I’m not here to hurt her.” She struggled for words, afraid to hope again. “Do you really think she’s still interested in me?”

“Gillian, it doesn’t matter what I think. The question is what you want.”

There was no question what she wanted. “I want her, I want ‘us’ back.”

A muscle in Janet’s jaw twitched.

Gillian steeled herself against Janet’s response.

“Are you ready to fight for her?” Janet held up a hand before Gillian could answer. “And I don’t just mean tonight, Gillian. You always have to treat her with respect.”

Days ago she would have answered “yes.” Without any doubt. But life had taught her a painful lesson about herself. Truth was that she didn’t have as much backbone as she thought. “I can only promise that I’ll try my very best.”

Janet’s gaze became cold. Her eyes drilled into Gillian and caused her to shiver. “I can’t say that I like you very much or that I understand her infatuation with you,” Janet said. “And let me tell you one more thing: you hurt Sylvana again in any way and I’ll kick your pretty ass from here over to your fancy place in the suburbs. But if she means half as much to you as you do to her... go over there and teach Barbie a lesson. Prove you’re willing to fight for Sylvana.”

Gillian stared at Janet, not sure if she understood the other woman. “I didn’t think you meant fighting literally.”

“Oh, please. Gillian, get over there before little Barbie hauls Sylvana home or before I rethink my decision of encouraging you.” Janet pushed Gillian off the barstool. “Now!”

Before Gillian had a chance to respond, Janet turned her back and began chatting with the bartender, simply ignoring her.

A bubble of anger heated Gillian’s belly, replacing the depression that had settled into the pit of her stomach earlier in the evening. As furious as Gillian felt about Janet’s treatment, the other woman was right. She had to do something or risk losing Sylvana forever. If she left now, all would be over. If she fought for Sylvana... well, the worst that could happen was that she would make a fool out of herself.

It was worth a try. She didn’t have anything to lose. Not anymore.

Gillian focused her attention as well as her anger on the table where the blonde was sticking her breasts—were those things even real?— in a clearly befuddled Sylvana’s face.

Okay, that’s it. No matter what happened next, she refused to stand here and watch this... this slut seduce her woman. She had to talk to Sylvana and see if they could sort things out, but first she had to stake her claim before it was too late.

She marched to the table and tapped the blonde’s shoulder. The woman muttered an annoyed “What?” without turning her head.

“You’re sitting on my lap.” Vibrating with anger, Gillian loomed over the woman, who finally deigned to look at her.

Surprise was clearly written on the blonde’s face. She looked Gillian up and down. “Are you crazy or what? Go find yourself someone else to bother.” She held out one hand and wiggled her fingers in a good-bye motion.

“No, you go bother someone else. I am sure you’ll find a woman here who’ll be more than happy to fuck you all night long. Only not this one.” Gillian pointed at a confused Sylvana, who seemed to be having a hard time keeping her eyes focused. “This one is mine, and if you don’t get up, I’m going to perforate your little ass with my Manolo stilettos.”

Laughter and comments from women at nearby tables made it obvious that they had an attentive audience, but Gillian was past caring. She had to keep going if she wanted to take Sylvana home and scrub the stink of another woman’s perfume off her.

Her last comment seemed to have an impact since the blonde climbed off Sylvana, who didn’t look happy about losing her new plaything.

“No, shday... well... we’ll have fun... lods of...” She tried to pull the blonde back into her lap.

Jealousy and fury ate at Gillian until she trembled. She pushed the blonde out of her way and pointed a finger in Sylvana's face. "You listen to me. We are going home and we are going to talk. And if you want to have your girlfriend back after our talk, I am sure Ms. I Can Go All Night over there will be happy to welcome you into her arms. But tonight I'm the one calling the shots, understood?"

For the first time, Sylvana's gaze met hers. Gillian's heart nearly broke from the pain she recognized reflecting back at her, a pain that she had caused.

"I am so sorry, love," she whispered.

"Does it look like Sylvana wants to go with you, stupid?" Apparently not ready to cave in, the blonde stepped between Gillian and Sylvana, her move effectively breaking their eye contact. "What you want here is of zero interest to anyone," she said snottily. "You'd better try your luck somewhere else and leave us the hell alone."

Gillian gritted her teeth, trying to rein in her temper. Never before had she come so close to hitting someone.

She braced her hands on her hips, ready to use some of the obscene vocabulary she had learned from one or the other HBO series, when suddenly a strong, coffee-colored hand reached around Gillian to grip the blonde's shoulder.

"Roxanne," Skyler said, "why don't you try your luck elsewhere? Preferably now!"

Relief flooded Gillian's body. With a few pointed words Skyler had done what she could not. Giving them both murderous looks, Roxanne grabbed her purse and left.

"Wow." Impressed, Gillian watched Roxanne walk over to the bar. "One day I would like to know what kind of history you two have."

Skyler grinned. "A gentlewoman kisses but never tells. Anything else I can assist you with?"

Now that the fight was won Gillian wasn't sure what to do. She couldn't take Sylvana home with her. And the city apartment wasn't a good alternative. It wasn't stocked with any food or medicine. That left only Sylvana's apartment. Maybe that would be the best choice anyhow. Sylvana surely was going to feel not too well in the morning. Being in her home and her own bed would probably be the best thing for her.

"Could you help me get Sylvana into the taxi waiting outside?"

"Sure." Skyler bent down. "Come on, Sylvana. Don't let your lady wait."

"Shesch not my lady, no more." Sylvana shook her head.

The words cut razor sharp into Gillian.

Skyler chuckled. "Well, she seems determined to be your lady. And you know how these femmes are, right?" She whispered something in Sylvana's ear.

Gillian had never seen the tough butch Sylvana giggle like a schoolgirl. Whatever Skyler said, worked. A moment later Sylvana struggled off her chair.

Now she was really in Skyler's debt. But this would have to wait until another time. For now she had to concentrate on getting Sylvana home. The taxi driver's offer had become a real blessing.

Good-natured whistles and shouts accompanied them as they left the bar, Skyler supporting Sylvana on one side, Gillian struggling to keep up on the other.

Chapter 2

"Here we are, ma'am," the taxi driver said.

Gillian didn't want the ride to end and she surely didn't want to open her eyes. The length of Sylvana's body was pressed along hers, Sylvana's head cushioned on her shoulder. This moment felt so sweet, so wonderful, she didn't want it to end. With all her heart, she wanted to pretend a little while longer that this was reality. Maybe if she didn't—

"Ma'am?"

Gillian sighed, opening her eyes. Through the fogged taxi window on her right she saw they had stopped next to a little corner shop. She used her sleeve to wipe the window clean and groaned as she spotted a group of young men in front of the shop's entrance in a pool of light, pushing each other around like young coyotes fighting over a well-chewed bone. *Great. Testosterone overdrive. Just what I needed to feel safe and relaxed.*

With a forced smile, Gillian focused on the patiently waiting driver. "Thank you. I must have dozed off during the ride."

"Yeah, and you're not the only one. I guess you'll have to wake sleeping beauty there." He looked at Sylvana, who continued to snore in complete oblivion.

"Yes, I should." *Though I really don't want to*, she added silently.

Gillian took one of Sylvana's calloused hands into hers and squeezed it gently. "Hey, Sylvana. We're here. Time to wake up."

A smile played at the corners of Sylvana's mouth before she snuggled closer to Gillian.

At least she's not upset with me while she's still asleep. That however made waking Sylvana up even harder.

"Hello, sleepyhead." She paused. The thought of kissing Sylvana made her lips tingle. Feeling a sudden reckless urge, she decided she wanted to prolong this state of near bliss. Now could very well be her last opportunity for intimacy, even if the moment was a stolen one.

Gently, Gillian brushed Sylvana's hair back and planted a soft kiss on her forehead. A hint of bergamot and sandalwood teased her nose, a scent that reminded her of summer and the ocean. "This isn't your bed, honey. It's a taxi," she said. "You have to wake up."

Drowsy blue eyes opened a slit. Sylvana licked her lips and turned her head toward Gillian, obviously still caught in dreams.

Hot breath caressed the side of Gillian's neck, causing exquisite shivers to run through her body. She gasped when the warmth was suddenly replaced by wet heat as Sylvana began to nibble on her earlobe. Every nerve Gillian owned tingled with excitement.

The taxi driver cleared his throat, shattering the moment.

"What...? Where...?" Sylvana drew back and looked around, clearly disoriented.

A sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach made Gillian sigh. The tender trust which seconds ago had been mirrored in Sylvana's beautiful eyes was now replaced by a pained suspicion. Reality had clawed its way back into the moment. Her dream was over.

Sylvana flinched away from Gillian's touch, causing the leather upholstery to groan in protest.

"Sylvana, we're at your place. Do you think you can manage to get out of the car on your own?" Gillian's voice sounded rough to her ears.

"Shure...shure I can." The tip of Sylvana's tongue appeared in the corner of her mouth, and her brows knit together in deep concentration.

Despite the pain that scratched inside her chest, Gillian smiled. Sylvana's expression was a perfect copy of the one her son wore whenever he tried to solve a problem that was beyond his scope.

Letting out a grunt, Sylvana managed to open the door on her side, her momentum nearly causing her to fall out of the car.

Gillian grabbed the back of Sylvana's jacket. "Hang on there."

"I'll give her a hand." The taxi driver got out and managed to help Sylvana out in one piece.

Tension tightened Gillian's shoulders. She stepped into the light drizzle, thankful that the earlier downpour had stopped and so far Sylvana wasn't making too much of a fuss.

"Should we get her inside, ma'am?"

Sylvana leaned heavily on their driver's shoulder. He was at least a head shorter than her, but he had a sturdy, muscular build. Gillian knew she would have a hard time getting Sylvana inside without his help. Once again she had to rely on the kindness of strangers. First Skyler, now the taxi driver. "Yes, thank you."

After a minor struggle, the three of them finally stepped through the front door of the apartment building next to the corner shop. Gillian wrinkled her nose at the musty smell in the darkened hall, which reminded her of a damp, moldy cellar.

“I can’t find the light switch here,” the driver said. “It must be on your side.”

Gillian reached out and touched something sticky on the wall. It clung to her fingers. For a moment, her imagination ran wild. Was it spit? Vomit? Blood? She gagged. *Don’t think about it! Don’t think about it!* she told herself firmly.

Determined to get on with it, she wiped her trembling hand clean on her coat before she continued her search. It felt like an eternity before she finally found a plastic switchplate and turned on the overhead fluorescents.

Harsh cold light that hurt her eyes splashed over concrete walls that an unknown artist had transformed with spray paint into canvases of aggression. Unrecognizable beings and letters melted together in perfect disharmony. Gillian shook her head. This was no graffiti art, she decided. It was either the testimony of an ugly childhood or simple vandalism.

Why on earth would Sylvana choose to live in a place like this? Was this one of the reasons why she had never invited Gillian into her home? Why they had always met at the city apartment? Surely there must be inexpensive places that were nicer.

You have to concentrate on why you are here. Gillian swallowed down her nervousness. “Sylvana, which floor do you live on, honey?”

“Am not your honey. You... you shaid so.” Sylvana crossed her arms over her breasts, swaying in place a little.

“Sylvana, you’re still my honey if you want.” Gillian silently counted to five. “But let’s talk about this later. We have to get you inside your apartment and into your bed first.”

“Am not going to shleep with you. No shex for you tonight! I don’t wanna.” Sylvana shook her finger in emphasis.

Gillian’s face grew hot. She cast a glance at the smirking taxi driver, who thankfully seemed more amused by the situation than anything else.

“All right, I got that,” she told Sylvana. “Now tell me, what floor do you live on?”

“Shecond floor. But no sex!”

“All right, no sex for me tonight.” Gillian wanted to bury her flaming face in her hands but instead forced herself to look at the helpful driver. As far as she was concerned, the sooner they made it to Sylvana’s apartment, the better. “You’ve already done so much for me tonight and I don’t even know your name.”

He grinned. “My name’s Joe, Joe Ingrellini.”

Gillian returned his smile. “Thank you, Mr. Ingrellini. My name is Gillian Webber, and I can’t tell you how thankful I am that we met tonight. Now, do you think you could help me one more time and take her up to her apartment? I’ll pay you for your time, of course.”

“Sure. Let’s get the job done. I hope the elevator’s working.”

Gillian groaned. There was no way they could drag a drunken Sylvana up to the second floor. She almost fell to her knees in gratitude when the driver pressed the button, and the elevator door slid open.

Stale air hit Gillian. The elevator’s metal walls had been attacked by the same graffiti artists who had done such a nightmarish job on the building’s entrance hall.

Gillian couldn’t imagine coming home every night to a surrounding so destructive and so unwelcoming. The longer the night dragged on, the more she became aware of how sheltered, how different her life was.

As if reading her mind Mr. Ingrellini said, “I’ve seen worse places, ma’am.” He chuckled and pushed the button for the second floor. “This place isn’t as nice as the ones in the area I picked you up today, but it isn’t half as bad as others in town. I’d guess that it usually doesn’t look like this.” He pointed at the graffiti. “Maybe a tenant went crazy or someone broke in and caused this. Who knows.”

The elevator rumbled alive, sparing Gillian from having to formulate a response. She had a hard time believing Mr. Ingrellini’s words. On the other hand she felt like a snob. Her whole life she had lived in the suburbs, first in her parent’s house, then with Derrick. Both houses had nice gardens, a clean appearance and alert neighbors. No stranger could remain undetected for long periods of time. It was a safe, if a bit constricting neighborhood. Everybody knew everything about everyone – or at least they thought so.

Gillian looked at Sylvana, propped against Joe Ingrellini’s side, her head resting against the graffiti-sprayed elevator walls. Even with dark shadows smeared like bruises under her eyes, she looked beautiful. *I wonder if she has problems sleeping?* Gillian had hardly been able to close her eyes, much less sleep since the café incident. Every time she tried, Sylvana’s face appeared in Gillian’s dreams. The pain and betrayal written over it haunted her. *Will she be able to forgive me? I don’t know if I could if our roles were reversed.*

The elevator stuttered to a halt and opened its doors under grinding protest.

Happy to escape, Gillian stepped out into a dimly lit corridor. *Wow. Are we in another building?* Sure, the walls could use a coat of paint and the linoleum floor a good scrubbing, but all in all it didn’t look half as run-down as the entrance area. Maybe Mr. Ingrellini was right.

Gillian turned around to help get Sylvana out of the elevator.

“It’s okay, ma’am, I think I have it under control.” Ingrellini clamped his hand on Sylvana’s elbow and steered her into the corridor. Behind him, the elevator doors stuttered shut.

“Which door is yours, Sylvana?” Gillian asked.

“There... s’hat one.” Sylvana pointed to a door to the right.

“Okay, and do you have the keys?”

“Yup, shure, I do have keys.” Sylvana nodded, patting her pants pockets.

Gillian felt her impatience mounting. “And could I have them?”

Sylvana’s brow furrowed. She squinted at Gillian. “Why do shu ... you want my keys?”

“To open the door.” Gillian sighed.

Sylvana thought about this a moment before she fumbled for her keys and handed them over to Gillian. “But no shex,” she added.

“Right, no sex for me tonight.” Gillian rolled her eyes, grateful that Ingrellini didn’t comment on Sylvana’s ban on sex. She found the whole situation embarrassing enough without added comments.

Three keys hung on the key ring that Sylvana handed her. One looked as if it belonged to a car, which left the two others. Gillian tried the first one, and the door opened with a slight creaking noise from the stiff hinges.

She stepped into the apartment, this time locating the light switch without difficulty. Soft light revealed the living room right in front of her.

A black leather sofa that had seen better days dominated the space. The walls were painted a deep saffron, creating an overall warm atmosphere despite the spare furnishing. Only the flat panel LCD television hanging on the wall opposite the leather sofa was new and shiny.

If anyone had asked Gillian to describe Sylvana’s living room, she wouldn’t have been far off the mark. Over the past weeks, she had learned that her lover appreciated functionality over appearance, although Gillian had discovered there was another side to Sylvana that she kept secret in the beginning. She was tough on the outside but had a heart of gold and a genuine warmth that made Gillian feel safe, secure, and loved.

Swallowing hard around a knot in her throat, Gillian turned around just in time to watch Sylvana stagger into a room that adjoined the living room, leaving her alone with a chuckling Ingrellini. “I guess that’s where my mission ends...right, ma’am?”

“Yes, I think I can manage from here. Though I can’t thank you enough for your help tonight.”

He beamed. “Ah, you don’t have to thank me. This is a nice story to tell to my wife. She’ll love it.”

No doubt a lover’s quarrel between two lesbians made for an interesting story. Gillian struggled not to say something disparaging.

“It reminds me so much of the time I was courting my wife,” he went on.

Gillian couldn't hide her surprise.

"What, you don't believe that I was once young as well?"

"I do, but I don't understand..."

His eyes twinkled. "You see, my wife's family, the Pancinos, they owned two grocery stores when my Rosa and I met. They wanted her to marry the son of a family who owned a small business themselves. But Rosa, she had fallen in love with me, a simple laborer without any money." His smile grew wider. "It's a long story and to make it short: we married in the end, against all odds. We have been married over twenty-six years now." He took his car keys out of his jacket pocket, adding in his friendly way, "But let me tell you, the time between us falling in love and finally getting married was tough on my liver and on Rosa's soul."

Stunned, Gillian did not know what to say. He didn't want to tell his wife about two crazy lesbians but rather about two lovers who reminded him of what he and his wife had gone through. Did he have any idea how much his story related to her own situation?

"How..." Gillian broke off and cleared her throat as it threatened to close. "How did your wife manage to stand up to her family?"

His smile vanished. "It was tough, for sure. Rosa's family threatened to send her to Italy, and in return she threatened to run away if they forced her to marry someone she didn't love. She's one hell of a fighter, let me tell you," he said proudly. "I think one of the reasons why she fought so hard for us was that she had seen enough arranged marriages to know they weren't built on love and seldom found happiness. She told me she wanted to break that circle and she did. Our daughters are free to marry whomever they want. My youngest daughter's partner is a wonderful woman."

Ingrellini looked expectantly at her, but Gillian found she couldn't speak. So that was why he had been so helpful and understanding...one of his daughters was a lesbian. The solution of his story and of her life seemed so easy: Believe in and fight for love. Be open and honest about what you want. *I'm not ready to believe in fairy tales though I really, really want to.* She really needed some time to sort out the confusing tumble of thoughts and feelings swarming inside her. But first she had to do something else.

Gillian opened her purse and took out her wallet. "Mr. Ingrellini, how much do I owe you?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. You've already paid me enough."

"All right." She handed him fifty dollars. "This is for a night out with your wife. I want you to take her to dinner. Just the two of you." She winked at him. "Make it a romantic evening."

The money in his hand seemed to weigh him down. "Ma'am, this is too much."

"No, it isn't. I don't know what I would have done without your help tonight."

He stared at the bills as if they might bite him. He sighed, finally looking at Gillian with the cutest boyish grin she had ever seen on a man with gray hair at his temples. "Thank you, ma'am," he said. "It isn't often that I have such a lovely customer. I would love to take Rosa out somewhere else than her brother's restaurant. She'll be thrilled." He stuffed the money in

his pocket. "I hope that the thing between you and your friend... well, I hope that you two... ah, you know what I mean."

For the first time tonight, Gillian laughed. "Yes, I guess I know what you mean. Thank you and give my best to your wife. She must be a wonderful person."

"She is. All right, then. It was a pleasure, ma'am. Have a nice evening."

Gillian closed the door behind him. The voices of arguing neighbors seeped faintly into the empty living room. Suddenly alone, she became aware how exhausted she was. Gillian leaned her back against the door. What a night, and it wasn't over yet.

She had left her home in the suburbs with the hope of finding Sylvana, talking to her and making up with her if possible. Afterwards, she had planned to go home, not spend the night in town. *So much for well-thought-out plans.*

So, what do I do now? One thing was sure: Right now Sylvana was in no condition for a chat.

Gillian rubbed her tired eyes. She felt torn. While she wanted to stay and make sure that Sylvana was okay a part of her feared that Sylvana was so angry with her she would throw her out or worse. *She could call the police and accuse me of breaking and entering.*

On the other hand, Gillian didn't want to leave Sylvana alone in her current state, knowing the woman would feel like hell when she woke up.

Staying away from home for the whole night didn't feel appropriate either. She had never been separated from the children more than a few hours whenever she met someone in town. Even her relationship with Sylvana had not changed this schedule, though leaving Sylvana behind had become more difficult lately.

Tilde could look after them. The Swedish au-pair had proven to be a reliable person. Gillian was sure Tilde wouldn't mind being alone with the children for one night. But would Sylvana want her to stay? It felt like an infinite loop in her head: stay or go, stay or go.

Frustrated, Gillian banged her head against the door behind her. Why couldn't she be seventeen again, carefree, without a family and the obligations that went with it? She rubbed her aching temples, knowing full well that these were childish thoughts. She loved her children and wouldn't trade them for anything in the world. Still, tonight she felt as torn as never before. *What am I going to do?*

A quick glance at her watch showed Gillian it was already after 10 p.m. Her children should be in bed and asleep by now. Guilt gnawed at her. Was she a bad mother if she wanted to stay with Sylvana for one night? Did it make a difference that she wanted to stay to talk to Sylvana and repair their relationship, as opposed to the rutting and running that was her usual pattern?

It struck Gillian that she had seen neither hide nor hair of Sylvana after they entered the apartment. Assaulted by confusion, guilt, and a host of other emotions, she went to the room into which Sylvana had disappeared earlier and found her lying fully dressed on a king-sized bed in the center of the bedroom. Soft snores floated through the air.

Gillian crossed the distance to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress, taking in the slow rise and fall of Sylvana's chest, the flutter of her eyelids, her strong features and full lips. Tempted, she reached out to lightly touch Sylvana's cheek before she carefully withdrew her hand again, tender feelings bringing a smile to her face. *What you do to me...* The power Sylvana already had over her life, over her heart made her dizzy.

All she wanted was to lie down beside Sylvana, hold her, and be there when she woke up. Gillian sighed. This wasn't the right time to give in to those feelings. Instead, she got up and took in the bedroom.

A framed poster of Georgia O'Keeffe's *White Rose with Larkspur* hung on one wall. Gillian had spent a long time in front of the original during her last visit at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The painting was an exquisite capture of the infinite beauty of flowers and one of Gillian's favorites. She would have never expected to see something so fragile in Sylvana's bedroom. *At the best I would have expected a black and white photo of a naked woman.* She shook her head at the assumption she had made. *There's so much I don't know about her.*

She surveyed the rest of the bedroom. Three walls were painted in ivory, the fourth indigo blue, which contrasted nicely with the wardrobe whose front consisted of white glass and mirrors. If the living room was proof of Sylvana's more practical side, the bedroom seemed to reflect the softer side she hid so well most of the time.

Sylvana mumbled something unintelligible, catching Gillian's attention. Half tangled in the sheets and still fully dressed she surely couldn't be comfortable. Gillian could not leave her like that. It didn't take much effort to pry the black boots off Sylvana's feet. She put the boots down next to the wardrobe before she touched Sylvana's shoulder. "Come on, honey," she said. "You have to roll over on your side."

With a bit of effort Gillian finally succeeded in turning her over. It wouldn't do to let her lie on her back in case she threw up sometime during the night.

Gillian took the extra pillow and a rolled-up bedcover and put the items behind Sylvana's back to keep her in the same position. Glancing around the bedroom, she noticed the wastepaper basket behind a chair. She placed it on the floor beside the bed within easy reach. Just in case.

Carefully sitting on the edge of the bed, unable to stop herself from touching her sleeping lover, Gillian caressed Sylvana's soft cheek.

I don't want to live without you. It was true. She couldn't imagine going back to the kind of life she had lived before Sylvana, but at the same time, she couldn't imagine how a life with her could work. In addition, she didn't know if Sylvana was even interested in taking their relationship to a more serious level. Or if she was even able to forgive Gillian.

That wasn't all. There was another, even more important question niggling at her: how important did she want *this* to become?

A calloused hand wrapped around Gillian's fingers, nearly making her jump out of her skin.

"No shex!" Sylvana murmured.

Gillian couldn't help grinning. "No shex. Not tonight. I promise."

Obviously satisfied with the answer Sylvana began to snore again.

All right. We have to talk. No more running away from tough choices. I'm going to stay. Decision made, Gillian got up from the bed and with one last glance at Sylvana went back into the living room. She would stay with Sylvana – at least for the night. *And then we'll see.* If Sylvana was lucid enough in the morning to talk, fine. If she was so angry that she would throw her out – *well, then I have to live with that.*

Gillian removed her stilettos and sank onto the leather sofa before she took her cell phone out of her purse and dialed her home number.

Tilde answered on the third ring.

"Hello, Tilde. This is Gillian. I have to ask a favor of you."

Chapter 3

Gillian inhaled deeply, not for the first time in her life wishing that the smell of coffee would have the same effect as the real thing on her as drinking it. A shouting match next door had woken her up minutes earlier, and she was in desperate need of caffeine. Words like "Ojo de culo," "putilla," and "cabrón" weren't really what she appreciated as a wake-up call.

When the shouting match stopped, her mind immediately dredged up memories of last night: the Labrys club, the taxi drive, and the unresolved situation with Sylvana. There had been no way for her to go back to sleep again. Yesterday had definitely been one of the strangest days of her life. And she wasn't so sure that today would prove to be better. Only Mr. Ingrellini and his story provided a ray of light. If he and his Rosa had made it against all odds and an angry Italian family, there had to be hope for her and Sylvana. Gillian wanted...no, needed to cling to that thought.

Groaning in frustration, she sat up on the sofa and buried her face in her hands. *Why did I have to behave like a first-class bitch? How could I have been so stupid?* Rhetorical questions, of course. She knew exactly why she had denied knowing Sylvana. It had been a reflex, triggered by the fear that her friends would jump to the conclusion that she knew Sylvana in the biblical sense. The fear had been totally irrational, stupid, and self-destructive. There was no logical way her friends could know about their relationship. And even if... she was a grown woman. It wasn't as if her friends were mothers par excellence. Elaine had an ongoing affair with her son's football coach; Ruth loved alcohol way too much, and Emma had a pill addiction. Everybody Gillian knew had at least one skeleton in the closet -- some a whole graveyard.

How often had she wondered who of her so-called friends had known about Derrick's affairs. had even had an affair with him.

No, neither Elaine's, Ruth's, nor Emma's opinion about Gillian's life was of importance.

If only she hadn't panicked back in the café. She had to ask for Sylvana's forgiveness, hope for her understanding, and be totally honest about her own feelings. But then... would Sylvana forgive her? Had their roles been reversed, she wasn't sure she could. She could only pray Sylvana proved the better person.

From the kitchen, the coffee maker spluttered like Mr. Hanson's old lawn mower, distracting Gillian from her depressing thoughts. She got up, stretched, and went to the kitchen. The machine was a simple apparatus that she hadn't seen in years. Most of her acquaintances had shiny high-tech tools in their kitchens, impossible to operate without reading a tome-sized manual. Derrick, her late husband, had been adamant that they buy one of those digital super-automatic espresso machines, not because it made good coffee – which it did – but because it was a status symbol, like his BMW roadster or the swimming pool or the gardener. All of these things had been important to her as well – once. So much had changed over these past months. Sometimes she couldn't believe how snotty she had been, how limited her whole life and her worldview had been.

Gillian opened the refrigerator in search of milk. She couldn't help chuckling. *Now, this is what I call a wasteland.* Three different brands of beer, a bottle of milk, Chinese leftovers which she didn't want to investigate too closely, and a jar of pickled eggs were the refrigerator's only contents. Breakfast was going to be a bit more challenging than she thought.

To her right stood an opened box of Fruit Loops in a cupboard. Her children would have had a field day if they ever learned about her eating something like this. Food with artificial flavor was banned from their home. They bought vegetables, fruit, and bread at the farmer's market. *Well, there is no need to tell the children that Mommy had chemicals for breakfast – if I'll be able to eat anything at all.*

Gillian took the milk out and carefully sniffed the open bottle before she poured some of it into a mug, then filled it with jet-black coffee. The slightly bitter taste was heaven on her tongue. She was just about to take another sip when the sound of retching cut through the apartment's silence.

Gillian flinched. *I guess that means she is up.*

Suddenly the coffee lost its appeal. She set her mug aside and followed the miserable sounds to the bathroom. The door was ajar. She hesitated, torn between the longing to help and the fear of intruding on a vulnerable moment. What if her presence made Sylvana feel worse? Guilt and insecurity held her frozen to the spot. *Quit dithering. Standing here doesn't help.* She reached for the doorknob and opened the door a bit more. Carefully peeking inside, she saw that Sylvana was hunched over the toilet.

Another round of retching started. Tremors shook Sylvana's body. Gillian felt sick as she watched her suffer.

Finally she pushed her doubts aside. This wasn't about her but about Sylvana. If Sylvana didn't want help, she would have to say so.

Gillian knocked at the door to announce her presence. When she got no response, she knocked again, this time louder and more insistent than before. She didn't want to enter before Sylvana acknowledged her presence.

“What?” Sylvana said thickly.

“Sylvana, it’s me, Gillian. Can I come in?”

A choked moan was the only answer.

All right. That’s it. Gillian entered the bathroom, the sour stench of vomit nearly making her gag. Controlling herself with an effort, she took a towel from a shelf. “Hey there.” She wet the towel at the sink, then knelt down next to Sylvana on the cool tile floor.

“How are you doing?” She tenderly pushed the damp hair from Sylvana’s forehead before she dabbed the cold sweat away.

For a moment Sylvana leaned into Gillian’s touch. The connection – simple as it was – warmed Gillian inside.

Another wave of dry heaves shook Sylvana’s body and broke their physical contact.

“I’ll be back in a moment.” Gillian got up and rushed into the kitchen. She remembered from her last pregnancy that one of the worst things about throwing up had been the graveyard taste left in her mouth. She picked up a glass, filled it with cold water, and hurried back to the bathroom, where she knelt down next to Sylvana again.

“I wanna die!” Sylvana’s voice was hoarse from alcohol and retching.

“No, you don’t. I wouldn’t have a clue how to get rid of your corpse,” Gillian said, softly enough to take any sting out of her comment. She hoped that Sylvana was receptive for her kind of humor.

Sylvana let out a dry chuckle. “Just leave my body in the hallway. Someone will pick it up.” She clutched her stomach. “Oh, that hurt.”

Gillian touched Sylvana’s back. The T-shirt was clammy with sweat. “Would you like to rinse your mouth? I have a glass of water.”

“Yeah.” Sylvana took the offered glass, her hand shaking. “Thanks.”

Gillian rubbed soothing circles over Sylvana’s damp T-shirt. The only time she ever had a hangover had been after a fraternity party – which seemed a lifetime ago. The experience back then had prevented her from ever getting drunk like that again. The day after was just not worth it.

“Do you feel like getting up?”

Bloodshot eyes turned toward her. “Why?”

“You’ll feel better if you lie down,” Gillian said. “Your stomach must be all cramped up by now. Sitting on the floor hugging the toilet won’t do you any good. You need to relax.”

Sylvana slowly shook her head. “No, I’ll only have to throw up again.”

“Sitting like this will not help. You should lay down.” Gillian had enough experience with her children to know that much. “I’m going to put a bucket next to the bed. You’ll feel much more comfortable lying down. You need to drink a lot of water and take some aspirin as soon as you feel like you can keep them down. It will help. Trust me.”

Blue eyes pierced hers. Gillian flinched. She wanted to kick herself. This really wasn’t the right moment to ask Sylvana for trust.

“Sorry, I—”

“All right. I guess I can give it a try.”

Surprise and relief washed through Gillian. “Good. Would you like to use some mouth wash first?”

A forced smile appeared on Sylvana’s face. “What’s the matter? You don’t like the aroma of dead rat and wet dog?”

“No, and I guess you don’t like it yourself.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Gillian helped Sylvana up and stood guard beside her at the sink while she gargled and rinsed with the minty mouthwash. Thankfully enough this triggered no more throw up attack.

“Would you like some help—”

“No, thanks.” Sylvana struggled toward the door. “I can manage.”

At the dismissive tone, a wave of pain soared inside Gillian. Even though she shouldn’t be surprised about Sylvana’s reaction, it still hurt. Gillian swallowed hard. “All right.”

Watching Sylvana creep weakly into the bedroom was tough. Gillian knew she didn’t deserve better, but Sylvana’s behavior hurt nevertheless. *At least she hasn’t asked me to leave...* She had to hold on to this thought or should leave immediately, which was no option if she wanted to mend things.

Sylvana stopped in front of the wardrobe and opened the door. Agonizingly slow, she tried to reach for something inside and nearly toppled over.

“Shit.” Sylvana breathed heavily and held her stomach. “Shit. Shit. Shit.”

Unable to bear it any longer, Gillian hurried over. “Come on. Let’s sit down.”

She took Sylvana’s elbow and led her to the bed before she carefully helped her to sit down. “Stretch out. It will help your stomach.”

For once, a pale-faced Sylvana followed her instruction without questions or comments.

“Can I...?” Gillian bit her lip. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Yeah, this really feels better.” She looked at Gillian through bloodshot eyes. “Could you hand me a clean T-shirt?”

“Sure.” Gillian turned toward the open wardrobe. “Wow.” She couldn’t hide her surprise at the T-shirts, sweatshirts, and pants sorted into neat piles on the shelves. “That’s quite impressive. You really like strict order in your wardrobe, eh?”

“Saves a lot of time,” came the grumbled reply.

Gillian’s own closet looked more like a war zone, at least when it was she and not her housekeeper who put the clothes away. She chose not to comment and picked a comfortable-looking T-shirt, the cotton fabric soft and smelling of bergamot and sandalwood, scents she would always associate with Sylvana.

Gillian handed the shirt to Sylvana. “Do you... can you manage changing on your own?”

“I’m not physically handicapped, you know,” Sylvana snapped.

A palpable tension sizzled in the air.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Gillian answered, a bit more sharply than she had planned. Sylvana’s behavior began to grate on her nerves.

“I’d like to change. Either you leave or you turn around. It’s up to you.” Sylvana slowly sat up, grabbing the hem of her T-shirt.

Gillian turned to face the wall. A naked Sylvana wasn’t something she needed to see right now, not under these circumstances.

Her body however seemed to be of a different mind. The rustle of fabric behind her triggered her senses. Her treacherous mind remembered the softness of Sylvana’s skin, the way her eyes turned nearly black when she was aroused, pupils expanding to swallow the blue. Heat rushed through Gillian’s belly. She fought to think of something else. Making a list in her head helped: Water. Aspirin. Call Tilde to make sure everything was all right at home.

“I’m ready,” Sylvana interrupted her thoughts. “You can turn around now.”

Gillian looked at Sylvana, startled. Sweat gleamed on her cheeks and forehead. She was as white as Gillian’s grandmother’s freshly bleached sheet.

“God, Sylvana,” Gillian blurted. “Are you okay?”

Sylvana grimaced. “I’ve been better but...look, Gillian, I really appreciate you helping me and all that.” She rubbed her forehead and looked down at the duvet. “I don’t... I guess you need to be home or something, so... I think I can manage from here.”

Cold fear gripped Gillian’s heart. Was that it? Did Sylvana want her to leave? She had to be sure before she walked away. “Do you want me to go?”

Weary eyes met hers. “I don’t know. Why would you want to stay?” Sylvana’s voice cracked.

Maybe she doesn't want me to go but believes I don't want to stay, Gillian thought, a spark of hope flaring bright. Only honesty had a chance of repairing the gap between them, and she had nothing to lose anyway. "There's more than one reason why I want to stay, Sylvana," she said, pointing at the bed. "May I?"

Sylvana's gaze was guarded, but she nodded.

Gillian carefully sat down on the edge of the mattress, close enough to be able to reach out and touch Sylvana but with enough distance so she wouldn't feel crowded. *Please let me find the right words*. "I don't have to be home before the early evening. I..." She swallowed around the lump in her throat. This wasn't easy. "I want to talk about what happened in the café if you're willing to hear me out." She wanted to say so much more. The need to explain, to apologize burned inside her. However, this wasn't the right moment. Sylvana needed to be well again for that discussion. "But for now I would like to take care of you and make sure you're doing okay. If you allow me, that is."

Sylvana looked up, a quick brush of their gazes, before her glance fell back to the duvet. She smacked her lips. "I feel like I'm under a dehydration curse."

"Would you like some more water?" Amazed she had not been thrown out already, Gillian got up, ready to get whatever Sylvana asked for.

"Yeah. Thanks. And Gillian?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for being here. I can't make any promises, all right?" Sylvana rasped.

"Thank you." Gillian felt nearly light-headed from relief when she left the room.

* * *

Sylvana's eyes snapped open. *What the fuck?*

Irritated by the sounds of honking cars and howling police sirens that invaded her bedroom, she rolled on her side, too annoyed to sleep any longer. The downtown noises, as pesky as they were, she was used to. Something else must have disturbed her.

She moved her head a bit, then let it fall back on the pillow as her throbbing skull threatened to explode. *Ow!* Her body felt as if a road roller had run over it. Twice. Every nerve ending hurt, including the few brain cells that had survived yesterday's stunt at the club. And, as if that wasn't enough, her tongue tasted as if something furry had curled up and died there.

Oh my God. She tried to focus on her breathing when an unfamiliar sound filtered into her dizzy brain. *Someone's moving around in my living room?*

Sylvana strained her ears, her stomach lurching. Now she remembered. Gillian was here.

Vague memories rushed back at her: Gillian dragging her out of The Labrys and into her apartment, her vomiting over the toilet, the promise that they would talk later.

Shit. The pounding in her head intensified. *Aspirin. I need an aspirin. Or two.*

With a groan Sylvana dragged her body toward the edge of the bed. She slowly sat up, relieved that she was dizzy but didn't feel the urge to throw up. She hated vomiting. The feeling of helplessness that came with losing the fight against her body, the taste in her mouth, the smell...but now, not only had she puked like a teenager after having been served her first drink, if she remembered correctly, Gillian had witnessed all of it. Humiliation made her face grow hot. *Why is she here anyhow?* A little flutter in her stomach accompanied the thought that maybe Gillian felt bad about her fucked-up behavior at the café.

She snorted, angry for even allowing herself that kind of hope. No, she decided, Gillian had not come to grovel. *I bet she's here for some kind of damage control, afraid that I'll show up again in one of her fancy haunts and tell her snobbish friends that I fucked her.* Her jaw clenched. She wouldn't let Gillian manipulate her.

Reaching over to the nightstand was like fighting against molasses, but she persisted until she found the aspirin bottle. She took two pills, forcing herself to swallow them with the water Gillian had left behind. With careful movements, she propped her back against the headboard and closed her eyes. She needed time to let the aspirin do its job before she could face Gillian.

Sylvana groaned. *How did I get into this mess?* And what had made her believe that Gillian cared for her? A bitter taste spread in Sylvana's mouth. *Who cares anyhow? I'm over her.*

She let out a small bitter laugh. *Liar!* What had her father always taught her? *You can fool others, but never try to fool yourself.* She wasn't really over Gillian. Not by a long shot. Not yet.

The little blond housewife had shaken her world. Who would have thought? Sylvana had always been a firm believer in "lust as first sight," never really wanting more until the day Gillian came into her life... and her heart. That much she had to admit to herself.

Sylvana's fists tightened on the duvet. The same lovely angel had demolished all of Sylvana's dreams with one single sentence: *I don't have any idea who this is.*

The lady and the tramp, that was how her friend Janet had described their relationship. Janet was right, Sylvana acknowledged. *I'm such an idiot!* Anger blazed inside her. Today she was running the show, and that stuck-up bitch had better watch herself.

Unable to lie still any longer, she ignored her body's protests and swung her legs out of bed. A wave of dizziness crashed into her. She bit the inside of her lip until she tasted blood.

Fueled by anger, she managed to dress herself in her most comfortable jeans and a sweater. There was no way she could talk to Gillian while lying on her back, feeling sick. She could lie down again and feel sorry for herself as soon as she had Gillian thrown out.

Determined to get it over with, Sylvana opened the door to the living room and stopped. The smell of coffee teased her nose. Gillian sat on the sofa, an old *National Geographic* magazine in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other. Her bare feet were drawn up beneath her.

A jumble of anger, longing, and hurt pulsed through Sylvana. Gillian's short black dress accentuated her porcelain skin and blond hair. *No one should be allowed to look so beautiful*, she thought. Confronting her was going to be hard.

Gillian's uplifted gaze met hers.

"Don't you look cozy?" The words came out as harshly as Sylvana had intended.

Surprise and a flash of hurt whisked over Gillian's eyes. She carefully laid the magazine on the coffee table and sat up straight. "How are you feeling? I bought some bread and jelly in the little corner shop. Would you like something to eat?"

Sylvana nearly laughed. She could only imagine what Mr. Singh and his wife thought when Gillian walked into their shop – all Mrs. Prim and Proper with the most expensive dress their block had ever seen.

Shaking her head, she walked to her small kitchen. "No, thanks. I just want some water."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Gillian's face crumple. Sylvana straightened her shoulders. *I bet that this isn't how you expected our little reunion to happen.*

She stepped into the kitchen and gaped at the kitchen counter. A whole array of water bottles stood next to a packet of herb tea, two pots of jelly, and some bread

"I didn't know what you might like to eat or drink. Herbal tea is usually a good choice." Gillian's soft voice came from behind her.

A bubble of anger burst inside Sylvana. She swung around. "What do you want, Gillian? Why are you here?" She couldn't stop now that she started, nor did she want to. "Do you want to bribe me into staying away from you and your friends? Are you afraid that I'll tell them what a good fuck you've been?"

Gillian paled and took a step back. "I didn't... that's not it at all."

"What then? Why did you come to The Labrys yesterday? Did you have a hot date? Were you looking for another butch to do you?" The pounding in Sylvana's skull increased, a pressure so great she wished she had stayed in bed.

"I was looking for you," Gillian said, lifting her chin. "You didn't answer any of my messages, and I...I needed to talk to you."

Sylvana snorted. "You could have talked with me back in the café when you were busy with your little friends. Why now? Why should I even listen to you?"

Gillian winced. "Because I wanted to ask your forgiveness for what I've done and said."

To Sylvana, the ticking of the wall clock sounded like a bomb counting down. "What?" she asked, not sure she heard Gillian correctly.

"I'm so sorry for hurting you." Gillian took a shaky breath, looking contrite. "I would give anything to undo what I've done."

Sylvana's breath caught. She had expected to hear Gillian justify her actions, maybe beg her not to reveal their secret. To hear her ask for forgiveness caught her off guard. What now? Did this change anything? How could she trust Gillian? Did she even want to? She blew out a frustrated breath and ran her hand through her hair.

"You have every right to be mad, Sylvana. I behaved like an absolute asshole!"

Sylvana rubbed her temples. "It's not that easy, Gillian. You can't just come here, say you're sorry, and expect everything to be okay again." As much as she wished that it would be so easy.

"I know, Sylvana. I can't tell you how much I—"

"Why did you do it?" That question had kept her awake, night after night. Over and over the scene in the café had played before her eyes, a living nightmare that wouldn't go away. The way Gillian had stared at her, her cold voice that had cut into Sylvana like a well-honed knife. "Why did you pretend not to know me?" She couldn't hide the hurt in her voice.

Gillian's shoulders slumped. She looked down at her feet. "I was afraid that they would believe that we are lovers."

"What? Because we were talking to each other?" Sylvana stared at her incredulously. "That's bullshit, Gillian! Do you think that I'm not able to talk to you without mentioning to everyone that I had you in every possible sexual position?"

The blood drained from Gillian's already pale face, leaving her white to the lips. "I know that my behavior is inexcusable. I panicked. But this is not about you. I... this is my problem. There are my parents and my children. They have no idea." Gillian's voice was raw, her expression ghastly. "Sylvana, I made a mistake. A mistake that I regret more than I can express. The truth is...I am scared." Gillian stared down at her hands. "Scared because I care about you. Very much. And I am so afraid that you won't give me a second chance and that I just blew what we could have had together."

Sylvana had a hard time absorbing Gillian's words. Anger and hope were trying to slaughter each other while she pondered how to respond. *She's scared. So what? Do I even believe her? And even if – is this whole thing worth all this struggle? We're so different.* Sylvana's thoughts raced. "Gillian, I don't know what to say." Trying to buy herself time, Sylvana opened a bottle and poured herself a glass of water.

"Maybe it is better if I—" Gillian's voice cracked. "I can call a taxi, and then I'll get out of your hair."

A lump formed in Sylvana's throat. Was that what she wanted? She stared at the half-empty glass in her hand. Did she really want Gillian to leave? She didn't know what to feel, what to think, but the idea of losing Gillian once and for all hurt more than the pain she had felt about the betrayal and was even stronger than her anger. Gillian had gone to The Labrys to find her. She had apologized and asked for forgiveness. That had to count for something, right?

After slamming the glass down on the counter, Sylvana followed a retreating Gillian to the living room in time to see her wiping tears from her face. Sylvana's gut clenched as she became aware of the dark circles under Gillian's eyes and her haunted expression.

She's hurting. Sylvana's anger deflated like a pierced balloon. What remained was pain and something else—the need to protect Gillian and ease her hurt. She wondered briefly how Gillian could so easily break through the walls that protected her most vulnerable parts. Parts she was usually skilled in hiding and protecting.

“You hurt me. A lot,” Sylvana said, choosing her words with care while searching Gillian's face for something she didn't know how to ask for.

Tears glittered on Gillian's cheeks.

For a moment Sylvana fought with the feelings of betrayal and hurt Gillian had caused. Then she opened her arms. “Come here.”

Gillian hesitated only a moment before flinging herself into Sylvana's arms.

A wave of Gillian's exclusive perfume drifted to Sylvana's nose, reminding her of a flowery meadow in the middle of summer. One of her hands found its way to the base of Gillian's neck and began to gently knead the soft flesh. *This feels so damn good.* She closed her eyes to let the closeness and warmth wash over her. A part of her knew that they needed to talk some more, but right now she was tired, felt like shit, and really needed more sleep.

“I'm so sorry.” Gillian sobbed against Sylvana's chest. “So sorry.”

Sylvana rested her chin on Gillian's head. “I'm sorry too.”

Gillian looked up, her eyes wet. “Why? You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I should have answered your calls, should have talked to you.” She touched Gillian's lips with two fingers to stop her from replying. “I still believe that what you did was wrong. It was. We have to talk about it.” She exhaled slowly. “But I missed you.” Saying those words felt unbelievably good – as scary as they were.

Gillian let her head fall against Sylvana's chest again. They stayed together that way for a while, swaying slightly back and forth.

“Hey, Gillian?” Sylvana finally roused herself to ask.

“Yes,” came the muffled reply.

“I don't know about you, but I'm really beat.” Her back hurt; her head hurt, and she was in desperate need of more aspirin.

“Me too.”

“So what do you say about getting some sleep before we talk?”

Gillian glanced up, her green eyes searching. “Sure, let me just call a taxi. Could we maybe phone later today?” Her voice quivered.

Sylvana swallowed. The offer didn’t sound bad. Later she surely would feel more grounded than she did now. But the truth was, she wasn’t ready to let Gillian leave, not when they had just begun to talk again. *What does she want? Come on, you chicken. Just ask her.* “You look pretty much out of it yourself. Why don’t you take a nap with me?”

Surprise and delight replaced the shadows in Gillian’s eyes. “Really? I mean, yes.”

Encouraged, Sylvana bent to brush her mouth over Gillian’s. The kiss was gentle and heartbreakingly familiar. There was so much between them that she didn’t want to lose.

Shortly later, Gillian traced her finger over the letters on the borrowed T-shirt.

Sylvana chuckled. Gillian’s expression made it clear that she had problems with the slogan on the T-shirt. “You don’t like it?”

“I’m not sure if a shirt with bright pink letters, stating ‘Dip me into honey and feed me to the lesbians’ is helpful for our first attempt at just sleeping next to each other.” Gillian gave her a strained smile, looking pale and tired as she snuggled under the duvet.

“Well, I haven’t gotten around to doing my laundry. It was either that, ‘She may wear the pants but I wear the strap-on,’ or ‘I eat from the bushy bowl.’”

Gillian grimaced. “That’s gross.”

“I thought that you’d like this one better.”

For a short, awkward moment Sylvana hesitated in front of the bed. All of a sudden she felt shy around Gillian. Ignoring the unfamiliar feeling, she slowly crawled under the duvet. “I set the alarm for three o’clock. Is that okay for you?”

“Yes, thanks.” Gillian tried to hide a yawn behind her hand. “I’m so tired. Sorry.”

“Me too.” The cool cotton felt good against Sylvana’s sensitive skin. “Would you, um, like to—”

“Yes.” Gillian scooted over, bridging the distance between them and laid her head on Sylvana’s shoulder. “Can I?” Her hand hovered over Sylvana’s stomach.

“Sure.” The soft touch against her middle nearly made her melt inside. A pleasant tingle followed, spreading up and down her spine. Neither mentally nor physically was she in any condition to do more than simply revel in Gillian’s presence, so she told her libido to back off. But she did allow herself to enjoy Gillian’s warm presence in her bed, the soft and sweet-smelling body curled against her. *Hell, holding her feels so good*, was her last coherent thought before sleep claimed her.

Chapter 4

Two days later, early morning sunlight streamed through the windows of Janet and Sylvana's small office space, spotlighting the dust that had collected on the shelves. Sylvana made a mental note to clean the office someday soon. Most clients called with new jobs; only rarely did someone show up. Still, it wouldn't do if the office looked and smelled like an unopened tomb.

"Sylvana, you still there?" the woman on the other end of the line asked.

"Yes." Sylvana pressed her cell phone closer to her ear.

"I asked Ron, and he's okay with you starting the job next week. We won't be home, but we'll give you the key."

"Thank you, Cheryl. I owe you one."

"No, that's all right. You helped us often enough, no matter what."

"Thanks and give my best to Ron. I'll give you a call at the end of the week. All right?"

"Sure. Bye, Sylvana."

"Bye, Cheryl."

Sylvana switched her cell phone off. Today was only Monday, but the week was already getting on her nerves. She turned to face Janet, who sat slightly hunched behind her desk. All right, maybe it wasn't as much the week but Janet who annoyed her to hell. "You're lucky. Cheryl is fine with me starting the installation of the track lighting next week."

Janet nodded, a grateful expression on her face. "That's good. There's no way I could lift anything heavy this week. I owe her one."

"Yes, you do. Honestly, Janet, will you ever grow up?" Folding her arms across her chest, Sylvana didn't even try to keep her anger out of her voice. Taking over Janet's responsibilities for this week meant longer hours than planned. And longer hours meant she would hardly be able to see Gillian before the next weekend. Damn.

"Someday. Yes. Probably." Janet shrugged and carefully shifted in her chair. "This wasn't planned, you know. It just happened. And I really can't move furniture around anytime soon."

"Okay. But as soon as you are better, you could start cleaning the office. Anymore dust in the office and we won't be able to open the door. So when do I have to show up tomorrow?"

"At seven" Janet pointed to a piece of paper on an old pizza box. "This is the address."

"And Jim will be there too?" As much as Jim had the ability to get on her nerves, Sylvana thought he was a good worker, strong enough to be a real help when it came to heavy lifting.

"Yes, he'll be there. He's the muscle, and you're the brain."

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, though I’m not sure how much brain I need to help someone move into a new apartment.” Sylvana picked up the paper and glanced at the address. “Where is the guy moving to?”

“His new apartment is only three blocks away from his old one, and there’s some installation work that needs to be done. That is where the brain part comes in.” Janet rose stiffly from her chair and walked over the small refrigerator they kept in the office. “Want something to drink?”

“No, thanks. I need to hurry if I want to finish the baseboard installation today.” Sylvana cast a glance at the paint bucket she had picked up earlier. If everything went well, she should be able to finish the job in the afternoon. Unfortunately, her long experience as a handyman told her things rarely went well. Maybe she should just accept her fate – this was going to be a hard workweek.

Janet opened the fridge in slow motion and removed a bottle of water. “But you’re not going to leave before you tell me what happened with your little housewife on Saturday. Did she stay? Did you throw her out?”

Sylvana sighed. She had hoped to be able to leave before being pestered. “It’s none of your friggin’ business, Janet.”

“Maybe. But you want to tell me, right?” Janet gave her a devious grin.

Sylvana shook her head. “Nope.” How was she supposed to talk about something she still felt so unsure about? And even if she found the right words – she wasn’t sure if Janet was really the best person to talk to.

“Oh, come on. You know you want to tell me. I’m your best friend.”

“Pass me the paint bucket, will you?” Sylvana pointed at the four-gallon paint bucket.

“I can’t,” Janet replied through clenched teeth, glaring.

“Really. Why not?”

“You know why.”

“Yes, but I love to hear it over and over again.” Sylvana grinned darkly. “It’s not often that one of my friends participates in sexual activities that lead to lumbago.”

“So what? At least I had some fun before it happened. Did you?”

“Did I what?” Sylvana knew exactly what Janet wanted to hear. How could she tell Janet how sweet waking up with Gillian had been? How wonderful it had been to kiss her good-bye? How satisfying it was to know that Gillian wanted more than sex between them. The last thing she needed today was to listen to Janet’s rambling about why trusting Gillian wasn’t a good idea. Or to hear about the advantages of fuck buddies. She knew she was risking a lot by trusting Gillian.

“How can someone be so dense? Did you have mind-blowing make-up sex with Gillian?”

Sylvana took a deep breath. “Why are you so interested in my sex life? It seems that yours was so much more interesting last weekend.”

“So there *is* something to be interested in?”

“I don’t believe this. It’s like talking to a horny teenager.” Sylvana rolled her eyes.

“So satisfy my horniness and I’ll be quiet.”

“No, we didn’t have sex.”

“Oh.” Janet rubbed the side of her nose. “What happened? I really thought that she, you know, she seemed really interested in getting you back.”

“She did.”

“Did what?”

Sylvana crossed her arms over her chest. “We talked, we kissed, and next Saturday we’re going to the zoo with her children.”

“Wow.” Janet stared at Sylvana with round eyes.

“Yes, wow.” Sylvana sat down on her chair. “It scares the crap out of me.” She knew she wanted more from Gillian than just sex. Though the sex had been great from the beginning and was a lot of fun on top. But it wasn’t only the sex she liked. She loved talking to Gillian, loved the small dimple that appeared whenever Gillian laughed. She wanted to be there for her, support her, hold her. Sylvana sighed. Damn she really had it bad.

“Why are you scared?” Janet asked. “Because she’s straight and has children?”

“No, I... she’s not straight. But that’s not the point. I’m...she’s...” Sylvana plucked a piece of lint from her work pants. “I want this to be more, to be serious.” There, it was out.

“Double wow. I’m speechless. So she really did apologize?”

“Speechless, eh? That’s a new one.” Sylvana chuckled. “Yeah, she apologized. I was pissed like hell when I realized that she was in my apartment. But we had a good talk, and she’s... I don’t know, Janet. She touches something inside me.”

Sylvana stared out the window. Everything was changing so fast. With her, around her. Not in a bad way – but changes weren’t really something she felt comfortable with. And now, on top of everything else, here she sat with Janet and had a deep, meaningful talk. They were best buddies, two dykes who worked in the same profession, killed some beers together in their free time, liked to watch sports together, and had similar tastes in women. *Well, at least we did until recently.* Deep talks weren’t something they usually did.

“I don’t know what to say.” Janet slowly shuffled back to her desk and sat down with a grunt. “No more sex for me. Never. Honestly. It’s not worth this.”

“You don’t need to become celibate; you just need to stop working your way through the Kama Sutra. Some positions are simply unhealthy.”

Janet stuck her tongue out. “Do you want my advice or not?”

“Maybe.” Sylvana wasn’t really sure if Janet was the right person to give advice when it came to relationships. Janet’s track record wasn’t speaking for her. Well, listening couldn’t hurt. Hopefully.

“See, I’m not really good at the relationship thing,” Janet said. “We both know that.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“Fuck you, Watson. And I don’t really like your little housewife, but she had guts coming into The Labrys and standing up to Roxanne. So my question is: why don’t you stop planning either the wedding or the divorce and just see where this goes? You’re not going to U-Haul in with her next week even if everything works out, right?”

“No. I won’t. But this is not only about the two of us. She has children.” *And a huge house in the suburbs, more money than I’ll ever be able to earn, knowledge about art that I didn’t even know existed, has traveled countries I only know about from old National Geographic magazines...*

“And you’re good with kids.” Janet took a sip from the water bottle. “Your niece loves you.”

That was true. Sylvana nodded. She did have some experience with children. Well, with one child. Still. Maybe Janet was right. Maybe she shouldn’t overcomplicate things. She got up from her chair. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Janet moved her hand toward the phone. “I’m going to ask Maria to drive me to my doctor’s appointment.” She groaned. “That’s the least she can do.”

Sylvana snorted. “So, it was Maria? Oh girl, when will you ever learn?”

Chapter 5

“Night, Mom.”

Gillian got up from the edge of her daughter’s bed. “Sleep tight, Angela. And don’t forget about the fifteen-minutes rule, all right?”

“But, Mom—”

“Don’t ‘mom’ me,” Gillian interrupted with a smile. “It’s already late enough. Fifteen minutes reading time, and then it’s lights out. Agreed?”

“But my friend Anne is allowed to stay up much later. I’m not a child anymore, Mom.” Angela pouted.

Gillian bent down, pushed back a shock of dark brown hair, and kissed her daughter's forehead. *She has no idea how cute that grown-up act sometimes is.* "You will always be my child, and don't forget that the fifteen minutes reading time is a generous gift. Michael's already asleep."

"But Mom, Michael *is* a child." Angela rolled her eyes. "He's only nine."

"Daughter of mine, fifteen minutes. All right?" Gillian remained firm.

Angela took a deep breath, finally relenting. "Okay, but we have to talk about this. My birthday is coming up."

"We will, sweetheart. I promise. Good night."

Gillian watched her daughter pick up her book and begin to read. Tenderness for her oldest filled her heart. Like her, Angela was a bookworm. Gillian's childhood had been a constant battle with a mother who couldn't understand why her daughter carried a book around at all times. *The joy of an easy escape into worlds where my mother couldn't follow me.* Gillian was happy that Angela loved to read as well and didn't spend half of her life in front of the computer like some of her friends.

She stepped out of the room and walked down the stairs, grateful the day was finally over and done with. Breathing a sigh of relief, she entered the kitchen.

"Hey, Gillian. Do you want a cup of coffee?" Tilde sat at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in her hand and an open newspaper in front of her.

Gillian shook her head. "No, thanks. I would like to sleep tonight. What is it with you Scandinavians and coffee at all times of the day or night anyhow?"

Tilde shrugged. "We're a tough race, trapped in a freezing country where polar bears roam the streets twenty-four hours a day. Surely you understand the need for a hot drink to warm our icy bones?"

"Are you sure there's only coffee in your cup? Let me see." Gillian took a step toward Tilde.

Tilde got up from her chair and sought refuge behind the table. "Go away, you crazy American, you. This is my coffee. Get your own."

Gillian laughed out loud. "Thank you very much. I prefer a glass of wine."

"Your loss." Tilde sat back down again. "Nothing better than twenty-year-old whisky mixed with a bit of coffee."

Eyes wide, Gillian could hardly believe what she had just heard. "You heathen. You didn't. Tell me you didn't."

Tilde shook her head. "No, just joking. But I found a whisky-flavored coffee today. It's really good."

Gillian went to the wine cabinet. “I really don’t like that flavored stuff. A coffee has to taste like coffee.” She picked a bottle of her favorite Shiraz and opened it. The slightly peppery aroma of the wine filled her nose. “And Tilde – I’ll have to kill you if you tell my father that I didn’t let the wine breathe.”

Laughter followed Gillian when she left the kitchen to go into the winter garden. Tilde had really proven to be a blessing. She was an easygoing person with a great sense of humor, just what the children needed. *And what I need as well...*

Gillian carefully placed her glass on the little side table and sat down in her favorite chair, facing the garden. Dusk had settled. Only a few birds were still on the lawn, looking for insects and worms. All was quiet. *The blessings of suburban life.*

This was the moment she had been looking forward to all day. Tilde wasn’t the only adult in her life anymore with whom she could talk about the day’s happenings, what needed to be done tomorrow or whatever else was on her mind. Ever since she and Sylvana made up over a week ago they had a standing date in the evenings.

Gillian retrieved the cordless phone and dialed a familiar number.

* * *

Sylvana dragged her tired body into her apartment and straight into the kitchen.

She longed for a hot shower, a cold beer, and a certain phone call. *I’m so pussy-whipped, and the weirdest thing is that it feels so good.*

A refreshing chill hit her body as she opened the fridge. She decided against an ale, choosing a light lager instead. The smooth, refreshing taste of the brew washed over her tongue.

She was just about to undress and go into the shower when the shrill ringing of her phone cut through her apartment. Her heartbeat quickened. Here was the one thing she had been looking for all day. She hurried to the phone and picked it up. “Sylvana here. I live to serve,” she said, suddenly embarrassed by the thought the caller might not be the person she expected.

“That’s good to hear.” Gillian’s laughter bubbled through the phone like champagne. “Hi, honey, how was your day? And how is your back?”

Sylvana closed her eyes, letting Gillian’s voice wrap around, feeling better already. “Hi, Gillian. I’m so happy it’s you. I was afraid I had another customer asking me to do more heavy lifting. Hang on a second, all right?” She walked over to her sofa and sat down with a groan. Her back was going to kill her one of these days.

“That doesn’t sound good, honey.”

“No, no, I’m fine. Today was okay, really. I only had to install a ceiling fan and some smoke detectors. Yesterday was tough. Moving furniture and boxes the whole day is no fun, but it’s a good job. I even got a warm pizza before I left.”

“That’s good. I was afraid you would have another cold-pizza night.” Gillian chuckled. “Does that mean there’s no more heavy lifting in your future?”

“Not in my immediate future, and that’s just fine with me.” Sylvana fiddled with the remote control she found on the couch. “So how was your day?”

“Oh, I met an old friend of my mother’s today. She’s a dean at the college I told you about, and she said that I could sit in for some of the lectures. That way I’ll get a better feel for the whole college experience before I make a decision.”

Sylvana knew how nervous Gillian had been about the whole affair. To hear that she had really done it was great. A feeling of pride washed through her. “That’s cool. You’re taking big steps there, Gillian.”

“I am, Sylvana. Your encouragement and support mean a lot to me. I’m not sure I’d be able to take these big steps without you.” The emotion in Gillian’s voice came through clearly.

For a few seconds, Sylvana heard only breathing from the other end of the phone. She didn’t know what to say. The only thing she had done was spend the last week listening to Gillian’s dreams and encouraging her to do what she wanted to do. That was not really heroic. But the knowledge that Gillian thought so produced a very warm and fuzzy feeling inside her.

Just as she was about to break the silence, Gillian said, “I miss you.”

“I miss you too.” Sylvana swallowed hard. Talking about emotions, even saying mundane things like “I miss you,” made her feel vulnerable. She wasn’t used to it, but they had decided to be open and honest with each other, and for her that included saying things she had never said before. “I’m sorry that my job takes up so much of my time right now, Gillian.”

“No, no, please. There’s nothing you have to be sorry for. I just really, really miss you.” Gillian cleared her throat. “Do you still think you’ll be able to join us on Saturday?”

“Yes. I’ll wrap up the job on Friday. And then I’m all yours on Saturday.”

“If only. Unfortunately, I have to act all grown-up and share you with my kids.”

Sylvana couldn’t help laughing. “Ah, there’s that, right. How do they like the idea of going to the zoo and meeting one of Mommy’s friends?” She and Gillian had decided the children would get to know her as one of Gillian’s friends, but she was still nervous about meeting Angela and Michael. What if they didn’t like her? If they found her weird or uncool?

“They’re looking forward to the zoo experience. Who will be accompanying us is not so important to them.” Gillian’s voice dropped a note. “But it is for me.”

“I still can’t believe you haven’t been to the zoo for years.” Sylvana yawned. “Sorry. The long days are taking their toll on my old body.”

“Your body is far from old. But you should take a hot shower and go to bed early. I can hear how tired you are.”

“Yes, Mom.” Sylvana chuckled. “That’s just what I’m going to do. Though I would rather shower with you.”

Gillian let out an exasperated sigh. “You can’t say things like that.”

“Why?” A grin spread over Sylvana’s face. She had a pretty good idea what Gillian was talking about. But teasing her was always a lot of fun.

“How am I supposed to go to sleep with the image of you and me together in the shower?”

“What do you think I’m doing with the same image when I’m in the shower? Ever heard of adjustable showerheads?” Sylvana imagined the blush flooding Gillian’s face with color. Despite her long marriage, the woman was still an innocent when it came to sex, something that Sylvana found absolutely adoring. But to see how Gillian slowly grew bolder in that area as well made Sylvana’s stomach flutter.

“I’d rather have the real thing instead of a device.” Somehow, Gillian managed to sound prim.

“Oh, Gillian. Me too, believe me.” Another moment of silence lingered between them. Sylvana closed her eyes, imagining Gillian sitting next to her on the sofa and not many miles away, so it was easier to ask the question in her heart. “Is there any chance for some alone time, just you and me?”

“Why, Ms. Freedman... are you asking me for a date?”

Sylvana sat up straight at Gillian’s playful tone. “Indeed, Mrs. Webber. I am.”

“Perfect, 'cause I’m free on Sunday night. How does that sound?”

“Perfect.” They hadn’t been able to see each other for what felt like an eternity. Phone calls were great. They had helped her to get to know Gillian better, and vice versa...but still, nothing beat seeing Sylvana face to face.

“What would you say if I told you that on top of it I have no curfew on Sunday?” Gillian asked.

Sylvana couldn’t believe her luck. “What do you mean?”

“The children will be staying with their grandparents from Sunday till Monday evening.”

A whole night together! Not only seeing but maybe also touching her. Touching, tasting, smelling. Sylvana's brain almost short-circuited when she thought about the possibilities this included. She licked her suddenly dry lips. *Down girl. Down.*

Maybe she could take Gillian to a romantic dinner. That could be a great start for an evening together. Some delicious but not too heavy food, some good wine, a lot of flirting and then a whole night together. This sounded like a perfect idea. But would Gillian be ready to go out on an actual date? In public?

“Are you still there, Sylvana?” Gillian lost her earlier playfulness. “I understand if that is too short notice. We could just meet, and then I could drive home again. That’s fine.”

Sylvana grimaced at the insecurity she heard in the quiet voice. “Yes... no. I was just speechless for a moment. I would love to spend the night with you, Gillian. Honestly. I was

just wondering if you would like to go out or would prefer to stay in for dinner.” She braced herself for Gillian’s answer. As much as she would love to have a romantic dinner somewhere, she would be all right if they stayed home and ordered takeout.

“Going out as in a date?”

“Yes.” Sylvana held her breath.

“I would love to.”

Sylvana could hardly contain her elation. “All right. That’s great.” She already had a place in mind, a cozy Italian trattoria not too far away from her apartment. They had a wonderful north Italian cuisine, and the chances of Gillian’s friends seeing her there were slim. The place was hardly one of those hip places they most likely frequented. “Why don’t we meet at my place around seven? I’ll be dressed and showered by then.”

“That’s a shame, really.” Gillian’s voice dropped to a low, intimate tone. “But maybe we could shower together the next morning?”

Images of a naked and wet Gillian flashed through her mind and set her loins on fire. “You’re a tease.”

Gillian chuckled.

A bright grin spread across Sylvana’s face. Now she was really looking forward to a nice, warm shower. “Great. I’m going to reserve a table for the evening, then.”

“Please, yes. Oh, and I hope that you like hot dogs.”

“Hot dogs.” Sylvana scratched her head. “I do, but I didn’t know they served them at La Trattoria.”

Gillian laughed. “No, sorry. My children insist on having hot dogs for lunch at the zoo.”

“Ah, that’s all right. As a matter of fact, I love hot dogs.”

“Good for you, then. I don’t, but the children are allowed to choose food on special occasions, so it’s going to be hot dogs on Saturday.”

Sylvana’s jaw cracked as she yawned. “Sorry, it was a long day.”

“You must be dead tired. Go on and have your shower. Alone,” Gillian added.

Sylvana got up from the sofa “No can do. It’s going to be me and my fantasies in there.” She chuckled at the splutter of Gillian blowing a raspberry. “We’ll meet on Saturday for the zoo, and then I’m going to see you on Sunday evening? Wow! I’m the luckiest girl in Springfield.”

A whole night with Gillian. Sylvana really was in seventh heaven. No time pressure, no hurry to fit as much sex as possible into the two or three hours they usually had. This time she could wine and dine her, take her time flirting, talk about everything and nothing, and then, well,

and then she could also take her time seducing her. They had a whole night together. Wow. This was going to be beyond great.

Chapter 6

The smell of oily fish invaded Gillian's nose. She grimaced and turned her head, hoping to escape the penetrating stench. Even with her eyes closed, she would have known which part of Springfield Zoo they had entered. The unique combination of odor and donkey-like braying meant the Humboldt penguins' enclosure was only a stone's throw away.

The zoo hadn't changed much. Everything looked pretty much the same since they last visited. She had been flabbergasted when she leafed through the old photo albums last night. They hadn't been to the zoo in at least two years. *And the last time we were here without Derrick. Just the three of us.*

"Look, Mom." Her daughter pointed at the brochure she held. "The meerkat feeding starts soon."

"I know, Angela," Gillian replied. "Give Michael a moment, all right?"

Unlike Angela, her little brother Michael was fond of the penguins—so clumsy outside the water, but moving like a shot once they were in their watery element. He wanted to spend as much time as possible watching them.

She cast a glance at her son, who stood next to Sylvana at the penguin enclosure. A sense of unreality hit her. Today it wasn't only the three of them. Being here with Sylvana and her children felt like some kind of dream. Weird, but good. *Definitely good.*

A small bit of doubt remained. Was it really the right time for her children to meet Sylvana, even if it was only as one of Gillian's friends? Despite her slight uneasiness, she was fairly sure there wouldn't be a time when she felt more ready than today.

Much to her relief, everything had gone well so far. Sylvana related easily to the children. Michael already had a little crush on her. Three years older than her brother, Angela had a harder time wrapping her mind around the fact that her mother suddenly had a friend that dressed and spoke so differently from her usual acquaintances.

"Mom, please!" Angela's whining ripped Gillian out of her thoughts. "We're going to be late."

"All right, honey. Let me talk to them."

Angela was right. They had to hurry if they wanted to be in time for the meerkat feeding. Gillian made her way over to where her son and Sylvana stood.

She drank in the sight of Sylvana, who looked fantastic in blue jeans, light brown nubuck leather moccasins, and a boat neck sailor top that did nothing to hide her strong shoulders. Gillian did her best to ignore the swell of desire that coursed through her body. They hadn't

seen, kissed, or touched each other for over a week. A very, very long week. *But tomorrow... tomorrow it's going to be just us two. Alone.* The thought made her shiver.

To take her mind of those thoughts she concentrated on Michael, who hung with utter fascination on Sylvana's every word as if she were about to tell him the secrets of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. *He's already under her spell. Just as I am.*

She swallowed around the lump in her throat and moved closer. "Hey, you two. As wonderful as penguins are, there are some cute little meerkats waiting for us."

Michael bit his bottom lip.

Gillian knew her son well enough to guess what was going on in his head. He wanted to spend more time at the penguin enclosure but knew that they had agreed to see the meerkat feeding together. Instead of voicing his wishes out loud as his sister would, he stayed quiet and resigned himself to his fate.

"We can come back here later, Michael," Gillian said.

"All right." His unhappiness showed clearly on his face.

"Come on, Michael. Let's go and watch how the cute little carnivores make mincemeat out of the zookeeper." Sylvana winked at him. "Girls only see the lovely gray face and never wonder why they have eye patches like the Beagle Boys."

"Really? What do they do? Do they bite?" Michael's disappointment was replaced by a childlike joy, something Gillian didn't see often enough on her son's face, especially not since his father's death. Michael had always been a shy and quiet child. After Derrick's death, he had withdrawn even more. Too often for her liking, he seemed enshrouded by a melancholy unfitting for such a young boy.

"What? You've never seen the feeding?" Sylvana asked, her brows raised.

Michael shook his head.

Sylvana chuckled. "Okay, pal, then it's about time."

As fast as he could, Michael ran over to his sister, most probably to tell her what Sylvana had said. Only in slightly different words. Gillian was sure that the meerkats were about to become some kind of monsters. She turned to Sylvana. "I can't believe you did that."

"Did what?"

"You cannot lie to him like that."

Sylvana shrugged. "Lie to him? Gillian, honey, have you ever seen a meerkat feeding?"

The way Sylvana's gaze slowly wandered up and down Gillian's body made her skin tingle, rekindling the barely extinguished desire she had felt earlier. She held up a hand. "And you can't look at me like that."

A mischievous twinkle appeared in Sylvana's eyes.

Gillian groaned, taking a step back. "Stop it."

"I guess you're in for a surprise," Sylvana said, her voice low.

"What?" Gillian held her breath.

Sylvana slowly bridged the distance between them. The cocky smile on her face made Gillian's knees go weak. Sylvana stopped in front of her. "The meerkat feeding, Gillian," she said.

Gillian stared at Sylvana, unable to comprehend her meaning.

"You're in for a surprise with the meerkats. What did you think I meant?" With a wink, Sylvana stepped around her. A hint of her perfume teased Gillian's nose, triggering memories not appropriate for a family visit to the zoo.

Gillian sat down on the bench behind her and watched Sylvana walk where Angela and Michael still stood. She was gripped by so many conflicting emotions, she did not know where to begin sorting them out. Guilt about the X-rated thoughts Sylvana unleashed in her was the most dominant. No matter how often she told herself that what she had with Sylvana was special, there was always that nagging voice inside her saying otherwise—a voice that, on reflection, sounded very much like her mother's.

Gillian clenched her hands into fists. What good had the things her mother taught her brought into her life? Derrick had been the perfect son-in-law her parents wanted, a corporate lawyer from a good family. She scowled. What had his exceptional background mattered when he turned out to be a lousy husband and a useless father?

What Gillian felt for Sylvana was already profound, going so much deeper than anything she'd had with Derrick. In addition, Sylvana's efforts to bond with Angela and Michael touched Gillian deeply. Especially after Sylvana's confession last night how nervous she was about meeting them.

Gillian rose from the bench, squaring her shoulders and willing the nagging voice inside her to be quiet while she walked to the place where Sylvana was talking to Angela and Michael. They were important. Those three standing together and each holding a part of her heart.

A short while later, she, Sylvana, and the children stood in front of the meerkat enclosure, where a large crowd of visitors had already gathered. With a bit of luck and Sylvana's determination, they found a spot in the first row.

Gillian leaned back into Sylvana's sturdy body, reveling in her closeness. Surely with everyone around them standing close to each other, nobody would notice the intimacy of their positions.

"You're playing with fire," Sylvana whispered in her ear.

"No, I'm just testing your self-control."

“You’re evil.”

Gillian chuckled. The knowledge that Sylvana wasn’t immune to her actions warmed her inside. And touching her, here, among so many strangers, felt great. How was it that a simple touch, a simple smile from Sylvana could make her feel so much better, so much more alive?

She tried to focus her attention on the bustle of little tan bodies inside the enclosure. Some meerkats groomed one another, while only a few feet away, three meerkats wrestled around. Others lay under sun lamps, using their stomachs as solar panels. Watching them interact was pure fun. Gillian had no idea what to expect when the feeding started, but she was sure Sylvana had exaggerated. These animals could be nothing other than cute.

“Look, this is the sentry,” Sylvana said, pointing to a lonely meerkat standing on one of the bigger stones. His body tense, he kept a constant watch on the surroundings. “Hey, Michael, Angela?” Sylvana whispered.

The children looked up at her.

“See the group running around in front of the small door over there?” Sylvana waited a moment for the children’s confirmation, while once again Gillian was amazed at how easily Sylvana captured Michael and Angela’s attention. “The zookeeper will come through this door. They already know that it’s about time. But the sentry is the one who sees her first and will signal her arrival to the group. Keep watching him.”

Gillian frowned. “How do you know it’s a she?”

“Eh?”

“The zookeeper. You said that the sentry will signal ‘her’ arrival.”

“It could be a he, but it was a woman every single time I’ve been here with my niece.”

Her niece. Right. So that is why she is so good with children.

Sylvana nudged her. “Look, it’s about to start.”

A woman in a dark green overall stepped out of a small building on the other side of the enclosure, carrying four stacked dishes in her hands.

“Now, watch the sentry,” Sylvana said to the rapt children.

The sentry meerkat stood straighter, making a funny peeping sound. As if given a command, the other meerkats stopped whatever they were doing, moving together like a school of herrings until they hovered in front of the small door Sylvana had pointed out earlier.

An excited murmur rose from the group of spectators around them. Gillian thought the scene must be reminiscent of the ancient Coliseum, the zoo visitor as spectators, and the meerkats like little gladiators. She felt Sylvana’s hot breath on her ear.

“The meerkats aren’t the only small mammals on high alert.”

Gillian looked down at Angela, who gripped a digital camera tightly, ready to take pictures. Michael's hands were in constant motion on the railing.

Sylvana pressed herself closer to Gillian. "They are cute, but as not as cute as their mother."

Gillian flushed. Distracted, she turned her gaze back toward the meerkat spectacle.

The zookeeper closed the door to the enclosure behind her and was immediately surrounded by the whole group of meerkats. Gillian couldn't believe her eyes. The formerly cute animals turned into a growling and squealing mass. Tails held in an upright position, the very same meerkats that had groomed each other seconds ago were now fighting and biting right, left, and center.

The zookeeper ignored the seething group at her feet, stepping over them. She took a few steps, turned to the left, and bent down to place the dishes on the ground. The wave of meerkats followed her, swarming to the place where they expected the dishes to land.

Gillian held her breath and gripped the railing tight. How could the zookeeper's fingers survive?

At the last moment the zookeeper turned to her right and set one of the dishes down on meerkat-free ground while a murmur swept through the crowd around Gillian. As soon as the dishes stood on the ground, the zookeeper jerked her hands away not a second too late. The meerkat mob dug into the food as if there was no tomorrow.

To Gillian's relief, the zookeeper didn't waste any time either. She placed two dishes a few feet away on the ground, and finally the last one several feet away from the others.

"It's a bit like watching the movie *Gremlins*," Sylvana said. "One moment they're so sweet you want to cuddle them; the next moment you think you need a weapon to defend yourself."

"Wow." Michael looked up at Gillian. "They are dangerous." Awe filled his voice.

"Mom, can we have some meerkats?" Angela asked, a dreamy look on her face. "They aren't big and we have enough space in the garden."

Sylvana chuckled but otherwise kept quiet.

"No, we cannot build a meerkat enclosure in the garden. We would have to move to..." Gillian looked questioningly at Sylvana. "Africa?"

"Yes, Africa it is. That's where they live." Sylvana confirmed, smiling. "Anybody interested in watching the raccoon feeding? They're just around the corner."

Gillian groaned. "I don't even want to imagine what they are going to do to get their food."

"You'd be surprised."

* * *

Sylvana rapped her fingers on her legs. Dozens of crying, laughing, and screaming children were testing her eardrums and her patience. *Whose stupid idea was it to visit the zoo on a Saturday? The horde of howler monkeys earlier wasn't half as bad.*

Gone was her hope of relaxing on a bench while Michael was occupied on the playground. She would never be able to unwind with that kind of noise and hustle around her. Keeping an eye on Michael while Gillian and Angela went to the restroom had sounded like a great idea. *Damn.*

Sylvana watched the adults on the other benches scattered around the playground. Most visitors were women; only a few men sat among them. She wondered how many were single parents like Gillian or part of a patchwork family. Weren't "normal" families, where Mom and Dad stayed together until one of them died, more and more of a rarity these days? When it came to families, her own experience wasn't exactly positive. She had long ago cut off all contact with her parents and her elder brother. The only family members she was still in touch with were her sister and her niece.

A rare wave of melancholy washed over her. She hadn't thought about her parents for some time. She sighed. Families were a strange thing. *Janet is more family to me than my parents ever were. On the other hand, it would kill me if Ashley didn't want to see me anymore or forbid me from seeing Chloe.*

Sylvana watched Michael climb down the monkey bars while doing his best to get out of the way of three boys trying to break a speed record to the top. He was a great kid, lots of fun to be around and full of questions. Chloe would like him. Maybe they could include her the next time they did something together.

However, while Michael connected easily to her, Angela was of a different mind. Sylvana could not blame the girl. Someone as bright as Angela had to wonder about her mother's strange new friend. Sylvana smiled, looking at her watch. She still had an ace up her sleeve. Something that she hoped both children would enjoy.

A new group of kids gushed onto the playground with loud hollers and wails. Sylvana flinched and glanced at the restroom door. Still no sign of Gillian and Angela.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Michael making his way toward her. Heaving a sigh, he sat down on the bench beside her. "I'm thirsty."

"No wonder. You conquered the monkey bar." She opened Gillian's backpack. "Let's see what I can do for you."

She found two bottles of water, one soda, and one sports drink. What now? Gillian hadn't left instructions as to what Michael was allowed to drink. *Better safe than sorry.* Painful experience with her sister had told her that mothers could be very peculiar. She picked a bottle of water and opened it for Michael. "Here, pal."

"Thanks." Michael took several gulps before he handed her the half-empty bottle.

"Wanna have another go?" Sylvana pointed at the playground.

"No." Michael looked into the restroom's direction. "Why do they always take so long?"

“Well, women are that way.”

He looked up at her. “You didn’t need that long when you had to go.”

She was saved from answering by a woman passing their bench with a crying boy clinging to her hand. He was about Michael’s age. The woman guided the boy toward the toilets. Only fragments of their conversation were audible, but it was obvious that the boy didn’t want to go with his mother.

A tug on her arm made Sylvana look down into eyes that were nearly as green as Gillian’s. “Yes, Michael?” she asked.

“Why is the lady so angry with the boy?”

“Well, I don’t know for sure, but maybe she wanted him to go to the ladies’ restroom and he didn’t want to.”

Michael nodded. “He’s a boy. He needs to go to the men’s restroom.”

Sylvana bit her cheek to stop herself from laughing. She would have to make sure that she wasn’t the one on toilet duty when Michael needed to go. “Yep, that’s right, pal. And look who’s on her way back,” she said, pointing at Gillian and Angela, who had just emerged.

She glanced at her watch again. *Perfect timing.*

A few minutes later, Sylvana listened with only half an ear to Angela’s elaborations about last week’s soccer training, her mind occupied with other matters while they slowly walked toward their next destination.

“... and then Mrs. Sand told Patty off,” Angela said, emphasizing her story with sweeping gestures.

Gillian nudged Sylvana’s shoulder. “Are you okay? You’re awfully quiet all of a sudden.”

“Yeah, sorry. I guess last week’s catching up on me. I’m a bit tired.” She gave Gillian a reassuring smile. It wasn’t a lie; she *was* tired, although there was another reason for her inattention. All of a sudden, she wasn’t sure if the surprise she had planned for Angela and Michael would really knock their little socks off. *Maybe they’ll think it’s boring. Or stupid. But then, children love cute animals, right?* She wiped her clammy hands on her jeans. *No, they’ll love it. Chloe would.*

Up ahead, Sylvana saw the nocturnal house, an unremarkable gray on gray building that gave no hint about what it held inside. It was her favorite spot in the zoo, a place where day turned into night, and night active animals from all over the world could be watched.

She sighed. If the playground was any indication, the zoo was too crowded today to enjoy the quiet and the uniqueness of the Nocturnal House. She would go crazy if she had to stand in a crowd of shoving and squealing visitors in front of the lemur or the bush baby’s enclosure.

A blond woman, dressed in the typical khaki trousers and sweater of the zoo employees, stepped out of the building. *Maisie. Right on time. Well, here we go.* She waved at her friend, who waved back. Feeling Gillian's questioning gaze, Sylvana ignored it. With determined steps, she walked over to Maisie.

"Hi, it's good to see you," Sylvana said, giving Maisie a hug. "Glad you could make it."

"Nice family you have there," Maisie whispered.

"Yeah." Releasing Maisie, Sylvana rubbed the back of her neck. Her friend wasn't particularly fond of children but had promised to do her best for Sylvana. "Let me introduce you. This is Gillian, a good friend of mine, and these are her children, Angela and Michael."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Maisie shook Gillian's hand and smiled at the children. "Have you enjoyed your day at the zoo so far?"

Michael and Angela nodded, one a bit more enthusiastic than the other.

"Good. I like hearing that. See, I'm one of the vets working here," Maisie said, "and Sylvana told me you might be interested in taking a look behind the scenes?"

"Oh, can we, Mom?" Angela's eyes shone with a passion that Sylvana hadn't seen often today.

Well, maybe my idea wasn't so bad after all. A weight lifted from her shoulders.

Michael chimed in. "Yes, Mom. Please."

Sylvana grinned. "Oh, please, Gillian. We really want to."

"I wonder who's the biggest kid here." Gillian chuckled. "All right, as long as I don't have to touch a snake or kiss a crocodile."

Maisie shook her head. "No, you're safe. We have to release a slow loris back into his enclosure today. I thought this would be something you'd enjoy watching up and close." She took a bunch of keys out of her pocket and opened a door to their right. "Please follow me."

* * *

Gillian walked through the exit and left the Nocturnal House. She squinted against the bright daylight. A light breeze ruffled her bangs while the bamboo to her right rustled. She breathed in deeply.

As fascinating as the slow loris and Maisie's explanations had been, she was happy to be outside again. Something about the interaction between Maisie and Sylvana bugged her, changing her good mood to irritation.

Somewhere behind her, she heard the squeals of kids who minutes ago had been told off for constantly pounding on the enclosure's glass front. Thankfully, her children behaved differently. *Well, at least when I'm around.* She couldn't delude herself into thinking that

Angela and Michael weren't normal children who misbehaved once in a while. Still, the way they acted around the slow loris, listening to Maisie's instructions made her proud.

"Mom, that was so cool." Angela appeared next to her, beaming. "I think I want to become a veterinarian. What do you think? The slow loris was sooo cute."

"That was great, Sylvana. Can we go again?" Michael begged.

"Yes, Sylvana, please. Can we do that again?" Angela echoed her brother.

"I can't make any promises, but I'll ask Maisie and maybe there'll be another opportunity. Why not?" Sylvana smiled at Michael and Angela before her questioning gaze met Gillian's. "Are there any particular animals you're interested in?"

"Well, I find female mammals quite fascinating." Gillian held her breath, having no idea where that came from.

Sylvana looked at her with wide eyes before she burst out laughing. Gillian couldn't help joining in, very aware of Michael's and Angela's confusion.

"All right, all right. Sorry." She laid a hand on her stomach, trying to calm down. "I don't know about you, but I'm really hungry. Why don't we discuss this over some food?"

"There's a hot dog vendor just around the corner," Sylvana said with a wide grin on her face.

"Great. Michael, Angela, why don't you have a look and see if it's open?"

"Yeah!" Angela and Michael shouted simultaneously and ran off.

"Are you okay, Gillian?" Sylvana asked, her smile faltering. "Is something bothering you?"

God, was she so transparent? Gillian attempted a smile but gave in after she could only manage a strained grimace. Maybe it was better to get this out in the open before it festered inside her. "I don't know if this is the right place to talk about it. But I..." Her stomach churned. "You and Maisie...was there ever anything between you?"

Sylvana stared dumbfounded at Gillian. "No, never. Why...oh, sorry. I see." She shook her head. "No, never. She's a terrible flirt. That's all."

"She's good-looking," Gillian pointed out.

Sylvana laughed. "Yes, but she's as straight as they come, or at least that's what she believes. She's a good friend of Janet's. Look Gillian, I won't say that we'll never be running into someone I had sex with – but no, not Maisie.."

Relief washed through Gillian. "I'm sorry. I just—"

"No, Gillian. Thanks for asking. We agreed to be open and honest with each other, right?"

Gillian nodded.

“That’s what you did. And I admire you for being so open about your feelings. Thanks.”

Their gazes locked. Gillian could easily get lost in those blue eyes that caressed her soul.

“Thank you for arranging the meeting with Maisie.”

Sylvana rocked on her heels. “You’re welcome. I like your kids.”

Warmth flooded through Gillian. “They like you too.” Unable to resist the urge to touch Sylvana, she laid a hand on her arm. “Maybe it should scare me how easily you were able to win them over.” She hesitated for a moment. “The truth is, I’m not. You made today something very special...for the three of us.”

What she said was true, but what Gillian didn’t say went even deeper. If she hadn’t already known her feelings for Sylvana had turned from lust to something much greater, today would have revealed the truth. She was in love with the woman who could make her blood boil, make her feel safe, and who treated her children with such respect.

This was neither the time nor the place for such a declaration, she decided. *Later*, she thought. *Tomorrow I’ll tell her. We have to find a way to make this work... if she wants to.*

Gillian squeezed Sylvana’s arm before letting go. “Come on. I’m sure Michael and Angela are already waiting for us.”

Moments later, they nearly bumped into both children, who sped around the corner like a couple of cheetahs, almost skidding to a halt.

“Where were you?” Angela demanded, frowning.

“Sorry, child of mine,” Gillian replied. “We are old women. Our feet don’t move as fast as yours anymore.”

“Mom, you’re not that old.” Michael rolled his eyes.

“Thank you.” Gillian turned to Sylvana. “These are the kind of compliments one simply hungers for at our age.”

Sylvana chuckled. “She’s right. You’re really not that old.”

Gillian playfully swatted at Sylvana. “Thank you...not.”

A line had formed in front of the food pavilion, when they arrived. Chirping birds hopped around the garbage cans, picking at whatever tasty morsels had fallen on the ground.

Joking and laughing, the four of them stood in line until it was their turn to order. Once again, Gillian couldn’t help but wish and pray that this worked out. The children liked Sylvana, but as Gillian’s friend. It remained to be seen if they would still like her when they found out the truth. *One step at a time*, she told herself. *Have patience.*

“Sylvana, could you help Angela and Michael carry their hot dogs over to the table there?” She pointed at a table where a family of five was just leaving. “I’ll pay and join you then.”

“Yep, can do.” Sylvana somehow managed to carry three hot dogs which left the kids to deal with only one each.

Gillian handed the money over and accepted her own hot dog. She froze when a familiar male voice next to her said, “Gillian. Gillian Webber. Is that you?”

She hadn’t heard that voice for a very long time but immediately recognized it. *Shit.* What were the odds of meeting someone from Derrick’s law firm on a Saturday in the zoo? *And Ben Cadwrick, of all people.*

Turning around, she cleared her throat. “Ben. Hi. It’s good to see you.”

“Tamara, honey. I’ll be right there.” He shouted toward a tall redhead half his age, who was surrounded by several children.

Gillian’s stomach churned. She knew Ben’s wife, Winnie, from several summer parties and other events associated with the law firm. Not too long ago, she had heard through the grapevine that Ben had replaced his wife with a younger woman, and here she was.

“Wow, I haven’t seen you in ages, Gillian,” Ben said, “but I must say...you look really good.”

She forced a smile. “Thanks, Ben. How are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m doing great. I partly retired last month, which means more time for the grandkids and for Tamara.” He waved over to Tamara, who was glaring in their direction.

“Are you here with your kids?” Ben asked, glancing around.

She self-consciously looked over her shoulder to the small table where Sylvana sat with Angela and Michael. All three of them were laughing about something, looking so carefree that Gillian had to fight the urge to leave Ben standing there and walk over to her family. *Yes, she decided, my family. It already feels that way.*

Sylvana caught her gaze, frowning and tilting her head in Ben’s direction.

Gillian straightened. “Yes, I am here with my kids and a very good friend of mine.”

Ben followed Gillian’s gaze, shrugging.

“I’m sorry,” Gillian went on, “but they’re waiting for me.”

“Sure, sure. It was nice to see you.” He flashed her a smile. “Hey, we could meet up for drinks sometime. Why don’t you give me a call?”

Gillian didn’t trust her ears. *The little shithead.* This wasn’t the first time he tried to cross a line she would never ever cross with him. “I am so sorry, Ben, but with the children to take care of and Derrick’s death... I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“There’s no hurry,” he said easily. “Whenever you feel ready.”

She wanted to punch him. *Who does he think he is?* She squared her shoulders. “Ben, let me make it plain and clear. There is already someone else in my life, and I’m very thankful and happy about it.”

His gaze hardened. “Really. Good for you. Do I know him?”

“No, you don’t. Have a good day.” She turned around and made her way to her family’s table.

“You okay?” Sylvana asked.

“Not really.” Gillian sat down.

Sylvana’s expression became guarded. “All right.”

“Sorry, let’s talk about it tomorrow. Okay?” She hoped Sylvana understood that she wouldn’t discuss what had happened in front of the children.

“Who was that, Mom?” Michael asked.

“He worked with your dad.” She ruffled Michael’s hair. “And you know what? I just told him how happy I am to be here with you three.”

A small smile played around Sylvana’s lips. “Did you now?”

Gillian looked deep into Sylvana’s eyes. “Yes.”

Sylvana’s smile grew bigger. “That’s good. Cause there’s a snake exhibition today where visitors are allowed to touch the snakes, and we just decided that’s where we wanna go next.”

Chapter 7

“Seductive silk or comfortable cotton? Which one should I wear tonight?” Gillian asked herself out loud, staring at the two pajamas sets that lay on her bed next to the overnight bag. Her fingers trailed over the simple but comfortable cotton pajamas before she touched the cool blue fabric of the short cut silk pajamas. She loved the way the smooth silk caressed her skin at night. A touch, soft like the hand of an experienced lover.

Her eyes fluttered closed at the image of a naked Sylvana, of her firm and hot body, of the way she looked when she came. Beautiful. Desirable. Unbelievably hot. Gillian’s knees went weak. She sat down on the bed. The longing for Sylvana, for her touch was so powerful and scorching that at times it threatened to overwhelm her. *How can I feel so much for her and such a variety of emotions at the same time?* There was lust, a lot of lust actually. She loved Sylvana’s touch, her take charge attitude during sex, and her thoughtfulness of Gillian’s needs. Needs she hadn’t known she possessed and would never ever have talked about before. All of this was mixed with a longing to simply talk to and be with Sylvana. Gillian wanted to be there for her and offer a massage when she heard that her back hurt. She wanted to make sure that she ate properly – no one could live on cold Pizza several days a week.

Over the past weeks, things had definitely changed between them, had become more intimate. Her own deep desire for sexual contact with women had been replaced by a desire for Sylvana—a desire that included sex but wasn't based solely on it any longer.

Still... She touched her lips, remembering the stolen kiss yesterday at the zoo. There was no denying Sylvana's raw sexual power. Gillian trembled inside. Little had she known that sexual desire could mix so well with... love.

The sound of running feet jerked her back to reality.

A moment later her daughter rushed into the bedroom, announcing, "Grandma is here."

Gillian groaned. Her mother was the last person on earth she wanted to talk to right now, not with the image of a naked Sylvana lingering in her imagination. Damn it, why hadn't Charles, her parents' chauffeur, come to pick up the children as usual? "Thank you," she said, composing herself. "I'll be down in a minute, sweetie."

"Which is good." Angela put heavy emphasis on each word.

"Because?"

"Mom, please."

"Please what, Angela?" Gillian put the silk pajama into her overnight bag. Both children knew that she was going to Sylvana's for a sleep-over. They didn't need to know that her kind of sleep-over would be a bit different from theirs.

Gillian turned to her daughter and noticed for the first time that Angela held a book in each hand. "You're staying for one night at your grandparents. You don't need to take a whole library with you."

Angela rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't need to choose which book to take if you bought me an e-reader. And if you don't have a cup of coffee with Grandma before we leave, we'll be the ones who have to answer all the questions she really wants to ask you." She lowered her voice. "And you never know what children tell in the absence of their parents."

Gillian felt the blood drain from her face. Had Angela picked up on something yesterday?
"Excuse me?"

"Sheesh, Mom. I was only joking." Angela's brow furrowed. "There's not a lot to tell anyhow. Your life is pretty boring."

"Boring? Thank you very much." Gillian couldn't help laughing. *You have no idea.*

"Yeah." Angela shrugged. "I mean with you staying home and being... you know, a mom and all. So are you having coffee with her or not?"

Gillian didn't want to spend time with her mother, but Angela was right. If she didn't have a cup of coffee with her, she would interrogate Angela and Michael. *Which she's probably going to do anyhow.* At times like this, Gillian really wished for siblings to share her mother's often overwhelming attention.

“As I said, Angela, I’ll be down in a minute, and yes, I’ll have a cup of coffee with your grandma,” she said, praying to God to give her strength.

* * *

A dog barked somewhere in the neighborhood while Elisabeth Haines watched a pair of blackbirds parade over the freshly mowed lawn, hunting for anything edible that couldn’t hide fast enough between the short blades of grass.

For goodness' sake, why did she do this? She turned away from the window towards Gillian, who sat at the dining table behind her. “I really don’t understand you. We could have sent Ricardo over to mow the lawn, as always. There are people who get paid for this kind of work. There was no reason to do this,” she pointed at the lawn, “on your own.”

Gillian shrugged and took a sip of coffee.

“Why didn’t you call, Gillian? Really.” She was more convinced than ever that her daughter had inherited her stubbornness from her father’s side of the family.

“Mother, please. Mowing the lawn is something I’m totally capable of doing.” Gillian set her cup down. “And I think I did a pretty good job. Don’t you agree?”

Elisabeth studied her daughter’s expression. Pride, mixed with the familiar stubbornness and something else...something she couldn’t quite put her finger on yet. “Yes, well, it doesn’t look too bad. But that is not the point, Gillian. You don’t need to do this kind of work. And if there were a man in your life—”

“You’d still send Ricardo over, Mother.”

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes, wagging a finger at her daughter. Gillian was right; both of them knew it. “Don’t you get fresh with me.”

Gillian shook her head. “That wasn’t my intention. So tell me, how is Father doing?”

“Very well, very well.” Elisabeth was aware that her daughter was changing the subject, but she still sat down at the table and picked up her own cup of coffee. “Michael Sherman, the new managing partner, asked him to mentor two new associates. Your father enjoys working with these young lawyers, you know. It brings back his own youth, he says.”

Gillian blinked. “I thought he wanted to cut down on his work?”

“He did cut down, but he’s not made for staying home.” Elisabeth took a sip of her coffee. *Strange*, she thought, *is this a hint of whisky?* “Is this a new brand of coffee?”

A small, strange smile appeared on Gillian’s face. “Not that I’m aware. What about your plans to travel to Europe with Father?”

“It’s only a pleasure deferred. There’s always next year.” The seed of bitterness that her husband’s decision had planted within her didn’t show in Elisabeth’s voice. She made sure of that, though she had been more than disappointed to learn about his plans, which he hadn’t

talked through with her. His job had won again, as usual. However, this wasn't a suitable subject to discuss with her daughter. "But enough about us. Tell me what you've been up to. We haven't spoken for over a week."

Gillian fiddled with the coffee spoon. "There's not much to tell, Mother. The children keep me busy."

Elisabeth stared at the spoon. From childhood on, Gillian had fidgeted and fiddled with things when she was nervous. What was going on here? "By the way, I met Ben Cadwrick in church this morning," she said as casually as she could manage. "He mentioned that he saw you in the zoo yesterday."

Gillian gripped the spoon tighter. "Yes, the children and I had a lot of fun yesterday."

"Ben mentioned that you weren't alone."

"That's right. A friend was with us."

"Oh, do I know him?"

"It was a her, and no, you don't. Would you like some more coffee?"

"No, thanks. No more coffee for me." A wave of disappointment crashed through Elisabeth. She had hoped Gillian was finally ready to date again and find a man to share her life. Her daughter's marriage with Derrick had proven a disaster in the end, but there were so many other eligible men looking for a wife. Elisabeth was sure somewhere in Springfield there was someone who was good husband material, someone who wouldn't balk at two children in addition to a wife. "Ben didn't mention it was a woman. He only said that he had no idea who your friend was."

A shadow dampened Gillian's usually bright green eyes. Her fingers clenched on the spoon. "Mother, please. Ben doesn't know my friends, and he certainly isn't one of them."

"And I don't know her either?" Most of Gillian's friends were married to lawyers or investment bankers. Meeting at functions several times a year was inevitable. Elisabeth was curious to learn who this mysterious new friend of her daughter was.

Gillian stirred her coffee with the spoon, which now bore a slight dent in the stem. "No, you don't. And honestly, meeting Ben was rather unpleasant. I still can't believe that he left Winnie for that red-haired bimbo. Have you seen her lately? Winnie, I mean."

"Gillian, watch your language." Elisabeth frowned. "We met for dinner last week." Elisabeth had been shocked by the way Winnie was treated by many of their mutual acquaintances. They avoided talking to her, as if what had happened was contagious and they might be the next wife abandoned by her husband. "She's a strong woman. I have no idea what I would have done if your father—"

"I guess she's stronger than I would have been in her position," Gillian interrupted. "It hurt like hell when I found out about Derrick and his..." She swallowed. "His mistresses, although we'd already grown apart for a while. Sometimes I wonder if it's the price we have to pay for our way of life."

Elisabeth stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“The curse of the desperate housewives.” Gillian leaned forward, her elbows on the table. “How many of your friends have been left by their husbands or been cheated on?”

“Why? I don’t know.”

“So many?” Gillian chuckled dryly “We wives stay at home and take care of the kids; we try to look good if we have to attend an event with our husband, and we’re supportive of their career in every way. In return we get nice houses, nice dresses, and nice presents.” A shadow drifted across Gillian’s face. “I sincerely doubt that we get the better part of the deal. There is no space, no encouragement for us to evolve, to grow as a person. Being beautiful, quiet, and accepting isn’t something I find fulfilling anymore.”

Elisabeth felt at a loss for words. Where did that little speech come from? Was that how her daughter saw her own life? *And mine?*

The silence between them hung heavily in the air. Elisabeth was torn between the anger simmering inside her about Gillian’s dismissive statements and the need to know what was going on with her only child. For the moment, she decided to push her own feelings aside. “I’m sorry for what Derrick did to you. I really am. You didn’t deserve his... what he did. But not every man is like that. Your father is different. I’m sure you’ll find a good man.”

Gillian threw her hands in the air, clearly frustrated. “I don’t want a good man. What I want is a good partner. In the truest sense of the word. I want to, no, I need to be an equal in a relationship. I want my partner to help me develop my potential. I want to be loved and cherished for who I am, and I want to do the same in return.” She leaned back in her chair. “Respect and love. That is what it’s all about.”

“These are a young girl’s dreams—”

Again Gillian cut in. “No, they aren’t, Mother. This is what every self-respecting person should wish for his or her own life. I’d rather have no new relationship than one where I am condemned to be a good-looking but unhappy subordinate.”

A subordinate? Elisabeth was about to answer when Michael entered the dining room, a brightly colored boomerang in his hand.

Anger sparked in his eyes. “Mom, Angela says I can’t take my boomerang with me.”

Angela stomped into the room. “Mom, he’s already taking his stupid remote control truck.”

“The truck is not stupid. You are.” Michael shot back, taking a step closer to his sister.

“Stop, you two. Now.” Gillian got up from her chair and walked over to her children. “Each of you can take one item to your grandparents. You already have lots of books and toys at their house. Now go and get your bags. You’ll be leaving in a few minutes.”

Elisabeth watched her grandchildren disappear, grumbling and complaining all the way out. She barely held back a frown. “Gillian, are you trying to get rid of me?”

“What?” Gillian stared at her.

“We were in the middle of a conversation as I recall.”

“Mother, the longer we let the children wait, the crazier they will get. And I’m sure that isn’t what you want.”

Gillian had a point. Elisabeth certainly didn’t want to have the children running around like overactive Energizer Bunnies. But she wanted to know what was going on with her daughter. She had never heard her talk like that before. Something must have happened. “Why don’t you come with us? We could continue our talk while the children are in bed.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m meeting a friend in town.” Gillian walked back to the dining table and pushed her chair closer to it.

A friend? Could that possibly be the same friend who had accompanied them to the zoo? Or was that another friend she didn’t know? “What about breakfast tomorrow morning, then? I’m sure we’ll find some time to talk.” *Is that a blush on her face?*

Gillian cleared her throat. “I can’t, Mother. I might be staying in town overnight.”

“Oh.” It wasn’t typical for her daughter to stay the night in town. At least, not that she knew. Elisabeth was torn between inquiring whom Gillian was going to meet and not crossing a line that her daughter had so clearly drawn. Painful experience had taught her that cross-examining Gillian wouldn’t help. She would only clam up. Pretending not to be curious, Elisabeth said, “I hope you’ll have nice evening out, then.”

Gillian was clearly surprised, but she recovered quickly. “Thank you. I trust that I will.”

“Charles will bring the children back tomorrow late afternoon.” And she would accompany him. *I’m going to find out what is going on here*, she vowed, taking a final swallow from her coffee cup.

Chapter 8

With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Gillian arrived a few minutes late to “La Trattoria,” the Italian restaurant Sylvana had chosen for their date. The warm, welcoming light shining through the small restaurant’s windows didn’t do much to improve her mood. Ever since the talk with her mother that afternoon, she had dreaded the romantic dinner Sylvana had planned.

At first, she had been angry with her mother, her constant attempts at tampering with Gillian’s life, but then she had realized that she was actually angry with herself. Why couldn’t she just tell her mother that she was seeing someone? And that this someone was Sylvana, a woman. Damn. She wasn’t sixteen anymore. She didn’t need her mother’s approval or anyone else’s, for that matter. Gillian’s shoulders slumped. No matter how often she told herself these lies, she had to acknowledge the truth: what her mother and what others thought *did* matter.

She was a wimp, and if Sylvana knew how she had pretended that Sylvana wasn't important... Gillian clenched her fists against the pain. Sylvana would surely never want to see her again. The wound from the café incident was too fresh. *Do I tell her? Or do I pretend that nothing happened?* She just didn't know.

Reluctantly, Gillian entered the restaurant. Small niches in the back of the room and a softly dimmed light created a warm atmosphere. Most tables were occupied, but the noise level was low enough to hear the soft Italian music that played in the background. "La Trattoria" seemed a good choice for a romantic dinner on any other day of the year.

Some guests glanced her way. With relief, she noticed no one she knew. But where was Sylvana?

Before long, the hostess approached and said with a slight Italian accent, "Buona sera, welcome to La Trattoria. How can I help you?"

"Good evening. I don't know." Gillian took another look around the restaurant but still didn't see Sylvana. "I'm supposed to meet Sylvana Freedman here tonight."

"Si, si. She's already waiting for you. Please follow me." The hostess turned around.

Frowning, Gillian followed her toward the back of the room and along a corridor until they halted in front of a door.

"She reserved a private room. Enjoy your stay." The hostess opened the door and with a wave of her hand, invited Gillian to step through.

Gillian stood stock-still. A bouquet of red roses dominated the wooden table in the middle of the room. Burning candles framed a Champagne bottle cooler that held a bottle of Dom Pérignon.

She was only vaguely aware of the smell of fresh bread when Sylvana got up from her chair and crossed the distance between them, a bright smile on her face and a red rose in her hand. Dressed in a dark blue button-down shirt and broken-in jeans, she looked sexy as hell. Gillian adored the butch way Sylvana dressed, and knowing what lay under those clothes made her desire blossom, despite the dark thoughts that still haunted her.

"Hi there. You look absolutely lovely." Sylvana handed her the rose.

Gillian's throat tightened. Torn between the shame that lingered inside her because of her earlier behavior and a deep burning longing for Sylvana she didn't know what to do or what to say. How was she going to get through the night?

* * *

Sylvana took a bite of her lamb filet, not really noticing the mild aroma of garlic and rosemary that caressed her tongue. She had been looking forward to the food but not nearly as much as the company. And this absolutely wasn't how she had envisioned their romantic dinner tonight.

A short glance at Gillian's plate revealed that she had barely touched the grilled tuna. *Seems like I'm not the only one who has lost her appetite.*

"So what did you say the kids were doing tonight?" Sylvana took a sip of her red wine, looking expectantly at Gillian. Maybe this time, Gillian's reply would be a bit longer, a bit less forced, and a bit less polite. So far their conversation was worse than some of the business lunches she had to endure from time to time. What the heck had happened between their phone call last night and their date tonight?

"They are with their grandparents." Gillian didn't even look at her but stayed focused on pushing the fish on her plate around without actually eating any of it.

Sylvana found it difficult to swallow around the lump in her throat. From the moment Gillian entered their private room, Sylvana had felt that something wasn't right. Her mind spun with possibilities. Had she said or done something wrong, crossed a line? Was Gillian angry? Did she have second thoughts? Had this Ben person yesterday at the zoo served as a reminder to Gillian that she didn't want to be seen with her... didn't want to *be* with her?

Suddenly, the tender meat in Sylvana's mouth tasted like the sole of a well worn shoe. Her insecurities reared their ugly heads. Never before had she cared whether a woman wanted to see her again or end their relationship, if relationship was the correct word for what she had with her conquests, one-night stand lovers, and playmates. The thought of not seeing Gillian anymore, not talking to her, not touching her made Sylvana's stomach churn.

She had to know what was going on but how? She didn't have the balls to simply ask if Gillian wanted to break up with her. What if the answer was "yes"? Sylvana sucked on the inside of her cheek. How did people do that relationship talk thing? Maybe she should begin with something obvious just to get the talk going. Sylvana set her flatware down and took a sip of her red wine before setting the glass down again with a slightly shaking hand. "Everything okay with your tuna? If not, we could order something else, you know?"

Gillian answered without much enthusiasm, "No, sorry, the tuna is really great. It's just that... I'm not really hungry."

Sylvana didn't need to be a mind reader to know that this wasn't the real reason behind the nearly untouched meal. All right, that was it. The time for small talk was over. "Do you want to talk about what's bothering you?"

The private room was so quiet, Sylvana could hear the faint voices of other people coming from the rooms on either side. She held her breath, waiting for Gillian's reply.

"You've gotten pretty good at reading my moods." Gillian finally glanced at Sylvana, who was horrified to see tears forming in Gillian's eyes.

The impulse to get up, take Gillian in her arms, and tell her that everything was going to be all right was nearly overwhelming. Instead, Sylvana forced herself to stay put. Her need to get in the open whatever was going on overrode her protective instinct. "I hope so," she said.

"I... I feel so bad. You go out of your way for this amazing dinner. You even reserved a private room. Just for us. The romantic candles, the champagne, the roses, everything—

you're so thoughtful. And I..." Gillian crumpled the serviette in her hand. "I don't have the courage to tell my mother about you, to tell her that I'm in love with you. I'm pathetic."

Sylvana blinked in surprise, unsure if she had heard correctly. The churning in her stomach was replaced by a gentle flutter. "You... you're in love with me?"

Gillian sat stock still, her face nearly as pale as the bleached table cloth. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

Sylvana reached across the table and entwined their fingers. "Don't you dare to take it back now." She chuckled dryly. "And here I thought you wanted to break up with me tonight."

"What? No." Gillian squeezed Sylvana's hand.

"It would have killed me, Gillian." Sylvana swallowed hard. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* "Because I'm..." Why was this so hard? "I'm in love with you as well." Now it was out. She never thought she would say those words.

"But haven't you heard what I just said? I didn't—" Gillian's voice broke.

Sylvana got up from her seat, walked around the table, and knelt down next to Gillian's chair. She opened her arms. "Come here."

For a moment it seemed as if Gillian wouldn't accept her offer, then she fell into Sylvana's arms, buried her face against her neck, and wrapped her arms around her.

A wave of giddiness rolled through Sylvana. *She loves me. Holy cow.* She enjoyed the feel of Gillian in her arms. This, being with Gillian, being there for her, loving her was as natural as breathing and as necessary. *Wow, I'm wasted.* She chuckled. *But hell, it feels good.*

As much as she hated to break their embrace, she knew Gillian needed a response to her self-condemnation. "Gillian, honey, look at me."

Gillian shook her head, a muffled "no" her only response.

"Gillian, please. I need to tell you something, and I want to look into your eyes when I do."

This time Gillian slowly drew away. Her eyes were red and puffy.

Sylvana tenderly brushed a few strands of blond hair out of Gillian's face. "I never asked you to tell anyone about us. Did I?"

"No. But—"

Sylvana cupped Gillian's face. "I know that this is not easy for you, Gillian. The only thing I ask of you is that you don't lie to me and that you don't deny that I exist. And in return I promise to hear you out instead of jumping to conclusions. See, this isn't easy for me either. I never... well, let's say that you have as much experience with that relationship thing between women as I have." That statement earned her a small smile. "But I believe that this, us can be something really big." She placed a soft kiss on Gillian's lips. "Really, really big. If you want to."

“I want to.” Gillian placed an equally soft kiss on Sylvana’s lips. “I need you... us. But there is more than ‘us.’ There are the children.”

Sylvana froze. What if Gillian said “no” despite everything, let her down gently, decided against her and for the life she knew? The life she felt safe with?

Gillian’s smile eased her fear a little. “But yes.” She squeezed Sylvana’s thigh lightly. “Yes, I want you, I want us.”

Suddenly, breathing got easier. “Good. More than good. It’s perfect. You’ll see. Together we’ll be able to work things out.”

The frown on Gillian’s face made it obvious for Sylvana that something was still bothering her.

“Sylvana?”

“Yes.”

“How did you... I mean since when do you know that you are... that you like women?”

The question came out of the blue. They had never really talked about her past. At least not in detail. Sylvana ran a hand through her hair. It seemed like a lifetime ago when she had first become aware of her feelings. “Um, well... I don’t know. Maybe fifteen or so. But that was only the first time I was able to put a name to my feelings. Looking back at it today, I’d say that I’ve been interested in women for as long as I can remember. And I had an enormous crush on Ms. Brown, my teacher in elementary school.”

Gillian nodded. “And when was the first time you, well, acted on those feelings?”

“Oh, Gillian. That was such a long time ago.” Sylvana smiled. She hadn’t thought about Vanessa for a long, long time. “I was sixteen, and she was one year older. It lasted for some time, but then her father lost his job and they had to move away.”

“And your parents?” Gillian plucked at the tablecloth. “Where they okay with their daughter being together with another woman?”

Sylvana shook head. “No, they weren’t. Luckily they didn’t find out until I was old enough to move out. I haven’t talked to them since then.” Her throat constricted. Even after all that time, the memories hurt. The disbelief in her mother’s eyes, the disgust on her father’s face – they had burned into her memory. “My sister is the only one I’m still in contact with. Well, and my niece.”

“I’m sorry.” Gillian reached out and touched Sylvana’s hand. “You were so young.”

“Yes, and I’m not going to lie and say that it wasn’t hard.” Sylvana took Gillian’s hand in hers, enjoying the feel of the soft skin. “I needed time to get to terms with myself, my sexuality. And I understand that you do as well. But you don’t have to go through this alone. I’m here every step of your way – if you want to.”

“Thank you.” Gillian’s voice broke. “I would like that very much.”

“Always.”

The corners of Gillian’s mouth lifted. “Want to try some of my cold tuna?”

Sylvana couldn’t help laughing. “Through thick and thin, eh? All right, if you eat some of my cold lamb.”

“Why not? I love to nibble on tender meat.”

Gillian’s voice dropped to a husky timbre that made Sylvana shiver. Relieved that their talk had drifted back to an easier ground, she tapped Gillian’s nose with her finger. “Vixen.”

“Yes, but only for you.”

And that was exactly how Sylvana wanted it.

To be continued in Chapter 9/10