

KENDAL

Kendal approached the phone as though it were a bomb. She lifted it gingerly from the holder quickly dialing the number she knew by heart. Her heart pumped furiously as she waited for the phone to be answered. Torn between being relieved and being anxious, she heard the electronic voice signifying the answering machine. "Jeff, it's Kendal," she replied after the beep. "I have to talk to you. It's *urgent!*" Kendal emphasized and hung up the phone.

Gathering the pregnancy test stick from the bathroom counter she stared at it again. "Damn," she muttered upon seeing the blue plus. In the back of her mind, she had hoped against hope that the plus would turn into a minus and thereby negating all she knew was true.

She picked up a plastic bag and swept all the paraphernalia that came with the kit along with the kit into the bag. Good forbid one of her sisters got a hold of any of this stuff. Kendal double-checked to make sure no evidence had escaped her and unlocked the bathroom door. Checking to make sure the hall was clear, she put the phone back on the base, crossed the hall and ducked into her room. She shut the door and leaned back against it, nervously wiping beads of sweat from her forehead.

What a nerve racking fifteen minutes that was! She squeezed her eyes shut and grimaced. "Why do all the dumb things have to happen to me?" Kendal groaned. It wasn't like she didn't know about birth control. Her mother had informed her of all things involving the reproductive process at the age of twelve when her first period started. Moreover, she and Jeff had used a condom for crying out loud! It was just their bad luck that the stupid thing split before it was pulled out, spilling Jeff's seed into her vagina.

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Kendal had immediately sprung up and started jumping up and down to try to keep the sperm from traveling upward and piercing any of her eggs. Obviously, that effort had not been successful. Maybe she would have done better if she could have jumped longer instead of tripping over Jeff's belongings that he'd carelessly left lying on the floor. Kendal landed spread eagle on the floor, naked as the day she was born, amid the rubble that was Jeff's stuff. She felt incredibly stupid until she noticed the look on Jeff's face as he took in the sight she made. Kendal could only put her hands over her eyes and start howling with laughter. Jeff, once he realized that Kendal was not hurt, joined in.

"It's not so funny now," Kendal said scowling darkly. What the heck was she going to do? She'd only started her job five months ago and had planned to move out from her parents' house on her own in a matter of months. Although her salary was more than adequate for one, she wasn't all that sure how well it would stretch for two. The one thing she knew about children was that they were very expensive.

Opening her eyes, Kendal glanced around her room. It was fairly large but filled with all the items she'd collected over the years; her stuffed animals lined the bed from the big lion to the little rabbit. Displayed proudly on top of her dresser drawer was her Mattel carwash set, along with some matchbox cars – still in their boxes. The walls were covered with posters from Winnie the Pooh to Laura Croft, the tomb raider. Her cello that she hadn't played since high school was propped up against a wall right next to a music stand. Another wall was taken up with shelves bursting with books.

There was no room for a baby, a crib, or all the accessories that came with them, she acknowledged to herself. Besides her sisters would kill her if she dared to bring a screaming baby into the house. Her youngest sister Dorrie already had her eye on Kendal's larger room, waiting impatiently for Kendal to move out. And who knew what her parents would do.

Kendal pushed herself away from the door and sat down on her virginal twin-sized bed. What a total, total mess she'd gotten herself into now. What really galled her was that she hadn't even gotten any enjoyment out of the experience! Kendal flopped back against her pillows and frowned. This had to be the most difficult problem she'd ever had to fix. There were really only two solutions to this problem, did she keep the baby or give it up for adoption?

These two options had been going through her head for the past week. She had to decide what was right for her versus what was right for the baby. Up to this point, Jeff hadn't even entered into her calculations, but the positive test had changed all that. Kendal was ready to pull out all her hair when there was a pounding on her door. "Yeah," she called out not bothering to get up.

Julie, a slightly younger version of Kendal, stuck her head around the door. "Jeff's downstairs for you."

Kendal jerked up quickly. "Tell him, I'll be down in a minute," she requested.

"Will do," Julie replied, shutting the door.

Kendal grabbed her backpack purse, pulled her hair back in a ponytail and headed for the full-length mirror on her closet door. She turned sideways to make sure there was no bulge in her stomach to give away her secret. All she saw was the same image that always greeted her. Her five feet nine inches tall frame was lithe and slim. Kendal made sure that she kept it in excellent condition. Her hair was a reddish-gold color and when loose hung halfway down her back, her brown/green eyes usually sparkled with joy of life. Today they were more brown than green because her top was brown. Her features were arranged in a nice package with a small nose, eyebrows that matched her hair, and nice shaped lips. Kendal forced a smile and headed for the stairs. With some trepidation, she walked down the curving staircase past all the family

pictures lining the wall. There were pictures of the progression of her family, starting from just her mom and dad to the one taken at her graduation last May. She looked at the one in which she was a baby and wondered if her baby would look like that. In an instant she felt a tug on her heart. She steeled herself to disregard that twinge.

The thick carpet covering the stairs enveloped the sound of Kendal's footsteps. She found Jeff sitting in the den talking to her mother and sisters. Her sisters Julie and Dorrie, just like Kendal, were replicates of their mother. They all had slim builds, reddish-blond hair, and their mom's beautiful features. Kendal's dad often remarked that if it were not for the color of his daughter's eyes, he would think he had nothing to do with their parentage. Kendal took a moment to watch Jeff's interaction with her family. She and Jeff had been friends since they met in middle school. They had "dated" each other off and on in high school, but only Kendal and Jeff knew what dating really meant for them.

"Hey Jeff," she said with a tight smile. "Are you ready to go?"

"Sure, Kendal," Jeff replied with a warm smile in return. Reaching for Kendal's hand he let her assist him up. Jeff was a very attractive man with short blond hair, gorgeous aqua eyes and a winning smile. He was about six feet tall, with a muscular build. Bodybuilding was almost an obsession for him so he dressed to show off his muscles. In addition he was Kendal's best friend and confidant.

"I'm not sure when I'll be back mom. We'll get something to eat while we're out," Kendal said as she and Jeff said their goodbyes and walked to the door.

"Okay, dear," Joan Richards, Kendal's mom, replied. She stood up to follow the two to the door. Joan Richards had a regal bearing, and she took stringent measures to make sure her body stayed slim and trim. The only real difference between Joan and all her girls were her eyes. While the girls all had the brown/green eyes of their dad, Joan's were

bright green –shinning brightly out in the world. All of her daughters had inherited her cheerful disposition, which helped in a house full of strong-minded females. “Have a good time you two,” Joan said and waved them off.

“Well?” Jeff asked quietly as soon as the door closed.

“Positive again,” Kendal replied, feeling glum. It wasn’t enough that her life was ruined; now Jeff’s life would go down the tubes as well.

“Are you sure?” Jeff asked, holding his breath.

“Positive,” Kendal replied stiffly, looking anywhere but at Jeff. “I’m sorry,” she added quietly, blinking her eyes to keep the tears from falling.

“Hey Ken, it’s not your fault.” Jeff pulled her in his arms and hugged her close. “You and I will deal with this together,” he said fiercely. “I’m just a little shocked, that’s all. Things will work out some kind of way,” he promised. “Let’s go eat some greasy food and talk everything through.” Jeff urged Kendal into his SUV.

The ride to the restaurant was made in silence with each of them lost in their own thoughts. Jeff instinctively headed to the Blue Room Pub, a small dive with excellent bar food and good music. They held hands as they walked to the front door, taking some strength from one another.

Kendal stopped just inside the door to let her eyes adjust to the low light condition that was a constant state at the Blue Room. Heavy drapes hung in front of all the windows to keep the sun out and preserve the mood. Jeff spotted an empty booth and motioned for Kendal to follow him. They slid into the vinyl booth with familiarity. This was the place they’d spent they spent a lot of time at in their adolescence. In the Blue Room they felt safe to be who they really were and dispatched with the pretence of being in love.

For something to do, Kendal reached for one of the plastic menus leaning against the wall. She already knew what she was going to order. Using the menu as a shield she snuck a quick peek at Jeff to gauge his mood.

“So, you’re going to have a baby,” Jeff said, reaching over to cover one of her hands with his. “No, make that we,” he added, quickly.

“Yeah, ready or not here it comes,” Kendal quipped. She looked at Jeff, her eyes tortured. “I don’t know what to do, Jeff. I just don’t think I’m ready for this,” she admitted.

“I don’t think anybody is ever ready, Ken,” Jeff said, falling back on the nickname he’d given her so long ago. “There are some options, you know.”

“I’ve thought about adoption,” Kendal replied, staring intently at a speck on the table. “It’s so hard to know what’s right,” she whispered, blinking her eyes to keep back the tears. The arrival of their waiter allowed her to begin to regain some of her composure. Jeff ordered for both of them barely glancing at the waiter.

“Kendal, you probably have another couple of months before you have to make a decision. Please take your time and don’t do anything you’ll regret,” he begged. “I promise that no matter what decision you make, I will be there to help you. We did this together, we’ll see this through together,” Jeff pledged.

“Thanks, Jeff.” Kendal searched in her backpack for tissues. She tore open the package and made quick work of wiping her eyes and blowing her nose. “I sort of panicked when the second test came out positive too,” she added with a sniff. “Even though I was sure that I was pregnant, seeing the plus sign really shook me up. I mean, it was my first time for crying out loud!” she said banging her fist on the table.

Kendal thought for a moment then added with some embarrassment, “At least my first time with an actual penis.”

Jeff tried but was unable to stop the shout of laughter that erupted from his mouth. “If it’s any consolation,” he began trying to be serious. “It was the first time I ever had a condom break,” Jeff offered, barely managing to keep a grin of his face. “They’re usually much more reliable than that,” he added trying to stay serious. “Now don’t take this wrong, but if you could have seen yourself that day, Ken. I mean, jumping up and down like that,” he added keeping a straight face. He pantomimed her breasts going up and down.

“Isn’t that just great,” Kendal retorted. She too was having trouble not laughing. “There I was trying to save your ass, and you think it’s funny.”

“Funny?” Jeff asked, feigning innocence. “No Ken, I thought it was hilarious! Kind of like some tribal ritual you’d see on an old National Geographic document.” His shoulders shook with silent laughter.

“I was trying to keep your sperm from jumping up stream, you idiot,” Kendal replied loftily. “Everybody knows if a woman jumps up and down it makes the sperm fall out. They get confused and start going the other way,” she explained as if to someone of low intelligence.

“And you went to college?” Jeff shook his head and rolled his eyes. He sat back as the waiter brought out their drinks, his attention once again solely focused on Kendal.

“I had to do something,” Kendal said in self-defense, once the waiter left. “And frankly, I couldn’t think of anything else,” she added with a sheepish shrug. “It’s not like I’ve had any contact with sperm before. Now, of course if your room wasn’t so junky I might have had a chance of succeeding. But no, you have to spread your possessions all over the floor.” She shook an accusatory finger at Jeff.

“You’re absolutely right,” Jeff countered. “I should have known that the condom would break and consequently you would run around the room like crazy and fall. And knowing that I should have cleaned up the room,” he mocked.

“No,” Kendal said with a shake of her head. “You should have cleaned up the room anyway,” she added and stuck her tongue out at him. She quickly pulled it back as Jeff reached across to grab it. “Besides, everyone knows you gay guys are all supposed to be neat.”

Just then their waiter appeared with their food. He neatly arranged the chili–cheese fries, the hot buffalo–style wings and the mozzarella cheese sticks with marinara sauce. “Can I get you anything else?” he asked looking directly at Jeff.

“I’ll have another beer and some water,” Jeff replied, looking at the waiter for the first time. “I might need something else later,” he added with a raised brow and returned the look.

The waiter after establishing direct eye contact with Jeff turned to Kendal, still smiling. “How about you?”

“I’m fine for right now,” Kendal replied, trying to keep from laughing at the antics of the two males. She picked up her plate and filled it with goodies. “It’s a good thing I’m *not* stuck on you, Jeff,” Kendal remarked casually. “There was no subtlety involved in that exchange. In fact I’m surprised the fire sprinklers didn’t come on.”

“A man has to do what a man has to do, Kendal,” Jeff replied, with a satisfied smirk. “You never know when you’ll meet Mr. Right.”

“You are right, I won’t,” Kendal shot back around a mouth full of food. “Um, this is wonderful,” she added, feeling better already.

As they munched Kendal and Jeff appraised each other of current events that had nothing to do with the “dilemma”. They were interrupted by the frequent visits from their waiter in the guise of refilling their drinks, but really to share sizzling looks with Jeff. Kendal finally sat back and declared herself stuffed. “Oh man, there’s nothing like good grease and fat to improve the spirits,” she declared while rubbing her still flat stomach. “I can see now that things will work out, won’t they Jeff?”

“You, bet,” he replied with more confidence than he felt and signaled the waiter with a big smile. “My *friend* and I are ready for the check.”

“I’ll be right back,” the waiter promised, returning Jeff’s smile with one of his own.

“Did you see the cute dimples,” Jeff hissed as the waiter walked to the kitchen area. “He is certainly to die for. Girl you must have had me completely confused when we first walked in here that I didn’t notice a prize like that right away,” he scolded.

“He certainly is very impressive with those cute dimples and that hot Puerto Rican look,” Kendal replied. “I almost want to ask him out,” she joked.

“Hands off,” Jeff warned with a mock scowl. “He’s not your type anyway. And speaking of your type, you should be prepared for a deluge of women once you start to show.” He gave Kendal a big wink.

“Once again your lack of subtlety astounds me,” Kendal replied, trying to look uninterested. “I have too much on my mind already to be worrying about women. Now is not the time to think about a relationship.” She gave a sigh as the enormity of her situation came back into focus.

“Why not? All the lesbians I know are into having families. Once you start to show you’ll have all sorts of women throwing themselves at you – especially when they find out you’re single and you don’t have an ex to worry about.”

“Oh, right!” Kendal scoffed, rolling her eyes. “A dog is a much better draw,” she argued.

“You’re nuts, Ken,” Jeff shot back. “You just don’t realize that you’re sitting on a gold mine. You’re not still in love with your last girlfriend, you don’t have some man begging you to come back to him, and you’re already pregnant – there’s no need for all that expensive fertilization stuff.”

“Jeff honey, the way your mind works is dangerous,” Kendal said as if dismissing every thing Jeff said, but she was secretly taking some of what Jeff said to heart. Maybe there was something to this baby draw thing.

“Here you are.” The waiter placed the check in front of Jeff, attached was a note with ten digits and a name.

Jeff immediately picked up the note. “Marco, what a nice name,” he remarked as he reached in his pocket and withdrew his wallet. He pulled out some bills and a business card. Turning the card over he wrote down his home number and pressed the card and the money into Marco’s hand. “Thank you for the great service, Marco.”

“I’ll be happy to serve you anytime, Jeff,” Marco replied slyly. “Have a good evening.”

Kendal watched Jeff, watch Marco as he strode to another table. Like she said earlier, Marco was gorgeous. A little less than six foot tall with a sinewy build, set off by dark Spanish looks, he was a god to behold. His straight black hair was cut short in the back and fell to his

ears on the sides. Top the picture off with cuddly brown eyes and sensuous lips; she could see why Jeff was interested. "I'm surprised you didn't ask when he gets off," Kendal said, dryly.

"There's plenty of time for that later," Jeff replied with a smug look on his face. "Now let's go back to my place and get this baby project settled." With a last wave for Marco, he led Kendal out of the restaurant to the car.

"It's so nice out, why don't we go to the park instead?" Kendal suggested as Jeff started the car. "I know you always have a blanket in your trunk."

"No," Jeff demurred. "We need a nice private, quiet place where we won't be disturbed."

"I almost forgot all you friends hang out there. You're right we would never get a chance to talk, Mr. 'Oh-so-popular' that you are."

"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful," Jeff replied with a pose, as he pulled up to a stop light near his apartment.

Kendal smiled but her mind was busy going over her two available choices again. She was leaning toward adoption because she felt too immature to be a good parent, and didn't most kids need two parents? Deep down Kendal wasn't sure she wanted all the responsibility that came with raising a child. It sounded selfish but maybe being selfish was what she needed to be at this time in her life. Kendal gave a deep sigh.

"Now, now, Kendal, none of that." Jeff reached out and squeezed her leg. "It will work out, babe."

Kendal put her hand on top of Jeff's and gave a wobbly smile. Sure things would work out, but at what cost?

They walked to Jeff's apartment in silence, once again holding hands. Kendal felt a moment of panic as they neared Jeff's apartment. She was tempted to turn and run from having to think anymore about the problem, but she realized that would do nothing to help this situation that would *not* just go away. For the first time she had some other being to consider beside her, and that was a terrifying thought. Did she really want to commit to something for the rest of her life?

Jeff unlocked the door to his apartment and stood back so that Kendal could enter. He could see the fear in her eyes and wished he could really reassure her that things would work themselves out. It didn't help that he was also feeling nervous about the baby. Being a father had never been a role he'd thought he play. Since high school he'd been living the life of the swinging bachelor. However, being an adult was to take full responsibility for your actions, and he was resigned to do that.

"Can I get you anything to drink, Kendal?" Jeff asked as Kendal plopped down on the big overstuffed sofa. He watched as she grabbed one of the throw pillows and hugged it to her stomach as though trying to shield herself.

"No thanks," Kendal replied, patting the pillow. "I'm still stuffed from dinner."

Jeff sat next to Kendal and reached for one of her hands. "I know we talked a little bit earlier, but tell me again what you see as your options?"

"Adoption and keeping the baby," was the quiet response. "I don't think I'm ready for motherhood. It's a role I never really saw for myself."

"I certainly understand that, Kendal. You know me; I've never been one to settle down. But at the same time I *will* accept the responsibility of helping you raise this baby if you decide that's what you want to do. I will also support you in finding good adoptive parents for the baby."

“It’s a real tough choice,” Kendal said, taking a deep breath. “If I give the baby up for adoption, what will my parents think? What will other people think – that I’m a person who can’t handle responsibility or that I’m selfish?”

“You can’t let what other people think cloud the issue, Kendal,” Jeff said forcefully. “I say we wait until we make a decision before telling anybody anything.”

“I wish it were that simple, Jeff.” Kendal gave a big sigh. “I’d like not to consider other people in my decision making process, but that’s just not possible. I guess I have to accept the fact that whichever decision I make, there will be some consequences that I won’t like,” she said sadly.

“Let’s do this Kendal,” Jeff proposed. “I’ll get us some paper and we’ll write up a list of pros and cons for each choice.” Jeff got up to find a pad. Once he came back they spent an hour discussing the reasons for and against each decision. Towards the end Jeff noticed that Kendal was drooping and suggested that she take the list home and study it for a couple of days. Then they could get back together and make an informed decision.

Luckily no one was downstairs when Kendal entered the house. She was really too drained to make small talk. All she wanted to do now was get into the bed and rest her brain. Sleep would hopefully take her away from this agonizing decision. It would also let her stop berating herself for having sex with Jeff. If only she had been ready to deal with the tough issues facing her none of this mess would have happened. But no, she’d tried to change something that could not be changed. And in truth, being a lesbian was not what she wanted to change. What she wanted to change, was not having to tell her mother that she was gay.

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Kendal lay down on her bed, not bothering to take off her clothes. Using her feet she thrust off her shoes and huddled in the middle of her bed. Closing her eyes, she willed her brain to shut down and think of nothing. Soon she drifted off to sleep as though she hadn't a care in the world.

Chapter 2

Kendal awoke slowly the next morning. She stretched like a contented cat. It's Saturday, she thought with a satisfied grin. That meant she didn't have to get up and go to work. Kendal basked in the warm sun peaking through her window. Maybe I'll just stay in bed all day reading romance books, she thought. She rolled over on her back, folding her hands behind her head. Even though no decision had been made last night, Kendal did feel as if some of the weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She was actually able to breath deeper this morning. Jeff was right, things would eventually work out. That's not to say that there would be no bad times, but life generally had a habit of balancing good and bad.

With that thought in mind Kendal was forced to consider the problems that her condition triggered. Here she was twenty-five, still living with her parents, no man wanted and pregnant. How did she go from being the all-American girl to un-wed motherhood? Well, all-American was probably too dramatic. While she wasn't married at least she did have a good job, the baby's daddy had an even better job and he was still in the picture so there was no reason they couldn't be a nuclear family. *Life is definitely strange.*

Kendal still cringed at the thought of having to tell her parents about the baby, especially her mother. Then what? She would have to move, there was no question about that. No way would they want her around to be a role model for her sisters, Kendal realized with a shudder. That was something she hadn't written down in the con column last night. She blushed at the thought of telling Julie about her condition. This would most assuredly ruin her position as the goody-two-shoes of the family. Kendal wasn't sure she was ready to give up that title. "No, I know I'm not ready to loose the warm fuzzy feelings that come with that," Kendal said, tears coming to her eyes.

She squeezed her eyes shut to try to stop the tears from falling but thoughts of her mother's disappointment caused the tears to come faster. Kendal pressed her hands to her eyes feeling the tears flow through her fingers. Of course the only way to avoid telling her mother would be to have an abortion and Kendal knew that was something she could not do. What other women decided for themselves was their business, but for her it was not even an option.

So she would have to tell her parents, Kendal realized with a deep sigh. How to do it was the real question, she acknowledged silently- as well as how much to say. Should she tell them how she got pregnant and would that lead to a confession of her homosexuality? Should she invent some lover who left her high and dry? Should she ask Jeff to marry her and then divorce him after the baby was born? Questions, questions, questions! Kendal grabbed her head in frustration. The earlier easiness she felt was long gone. This was going to be a tough situation to deal with even if things worked out in the long run. She'd be lucky if she made it to the long run without having a nervous breakdown at the rate she was going.

A tap on the door started Kendal's heart to pounding. She quickly wiped her face with her shirt. "Come in," she called out, her voice showing the slightest quiver.

Her mom poked her head around the door. "Are you going to get up today?" she asked upon seeing Kendal still abed.

"Eventually," Kimball replied, pleased her voice sounded fairly even. She raised her hands to her face and pretended to stretch to hide any evidence of tears. "I stayed up late reading, so I'm having a hard time getting my eyes to stay open." She rubbed her eyes to prove her point.

"I can certainly understand that, dear," her mom replied. "I'm off to the farmer's market now. Is there anything special you want me to pick up for you?"

“I’m fine, mom. Thanks.”

“Both your sisters and your dad are out, so you’ll be here by yourself,” Joan Richards remarked. “Sleep as long as you want.” With a quick smile and a wave she was gone.

“That was close,” Kendal muttered. She gave her mother ten minutes to gather her things and leave. Kendal went to the window and watched her mother pull out of the driveway. Taking off her clothes, Kendal grabbed her robe and strode to the bathroom. She got into the shower and let the warm water cascade over her head, luxuriating in the water pulsing over her scalp and gently sliding down her body. Kendal raised her head and let the water massage her face.

Against her will images of her last encounter with Gloria played through her mind. Kendal was struck by a tingling in her groin as she remembered the kisses she’d shared with Gloria. She blushed even now thinking about the wonderful things she and Gloria had done to each other on the floor in Gloria’s tiny apartment. Kendal’s nipples tightened into stinging points as the feelings washed over her. Gloria had been the one and only great love of her life.

Why am I thinking of this now? Don’t I have enough on her mind already? As usual, the thoughts wouldn’t listen to her and they just kept rolling. Growing up Kendal had kissed several boys, but the softness of Gloria’s lips had caused such incredible hunger in her. Up until that point Kendal had had an appreciation of women but really thought she was not sexually inclined. Boys did nothing for her and she desperately suppressed any feelings she may have had for girls. How she’d scoffed at all the girls who’d given up their virginity due to the sweet-talking of testosterone-filled boys. How superior she had felt to be above that. With Gloria she’d finally understood why she hadn’t been in any danger with boys, and discovered that she was just like all the girls she’d looked down her nose at because they were vulnerable to raging hormones.

Over time, Gloria had become a necessity and at times Kendal felt she could hardly breathe without her. For two wonderful years they had been together almost all the time; studying together, eating together, loving together. Living in a university environment cocooned them from the real world. They only had to worry about making their grades, not about society. As graduation approached Kendal was ready to give up everything to follow Gloria wherever she was going. Gloria suddenly wasn't so sure she was ready for that much of a commitment. The last two weeks they spent together were hell and heaven for Kendal. The sexual attraction they shared was as passionate as always, but the mental closeness was all but shattered.

Thinking to give Gloria one more time to realize their relationship was worth fighting for Kendal agreed to visit the tiny apartment they had shared. Gloria met her at the door with nothing on. She pulled Kendal inside and pushed her up against the closed door. Her mouth locked on Kendal's with the utmost passion. As usual, Kendal immediately melted under the heat of Gloria's passion. That night they couldn't get enough of each other joining together time and time again. No words were spoken, but Kendal knew that this was the end. Near dawn she dropped a kiss on a sleeping Gloria's forehead and left; heart broken.

It took six hard months for Kendal to recover from that blow, and in some ways she still hadn't recovered. Outwardly she'd given the appearance of being fine, ready to get into her new job and start life, but inwardly she still carried a big hurt. She'd managed to keep a positive outlook so that even her mother's probing gazes didn't see through her façade.

Realizing that the water was getting cold, Kendal turned it off. Grabbing a towel, she wiped dry. *Strange I haven't thought of Gloria for a couple of months.* It had been over nine months since you split, surely that is enough time to get over it, Kendal chided herself. It wasn't as if she didn't have bigger problems to deal with now.

Rubbing her still flat stomach, Kendal wandered to the full-length mirror next to the sink counter. She turned sideways to see if her stomach looked any different today. “Jeez Richards, ever think it’s too early to show anything,” she told her mirror image. Kendal was pleased to see that her body was still trim and firm. She cupped one of her small breasts and tried to imagine a baby’s mouth attached to her rosy nipple. Her heartstrings pulled a little bit at the image. At least she was tall so she wouldn’t look totally fat in her final months. Her brown/green eyes starred back at her gravely, as she realized the thoughts that had just passed through her mind. Here she was really thinking about the baby, imagining how it would change her shape and how she would feed it – totally without conscious thought.

Kendal studied her face thoughtfully. She looked the same with her thick naturally arched red eyebrows, her pug nose and nicely rounded lips, but inside she felt just a little different. Her red-blond hair hung down her back as thick as ever. Her features hadn’t changed but there in the back of her eyes was a little tiny glow. A baby, she thought with wonder; a tiny miracle that depended on her to nourish it and keep it safe. Kendal swore she felt a tug from within her body. She looked quickly away from that glow not wanting to analyze yet what it meant.

Once Kendal was dressed, she ate a leisurely breakfast, even though it was closer to lunchtime. While reading the morning paper, she found a small article on the benefits of early prenatal care. She made a mental note to look through her employee handbook at work for a doctor on her insurance plan. Kendal gave quick thanks that she was fully insured. Surely anything involving a hospital stay was bound to be expensive. That was another thing she and Jeff hadn’t considered when making the pro/con list. Who knew how many other responsibilities they hadn’t considered?

Making her mind up to surf the net that night for more information, Kendal went about cleaning up her breakfast dishes. As she finished up,

she heard her mother's car pull into the garage. Thoughts of fresh buttery croissants quickened her steps to the garage, so that she could be the first in line for the buttery treats.

"So you finally decided to get up?" her mother teased as Kendal reached into the trunk to grab some bags.

"Yeah," Kendal replied, "the sun was shining too bright for me to stay in bed any longer. After I filch a croissant I think I'll take a nice long walk to work it off."

"I'm tempted to join you, but I need to tackle the overgrowth in the back yard." Joan shut the trunk and followed Kendal into the kitchen with the remaining bags. "You seemed very preoccupied yesterday evening Kendal, is everything okay?" Joan asked, making sure her back was to Kendal.

"Sure, mom," Kendal replied a little too quickly. "Just some work stuff that I was thinking through. This walk will help me sort it all out," Kendal added with assurance.

"Okay, dear. You know I'm always available to talk, even if you are all grown up now." She turned around just as Kendal was stuffing a chocolate filled croissant in her mouth. Well almost, she added silently.

"This is great," Kendal mumbled around a full mouth. She brushed the crumbs off her face, downed a cup of water after swallowing the remains and ran upstairs. In her room she grabbed her license and keys and hurried back downstairs. It wouldn't do for her mother to get too curious at this stage. "I should be back in an hour, mom," she called to her mother from the front door and didn't wait for a reply.

For the middle of November the weather was perfect. The day was warmer than usual and sunny. The expected high for Atlanta was 65 degrees. There was a gentle breeze to keep the sun from making it feel

too warm. An altogether perfect day to take a walk, Kendal thought taking a deep breath.

As she walked along her intown neighborhood, Kendal listened to the cadence of the constant falling acorns as they hit the concrete. She enjoyed the crunching of the crisp oak leaves lining the sidewalks as she stepped on them. Getting into the spirit of the noise, Kendal went out of her way to crunch a few of the acorns strewn all over the place. Yep, it was fall in this tree-lined neighborhood.

Walking on this warm autumn day Kendal felt exhilarated. The sky was bright and clear, not at all like the smog days of the summer. There were also fewer cars to mar the quiet of mid-morning. Kendal raised her arms and twirled around. What a wonderful day to be alive, she thought drinking in the glory of the morning.

Kendal quickly glanced around sheepishly to see if anyone had witnessed her moment of folly. Luckily the street was empty, although she thought she saw a curtain twitch at the house she was standing in front of. She decided to move along before they reported her to the cops, mistaking her for one of the homeless people that hung out in the nearby park.

The rest of her walk was spent enjoying her neighborhood. One of her favorite things to do was to figure out what kind of people lived in the different houses. Most of the houses were large Victorians set up on a hill and back from the streets. She was amazed at the sheer number of vans and sport utility vehicles that she passed. Of course there was still a proliferation of Volvos and Mercedes, given the kind of upper income neighborhood it was. She knew from talking to her mother that some of the residents in the area were fairly new, having moved back into the city from the surrounding suburbs. Her mother had even mentioned that the city of Atlanta could even show a population increase once the new 2000 Census was released, something that had not happened in the past twenty years.

Yes she loved this neighborhood but knew that it would be too expensive for her to live here. She would look for a smaller place on the south side where some neighborhoods were just starting to take off. That thought had Kendal starting on a mental to-do list. First and foremost was to talk to Jeff about her decision. Her little bathroom session had fairly well fixed things in her mind. This baby was here to stay so she needed to find a doctor and make an appointment. She also needed to make sure that Jeff didn't feel any obligation to her or the baby. It was her decision to keep this baby so the full responsibility would lie with her. She still didn't know how she would tell her parents or her sisters, but tell them she would. Maybe after the baby was born her family would come around.

She would need to find a place fairly quickly, move out and then drop the bomb on her family. That way she would have her own space if things got strained. If she couldn't find anything on the south side to suit her maybe she could move in with Jeff for a little while. His neighborhood was called Midtown and was within walking distance of the transit system. Although Kendal had a car, she preferred using transit to driving. It saved her the costly parking fees and helped clean up the environment on a small scale.

Chapter 3

As Kendal turned onto her street, she immediately spotted Jeff's SUV parked in front of the house. Alarmed she hastened her pace; all the while praying that Jeff wasn't taking to her inquisitive mother! Kendal all but burst through the front door. Hearing conversation coming from the den she sped in that direction. Sure enough there were Jeff, her mother and sisters having a seemingly all too friendly conversation.

"Hey Jeff, were we supposed to meet today?" Kendal asked, her heart beating furiously and her breathing a little ragged.

"Oh no, dear," Jeff replied rising to pull Kendal into a quick hug. "I decided at the last minute to drop by and see if you were free today." He gave her a reassuring smile.

"Sure, I'm free," Kendal replied, quizzing him with her eyes. "I'll just run upstairs and get ready, *dear*." She put some emphasis on the word dear. "Give me fifteen minutes."

"No problem sweetie," Jeff said and sat back down on the couch next to Joan.

Kendal shot him a warning look before rushing up stairs. She set an all time personal best time for getting ready, arriving back downstairs in ten minutes with no makeup and her wet hair swept back into a ponytail.

"Wow, that was quick," Jeff remarked mockingly with a wicked smile. He knew she was worried that her mother had somehow ferreted information out of him like she used to do when he was younger. These days he could keep his own with Joan though, he thought with satisfaction. No more of those days when he inadvertently gave away secrets.

“Look what I had waiting for me,” Kendal said, ever so sweetly. “It makes a girl rush,” she added with a smirk. She noticed Julie giving her a disbelieving look out of the corner of her eye. She would have to deal with her later.

“Well then, let’s go see if we can find some trouble,” Jeff replied. He leaned over and gave Joan a kiss on the cheek, stood up and reached for Kendal’s hand.

“Don’t wait up for me, mom,” Kendal called out as Jeff all but dragged her out of the house. She managed to keep quiet until they were seated in Jeff’s powerful vehicle. “What’s going on, Jeff? Did I miss something last night?” Kendal asked her voice rising with each word.

“I’ve got everything under control, Kendal,” Jeff announced with pride and a big grin. “I am a,” he paused for effect, “a genius,” he said poking out his chest and nodding his head.

“Let’s hear it,” Kendal demanded with one eyebrow raised in obvious skepticism.

“We need to get married,” Jeff declared.

“Are you crazy?” Kendal screamed. “Jeff, you know I love you, but I think we both know that I prefer women and you prefer men.”

“That’s the beauty of this plan, Kendal,” Jeff replied obviously excited. “We’re good friends, we’re going to have a baby and best of all we’ll be free to pursue our own pleasures with no jealousy involved. If one of us, probably you, finds that one true love we can easily get divorced or continue the marriage. Just think we’ll have all the advantages that straight married people have, whatever that is,” he added as an afterthought. “Plus the baby would automatically have my name and the rights to anything I leave behind. Best of all my parents will be

so thrilled at the thought that I got married to a woman, they'll shower us with money and gifts," he added gleefully.

"You really have thought about this," Kendal said with surprise. "But Jeff, marriage seems so drastic."

"Listen, I know you don't want to abort the baby, and I think you might be more inclined to keep it rather than give it up for adoption after you really think about this. So us getting married is the next best logical step," Jeff argued, giving Kendal a reassuring look. "I really have thought it through Ken and I think we should do it," he said, using her special nickname to drive his point home.

"My family will never buy this. Did you see the look Julie gave me when we called each other dear?"

"They don't have to believe it, just accept it," Jeff pointed out. "When we drop the real bomb, the baby, I'm sure they'll be only too happy to play along."

"My mom will play along? You must be kidding?" Kendal snorted. "Since when?"

"Then it's up to you to convince her that this is what you want to do, Kendal," Jeff replied. "She will have her doubts but if she believes that you know what you want then she'll stand by your decision."

"Okay, I'll give you that one," Kendal said with reluctance. "But what about your family, Jeff?" Kendal added, trying to make him see reason. She conveniently forgot that she'd had the same notion of a quickie marriage earlier.

"The old coot will be so happy that I've accepted the trappings of society that nothing else will matter. It's all in how things appear, not how they are. If I'm married to a woman and sleeping with a man it's

almost acceptable as long as I pretend good enough,” he said with some bitterness. “Besides, they don’t really visit here anymore and I only go and see them ever other year, so we won’t have to play it up for them much. We’d better go before your mother comes to check on us,” he said starting the vehicle. “You think about it on the way. And just think about how great the pictures of us and the baby will look on my mother’s mantel,” he smirked.

Ten minutes later they were pulling into a big suburban-like shopping center. It was very large and set back from the street. The shops were big and spread out with an abundance of parking spaces.

“Where are we going?” Kendal asked as Jeff pulled into the parking lot of the shopping center.

“If we’re going to be parents we need to get some books to read up on this,” Jeff explained. “I’m *know* neither one of us had any idea of what’s really going on with your body.”

“Why are you so sure, I want to keep this baby?” Kendal asked as Jeff helped her out of the vehicle. “I haven’t decided either way.”

“As much as you’d like to walk away from the responsibility Kendal, I know you can’t,” Jeff replied easily. “I knew last night that the rational part of you might think of adoption, but the feeling part of you would get pulled in by the emotions. And let’s face it, it has to be hard to live with somebody for nine months and not get attached. Especially when the thing comes attached to you already,” Jeff added philosophically. “It’s one of the nicest characteristics you have, and if things were different between us, I would have snapped you up long time ago.”

“Jeff, that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” Kendal said clearly touched, feeling a little teary eyed. “Okay, I admit I saw something deep in my eyes this morning that warmed my soul. It was like the baby

reached out to me and put her hand around my heart.” She struggled to hold back tears.

“You know it’s a she?”

“No, just a figure of speech,” Kendal replied with a shake of her head. “Listen can we go out to eat after this, I’m already hungry.”

“I guess you’re eating for two now, babe,” Jeff said and steered her towards the bookstore entrance.

“Nah, I’m just my old ravenous self,” Kendal snorted, dismissing his words with a wave of her wrist. “I always eat enough for two, so now I guess I can eat enough for three,” she said with a big grin, rubbing her hands together with glee.

They ended up spending two hours browsing the pregnancy and childbirth section of the store. The store was equipped with comfortable chairs and that probably extended the visit. In the end they each had a stack of books they wanted. When the stacks were compared a few duplicates were eliminated. Jeff insisted on paying for all the books claiming that he needed to get used to the idea of spending money on “Junior”.

“What if it’s a girl?” Kendal asked as they waited in the checkout line.

“Junior can work both ways,” Jeff assured her. “Next time we’ll have to get a name book, but for now Junior is non specific.” He greeted the cashier and reached for his wallet.

“What ever you say, dear,” Kendal said sweetly, and rolled her eyes. As she followed him to his car Kendal did wonder how Jeff had become an expert on babies in such a short time.

“So where do you want to eat, Kendal?” Jeff asked once they were settled in his SUV.

“How about Fellinis Pizza?” Kendal suggested. “I could go for a salad and a couple of slices of veggie pizza.”

“Good choice since it’s practically across the street. That way you won’t starve before we get there,” Jeff teased since he’d heard Kendal’s stomach rumble a couple of times while they were in the bookstore.

As if on cue Kendal’s stomach once again let out a loud growl in response to Jeff’s statement. “Hey, blame it on Junior,” she said, rubbing her stomach as though to sooth it. “Who would think something this small could cause such a ruckus?”

“If Junior has trouble hearing, we’ll know the cause.” Jeff set the car in motion and quickly drove to the restaurant. He pulled up in front of a funky building painted red and yellow. There weren’t many cars in the parking lot since it was past the noon rush.

As Kendal stepped inside Fellinis, she sniffed the air appreciatively as her senses were assaulted with smells associated with pizza parlors. She and Jeff walked up to the empty order counter right in front of the door. Behind the counter was the pizza assembly area complete with the worker working the dough. The young man behind the counter patiently waited for them to look at the menu hanging above.

“You always look at the menu even though you know you’re getting the same thing you always get,” Jeff mocked from behind Kendal.

“I look because I never know what I’m going to order when I walk through the door,” Kendal informed him loftily. “So I look at the menu to help me with my choice.” She turned her head back to give Jeff a mischievous look.

“Can I help you?”

“I’ll have the salad, a slice of white pizza and a slice of veggie pizza, and some water,” Kendal replied, with an emphasis on the white pizza for Jeff’s sake.

“You only changed your order because I said something,” Jeff muttered before giving his order to the counter person. Before Jeff could reach for his wallet, Kendal put down a twenty to cover their lunch. The person behind the counter gave Kendal her change, two cups and a picture of Elvis to identify their order to the person who would serve the pizza. Kendal passed a cup to Jeff, dropped a couple of dollars in the tip jar and followed Jeff to the drink stand.

After getting their drinks, Jeff and Kendal sat at one of the tables along the back wall.

“The old building had more character than this one,” Kendal announced as she squeezed a lemon into her water. “I’m still not really sure if I like the décor of this new place. It might be too nouveau something for me.”

“Hey, the pizza is still good and the serving staff is still tattooed and pierced,” Jeff said dryly after a server placed two salads on the table. Both of his arms were covered with tattoos. “And of course this place is a lot cleaner and shinier than the other one,” he added.

“I guess the first two do still give it some of the old quaint charm. But I miss the old over stuffed booths with rips in the upholstery and the dangerous winding staircase,” Kendal said before attacking her salad with relish.

Silence reigned as they both gobbled down their late lunch. Before they could finish their salads, hot slices of pizza were delivered to their table. They eagerly made room for the shiny pizza pans.

“Wow, this is good,” Kendal exclaimed around a mouth full of white pizza. “Maybe this will be my new favorite.”

“No imagination, Kendal,” Jeff said shaking his head. “You should try more variety. When you get the same thing all the time, it dulls your senses.”

“Does not,” Kendal protested, playfully indignant. “It just means that I know what I like. I go to restaurants because I have a taste for a particular dish. If I go and can’t find that dish anymore then I’m less likely to return.”

“You are too young to be so set in your ways,” Jeff argued. “Kendal, you need to get out there and experience more.”

“I did that and look where it got us,” Kendal replied, dryly.

“I, uh, meant with food,” Jeff stammered. “And speaking of Junior, which I was not, have you decided to marry me yet?” He looked at her hopefully with what he knew to be his most winning smile.

“You have to give me a little more time, Jeff,” Kendal replied putting her hand over his. “I’d hate to rush into another mistake because I didn’t think everything through. Besides, you know how hard it is for me to make quick decisions,” she added, pleading for his understanding.

“Okay,” Jeff said with a dramatic sigh. “But don’t expect me to stop trying to persuade you, Kendal. I really think getting married would be a win-win scenario for both of us.”

“That I can deal with.” Kendal gave Jeff’s hand a squeeze. “Oh, by the way, did you get any calls today?”

“No,” Jeff replied with a shake of his head. “I got a call last night,” he imparted with a smirk. “We’ve got a date for tomorrow afternoon.”

“So you’re only good enough for Sunday, huh?” Kendal taunted.

“He has to work tonight missy, so there,” Jeff replied quickly, resisting the temptation to stick out his tongue. “We had a nice long conversation,” Jeff added in a more serious tone. “I think I could really like this guy. I mean, I had the hardest time getting off the phone.”

“Does this mean he’ll last longer than a month?” Kendal asked, tongue in cheek. Jeff was well known for quickly falling in love and just as quickly falling out of love.

“Very funny, Kendal. I’m serious this time. We have a lot in common, just you wait and see.”

“Jeff,” Kendal began hesitantly, “won’t it be kind of strange with you getting married so early in your relationship?”

“No way.” Jeff dismissed the question with a flick of his wrist. “I already mentioned it to Marco and we still have a date,” he admitted with a sheepish grin. “Besides, he’s seen us together so he knows there is nothing going on between us.”

“I hope you’re right, Jeff. So tell me more about the gorgeous Marco,” Kendal bade.

“He’s twenty-eight and working on finishing his law degree. He used to be a social worker but decided that he could help people better if he was a lawyer. The bad part is that he has two jobs so we won’t be able to spend as much time together as I would like,” Jeff added with a grimace. “But since we do have similar interests our time together will be more fun for the both of us. I can’t tell you how excited I am about this.”

“Sounds like a good start,” Kendal said, wiping her mouth and crumpled her napkin in her plate. She leaned back and put her plate on top of the empty pizza pans. “I hate to admit it, but your proposal is starting to sound good to me,” Kendal admitted cautiously. “I still feel the need to really think it over,” she added quickly as Jeff jerked to attention.

“Whatever you decide, I’m willing to try,” Jeff promised in all seriousness. “Even if it wasn’t my baby Kendal, I’d still be willing to help you anyway I can.”

“I know that Jeff, you’ve always been my best friend,” tears glistening in her eyes. She blinked to stop them from falling. “This pregnancy has me so teary-eyed lately,” she complained with a smile. “I hope this doesn’t last the whole nine months.” A huge yawn caught her by surprise. Kendal covered her mouth and stretched her back. “Excuse me. I’m so sleepy all of a sudden.”

“Let’s go to my place,” Jeff suggested. “You can take a nap while I read one of my new books. After you rest we can decide if we want to do something later on.”

“Good plan,” Kendal replied and yawned again. “If it’s okay with you, I’ll spend the night to at least start give my parents thinking something may be going on between us.”

“That’s the spirit, Kendal.” Jeff gave her an approving smile. “What they don’t know won’t hurt them,” he chanted. “Now say it with me, babe.”

Kendal obediently repeated the chant with Jeff. Although she didn’t tell him, she was almost certain that marriage was a solution to their problem. It really would address a lot of the issues facing her. However, making decisions had never been a strong point for Kendal. She had an annoying habit of “over thinking” the problem and not being

able to make a decisive choice. This was one decision that was too important to be wishy-washy about.

“Go ahead and lay down in my room,” Jeff urged Kendal as they entered his apartment. Kendal, caught in the midst of another yawn, willingly accepted the invitation and proceeded to Jeff’s bedroom. Once there she kicked off her shoes and curled up in the middle of Jeff’s bed. She was out almost before her head hit the pillow.

Kendal awoke later feeling rested and relaxed. She stretched her body as far as it could go and sat up. Peering at the bedside alarm clock she noticed that it was four-thirty, time to think about what to do tonight. With a burst of energy she sprang from the bed and went to find Jeff. Before she reached the door, she noticed something was different about Jeff’s room. She looked around, but the wall was still pale blue and empty, the bed was the same as well. Then it hit her – Jeff had cleaned up his room! That was certainly a first.

“She’s awakens,” Jeff announced as he spied Kendal. “Good timing, the ‘Gods must be Crazy’ is just starting and I’ve got a full bowl of popcorn.” He held up the bowl for her to see.

“Um, that’s probably what woke me.” Kendal took a sniff and reached for some popcorn.

“If you want a drink, you know where the fridge is,” Jeff said before Kendal could sit down. “You’d better hurry because the movie is starting.”

Muttering ‘what a prince’ under her breath, Kendal quickly went to grab a Dr. Pepper out of the refrigerator. She made it back in time to settle down for the start of the movie. No matter how many times she saw the movie, it always struck her as hilarious.

By the time they followed the adventures of a Bushman making his way to the end of the earth to get rid of a Coca Cola bottle, Jeff and Kendal were pelting each other with popcorn and pillows.

“Now that’s a movie that should be shown instead of all those other documentaries they throw at you in high school,” Jeff declared as the closing credits were running. “You learn about Bush people, you learn about revolutionaries, you learn about warthogs – I mean what more could you ask for?”

“Plus the nice guy gets the girl in the end,” Kendal added with a fake sigh, clutching her heart. “How romantic.” She batted her lashes at Jeff.

Jeff just raised an eyebrow and gave Kendal the look. “So what trouble do you want to get into tonight? I can’t stay out too late because I want to look my best for Marco tomorrow.”

Kendal gave a delicate snort. “All we ever do together is eat, but let’s go get some dinner anyway,” she said. She looked at her watch to see that it was only six thirty.

“Dinner is always good for me. And if all we did was eat together, we wouldn’t be in the mess that we’re in,” Jeff added, dryly.

“Ha, ha, ha,” Kendal intoned. “After dinner why don’t we go to Abbots? We can get there early and shoot some pool. Since it’s Saturday there should be some hot girls hanging out tonight.” Abbots was a popular club that had a mixed clientele of women and men.

“Okay,” Jeff agreed readily, “but you have to promise not to let me take anyone but you home tonight.”

“Slut that you are,” Kendal replied.

“I am what I am, honey,” Jeff shot back, striking a pose.

“Always ready,” Kendal quipped. “Couldn’t you imagine yourself wearing a chastity belt just this one time?”

“Oh girl, too many boys have that key!” Jeff scoffed.

“Let me go freshen up, you shameless hussy,” Kendal said primly and went towards the bathroom.

“We don’t all wait to be asked, Kendal,” Jeff called out as a parting shot.

Chapter 4

Kendal grunted and slowly came awake. The sun was shining brightly causing her barely open eyes to squint. She groped the nightstand feeling for her watch. She realized with relief that it was Sunday and she couldn't possibly have overslept. In fact she could lie in bed as long as she wanted to. Strange that her mother hadn't come by to ask if she wanted to go to church, Kendal thought as she squinted to see the time on her watch.

"Twelve already!" she croaked and realized where she was.

"What?" Jeff muttered in return. "I hope you drove us home last night," he added grabbing his throbbing head.

"Yes I did, dear," Kendal replied with sick sweetness. "I even got the phone number from one of the cute dykes who helped me put your drunk ass into the car as the bar was closing."

"Why did I drink so much?" Jeff groaned. "Don't even dare answer that, Kendal," he said quickly, not even opening his eyes. "At least I have time to recover before I see Marco."

"Oh no you don't, dear. We have to go give my parents the good news, remember?" she prodded.

"Oh hell!" Jeff opened his eyes and gave Kendal an evil look. "Next time remind me *before* I drink too much that I have to talk to my future in-laws." He sat up, swung his legs off the bed and buried his head between his hands. "What time are we going?"

"We should try to get there before mother makes it home from church. That way I won't feel like I'm sneaking in," Kendal explained with a shrug of her shoulders.

“It’s pretty darn hard to *sneak* in after noon, Kendal,” Jeff informed her.

“Oh just go take a hot shower, get dressed and then we can stop by Starbucks and get you a large cup of coffee,” Kendal promised. “I’ll shower when you’re done. And throw me something to wear home, I’m sure my clothes reek of smoke.”

“Are you going to be this bossy when we get married?” Jeff whined. He moved to the dresser, pulled out some clothes and threw them in Kendal’s direction.

“If I have to be,” Kendal answered with a saucy grin. “Remember I’m the man in this relationship, Jeff.”

Jeff slapped his forehead, instantly grimacing in pain. “I forgot myself for a moment, honey,” he said in falsetto and swished into the bathroom.

They made it to Kendal’s house only to find her mom’s car in the driveway. With a shrug she let them into the front of the house. Jeff immediately plopped down on the couch and nursed his coffee. Kendal ran upstairs to change into something a little more hers.

Going into her room, she walked to the closet. She wanted something to make her seem more feminine, hoping to distract her parents into believing their story. Kendal ended up with hip hugging jeans and a frilly red top that had spent its entire existence in the back of her closet. Since it was a gift from her mother, she figured it might help with the plan.

When Kendal came back downstairs she found Jeff and her father watching football. She noticed right away that Jeff was doing a terrible job of pretending to watch the game. His head was rolled over at that

terrible angle that only people who were sleeping could attain. She noted with relief that he had put his coffee cup on the table so it didn't have a chance of being spilled on her mother's off-white furniture.

"Well hello, Kendal," her dad said with a big grin. Dave Richards, Kendal's dad, was tall and thin. Unlike his wife he didn't have to work at keeping his body in good shape. His brown hair was as thick as it had been in his younger days, worn a trifle too long – especially for someone his age. He was considered handsome with large brown/green eyes that he'd passed on to his daughters. Laugh lines had formed on his face because he was often smiling or grinning. His family affectionately called him the family clown. "Good to see you still know where you live."

"Truthfully dad, it was just a lucky guess that brought me here," Kendal replied with a grin of her own, trying not to laugh as Jeff jerked to attention at the sound of her father's voice. "Where's mom?"

"In the kitchen fixing lunch like she does every Sunday," Dave Richards replied pointedly. "First you almost forget the address and then you don't know where your mother is at this time on Sunday. Maybe you need to cut back on those late nights, sweetie."

"Now dad, you know I'm just joking," Kendal said with a fake laugh. "I'll go see if mom needs any help," she volunteered and quickly left the room.

Dave stared after his daughter, a little perplexed. *What am I missing?* Kendal had almost seemed nervous about something. Surely she knew he was just joking around about staying out all night. To the best of his knowledge she never volunteered to help with cooking, preferring to do other jobs around the house. He turned to study Jeff, who was halfway lying on the couch. Obviously nothing was bothering Jeff but the lack of sleep. With a shrug, Dave turned his attention back to the game. If anything was to be found out he was sure Joan was the person to do it.

In the kitchen, Kendal nervously paced around. She had used the sorry excuse of going to help her mom to get away from her dad. *What an idiot!* She never volunteered to help in the kitchen, so it was a sure sign something was up. *You've got to be more careful, because mom is much more astute than dad. In fact you'd better stop pacing, it's also sure sign that something is up!*

Joan watched her daughter silently, knowing that Kendal would talk when she was ready. To her best estimation Kendal would pace for a few minutes more before she was ready to talk. *It must be something big, that's the first time she's ever worn that shirt!* Having known Kendal for twenty-five years, Joan prided herself on knowing her daughter fairly well. To her way of thinking, they had a pretty open relationship. Kendal might stew and stall but eventually she would come to Joan and talk things through. *Well almost everything.*

"Uh, mom?" Kendal said coming to a stop next to her mother.

"Yes, Kendal," Joan prompted gently.

"I've got something uh, to tell you," Kendal admitted slowly, looking down at the counter. She absently reached for the fruit basket and picked up two apples, squeezing them somewhat hard.

Joan stopped chopping the eggs and turned to face Kendal with concern, alarmed by the tone of her daughter's voice. "I'm listening," she said quietly, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Well," Kendal paused, sensing the intense gaze her mother was giving her. *Why did I think this was a good idea?* She knew there was no way her mother would ever buy this, even if she was wearing the frilly shirt. Kendal took a deep breath and blurted out all at once, "Jeff and I are getting married." She forced a smile on her face, turned to her mother and tried to look happy.

“This is a big surprise,” Joan replied, still wiping her hands and trying her best to look supportive – whatever that was. “Congratulations, Kendal.” Joan folded Kendal into her arms and hugged her close, mainly because she didn’t know what else to say. “Have you guys picked out a date?” she asked her voice husky with shock and worry.

“No, we haven’t planned anything out yet since it just happened last night,” Kendal replied with a fake smile that had about as much warmth as a snowball.

Joan stepped back and took Kendal’s face between her hands. “Is this really what you want to do, Kendal?” She looked Kendal straight in the eye.

Kendal forced herself to return her mother’s look. “This is what I really want, mom,” she replied trying to sound convincing but coming off a little shaky. “It will work out mom, you’ll see,” she added, pleading for understanding.

“If this is truly what you want, then I’m happy for you,” Joan said, she fought with herself to keep from saying more. “Let’s go tell your father.”

Dave Richards wasn’t nearly as good as his wife at hiding his feelings. When told the news of the impending marriage, his eyes went wide and his jaw dropped down. “You’re joking right, sweetie?” he pleaded.

“No dad, I’m serious. I’ve known Jeff a long time and finally realized that we’re meant to be together. He’s really the guy I’ve been looking for all this time,” Kendal said, feeling that she wasn’t really telling a lie. After all he was the only guy she could see marrying.

“You stumped me on this one, Kendal,” her dad replied, running his hands through his hair. “I can see he’s real excited about it,” he added, giving Jeff’s prone body a quick look.

“We celebrated pretty hard last night,” Kendal explained quickly. “I’m afraid the alcohol got to him. He’s exhausted, the poor baby.”

“I’ll go finish up lunch,” Joan announced abruptly. “Why don’t you wake up Jeff while I get things ready.”

“Here Joan, let me help you with that.” Dave quickly followed his wife to the kitchen. *She’s not leaving me alone with this!*

With a big sigh, Kendal sat down next to Jeff. *What a mess!* She didn’t even try to choke back tears. Her parents weren’t fooled at all. Even though they tried to hide it, she knew they were worried. Man, what she wouldn’t give to be ‘Invisible Girl’ and go listen to their conversation. *Why can’t I have delusional parents who would just be happy that their darling girl is getting married? But no, that’s just not them.* With a sigh Kendal reached over and gave Jeff a hard shake.

Jeff sat straight up and asked “Is it time?” He looked around, his eyes a little glazed and noticed that they were alone. “I need to run to bathroom and throw some cold water in my face before we tell them,” he said rubbing his eyes.

“No need to rush dear, I already dropped the bomb,” Kendal said, her voice full of sorrow.

“What! I thought we were going to do it together,” Jeff said giving her a look of confusion. Noticing the tears running down Kendal’s face, he whispered, “How did it go?”

“It maybe could have been worse,” Kendal replied sarcastically. “Dad thought I was joking, of course and mom thinks that I’m somehow

being forced to marry you. They're in the kitchen discussing us even as we speak."

Jeff cocked his ear towards the kitchen. "I don't hear any screaming or shouting, surely that's a good sign."

"It's not the screaming and shouting that gets me, it's the quickly concealed looks of horror," Kendal said dejected. "I don't know that this is any better than just admitting that I'm pregnant, Jeff. I wish I knew what they were saying." She jumped up and started pacing, absently brushing her tears away.

"I'll call Marco and reschedule our date," Jeff volunteered, clearly concerned. When Kendal started pacing it was a sure sign that she was disturbed.

"No, don't do that Jeff," Kendal protested quickly. "I really appreciate the offer but I'm strong, I can deal with this," she said as much for Jeff as for herself. "Besides, mom is much more likely to tell me what she really thinks if you're not here," she admitted.

"If you're sure, Ken." Jeff walked over to Kendal and pulled her into his arms. "This has been a hard week for you my friend." He dropped a soft kiss on the top of her head. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "we could just drop this whole marriage idea and just live together. I didn't think the thought of us getting married would be so upsetting to your parents. Just proves how much more aware they are than my parents."

"Yeah?" Kendal said slowly, giving the idea some thought. "But what about your parents? Living together wouldn't help that situation at all. And if I go in there and say the marriage is off my parents will think I'm truly crazy and the baby will be born in a mental institution."

"About my parents, what can they say? Hey, I am moving in with a woman," Jeff returned with a grin trying his best to cheer up his buddy. "I

could drop a few hints that we might get married later on. Besides I only see them every other year, it'll be easy to fool them. I hope that junior will look like me to reassure dad that I actually had sex with a woman. And your parents may think you're crazy but they'll still be relieved that you aren't marrying me."

"I don't know, Jeff," Kendal prevaricated. "Will it just get us in more trouble?"

"Absolutely not," Jeff declared, categorically. "Just tell them we got caught up in the mood last night, or simply don't explain it at all. You know your mom will come torture the whole story out of you later. Then you can slip in the part about the pregnancy," he reasoned.

"Jeff, you're the best, best friend in the world," Kendal declared, giving him a tight hug. "You're absolutely right, I will have to eventually give a full confession. Mom won't be as bugged about the baby as she would have been if I hadn't told her we were getting married. You've really gone above and beyond the call of friendship. Why don't you go on home and get some more sleep before the big date?" she suggested, breathing a little easier.

"You sure you're okay?" Jeff lifted Kendal's chin so that he could see her eyes. He was relieved to see that they were clearer.

"I'm fine, Jeff." Kendal flashed him a smile to back up her words. "You're the best," she added laying her face on his chest and giving him a squeeze.

"Back to you." They hugged for a minute then walked to the door. "Call me if you need me, Kendal. You know I don't go nowhere without my phone." With a quick kiss to her forehead, he was gone.

Kendal shut the door and leaned against it. *Life is strange*. Here she had the perfect man and she didn't even want him; of course he

didn't want her either. Shaking her head, she went to join her parents in the kitchen.

They stopped speaking as soon as she entered the room. "Lunch is just about ready, dear," Joan said with determined cheerfulness. "You're just in time to help me set the table. Dave, could you get the crackers from the pantry?"

"Sure," both Kendal and Dave replied. "Oh, mom, dad, I'm not getting married anymore," Kendal announced matter of factually as she reached into the cabinet for the dishes. "Jeff and I talked it over and decided to rethink our plans."

"Are you okay with that, Kendal?" Joan asked hesitantly, feeling relief and some trepidation that she was the cause of the called off marriage.

"Sure mom, it was a mutual decision," Kendal replied with an even tone, finally getting up the nerve to turn around. She quickly glanced from her mother to her father, but they had their facial features on neutral. "It's really is okay you guys, trust me. Jeff went home so you can say whatever you want to." She grabbed three plates, some silverware and set the table.

"This is certainly a surprise, Kendal," Joan said as she placed the chicken salad on the table. "Both the fact that you were getting married and the fact that you are now not getting married. I hope my reaction in no way swayed your decision."

"Not at all, mom," Kendal replied promptly. "Do we have any of that sweet tea left?"

"Of course. You get the glasses and ice and I'll get the tea."

They all sat down together and began to eat.

“So Kendal, does this mean I don’t have to trade in my mutual fund to finance your wedding?” Dan joked, feeling very relieved.

“Dad,” Kendal replied with a grin, “you told me you sold that thing to send me to college.”

“Oh, right. How could I have forgotten that?”

“Old age?” Kendal guessed.

“Hey, watch that,” Dave protested. “I’m not old yet, right Joan?”

“Of course not, dear. You’re still my knight in shining armor.” Joan put a hand on Dave’s arm and gave it a squeeze.

“I take it back, dad,” Kendal said laughing. “If mom says you’re not old, then I guess you’re not old.”

“So if your mom says it, it’s true but when I say it, it’s up for grabs?” Dave said waving a finger at Kendal with pretend upset.

“But dad, everybody knows what mom says goes in this house,” Kendal explained. “That’s why you asked her to back you up,” she added smugly.

“Rotten child,” Dave muttered.

Later that evening, Kendal was upstairs in her room reading. She had already taken her shower and put on her flannel Mickey Mouse pajamas. At the knock on her door, she quickly covered the pregnancy book she was reading with her pillow and yelled, “Come on in.”

Her mother peeked her head around the door. “Do you have a minute to talk?”

“Sure, mom,” Kendal replied and sat up. She patted the bed next to her. “What’s on your mind, as if I can’t guess?”

Joan smiled and sat down on the bed. “Okay Kendal, I’ve held it in as long as I could,” she confessed. “What is going on?” she demanded. “And I want the truth this time, young woman.”

“It’s a long story, mom,” Kendal prevaricated.

“I have all night,” Joan said dryly, smoothing the comforter. “Go ahead, spill your guts.” She gave her daughter an expectant look.

“It’s a good thing you’re already sitting,” Kendal began. “Short version, I’m a lesbian and I’m pregnant,” she quickly added.

Pregnant! Joan gave an involuntary gasp. “Did I just hear what I thought I heard?” she gasped with her eyes wide open.

“I’m a lesbian...”

“I pretty much know that part,” Joan interrupted. “It’s the other part that doesn’t go with the first part, Kendal.”

Kendal scratched her scalp absently, thinking carefully about what she was going to say. She pulled her fingers through her hair, holding it up to the light. Well, she thought, this is one way to come out to my mother. *But surely there must be a better way!* “It was kind of an experiment, really,” she said slowly, trying to get her thoughts together. “I didn’t mean for the pregnancy to happen and we certainly used protection,” Kendal added. “The condom broke and now I’m pregnant.”

“Experiment?” Joan said as her eyebrows shot up.

“You know, testing the ‘one good lay’ theory,” Kendal prodded, hanging her head down as a blush stole over her face.

“That one is over my head,” Joan admitted. “I need further clarification, Kendal.”

“It means that one time with a man will turn a lesbian straight,” Kendal mumbled, blushing even harder.

“And you believe that?” Joan was clearly incredulous.

“Of course not, mom.” Kendal’s head came up and she gave her mother a look of disgust. “I’m not quite that naïve. But Jeff and I were quite drunk at the time, and I was still mad at Gloria, he had just been dumped by some guy, so well it happened. I, uh, kind of wanted to know if maybe I could be sexually attracted to men. My first relationship with a woman ended badly so I stupidly decided relationships with women were too painful. So I used Jeff to uh, experiment with men,” she finished up baldly.

“And now?” *Okay, don’t freak out here, Joan. These things do happen. Just not to my child!*

“I know I was dumb to even think I could really control something like that. I’m a lesbian and I’ve accepted that fact,” Kendal said with conviction.

“I don’t know what to say,” Joan remarked and closed her eyes. She wasn’t sure how she felt about any of this. Her head felt like it was spinning. *Not my perfect girl!* The lesbian part she had pretty much come to terms with, but pregnancy? Kendal was just starting her life, she didn’t need a baby to slow her down. Joan couldn’t help the tears that burned in her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, mom,” Kendal whispered as she watched the tears roll down her mother’s face. She blinked to try to keep her own tears from falling. *Damn, why did I have to mess up so badly? I should just have accepted myself as I was and not what I thought my mom wanted me to be. Now too many others have to deal with my stupidity.* Kendal put her head in her hands and wept.

“Oh, Kendal.” Joan put her arm around Kendal and pulled her against her chest. “We all make mistakes in this life, baby. That’s just part of being human. Please know that I will always be there for you.” Joan rocked Kendal back and forth, stroking her hair.

They stayed that way for what seemed to Kendal like hours. The tears eventually stopped, but comfortable silence prevailed. With a sniff, Kendal wiped her face and sat up. “So much for being grown up,” she said her voice husky from crying. “I really am sorry you have to deal with this mother,” she said giving a deep sigh. “I thought if Jeff and I got married that there wouldn’t be any problem.”

“Kendal, when my daughter whom I believe to be gay tells me she marrying a man I know to be gay, I automatically have a problem,” Joan pointed out. She rubbed her face with her hands to remove the aftermath of the tears. “I know you guys “dated” in high school but there was never any indication of anything but deep friendship between the two of you. I always expected you to come to me and tell me that you were just good friends. Of course I also expected you to come to me and talk to me about your sexuality.”

“There were so many times when I was so close to doing just that,” Kendal replied softly. “I just felt like it would destroy my good girl image that I was so proud of,” she acknowledged, ruefully. “It’s amazing the things I denied myself to keep up with that image. Even today I was still willing to live a lie.”

“Part of that is my fault,” Joan said with a sigh. “You were my first child and I wanted so much for you to be the best at everything. I was sure that if I pushed you hard enough you’d end up being somebody very important, which is what I always wanted to be. Kendal you’ve tried so hard to live up to all the expectations that I’ve had for you, but now you have to live up to your own expectations. I love you so much and I’ll love your baby just as much, sweetie. You have my support for whatever you decide is right for you.”

“Oh, mom,” Kendal said and the tears started running again. She threw into her mother’s open arms and cried with relief. “This must be all the stupid hormones that are starting to rage,” Kendal said minutes later, clearly embarrassed by her outburst.

“It’s only the start sweetie, only the start,” Joan said from past experience. “Parenting is very hard work but it is worth it in the end. My life wouldn’t have been nearly as enriched if I hadn’t had you girls and that’s the truth.”

Kendal grabbed the box of tissues from her bedside and blew her nose. “I feel so much better now mom,” she said with a watery smile. “And mom, I want you to know that you are somebody very important to me.”

“Thank you, Kendal,” Joan replied and stood up. “Why don’t you try to get some sleep, dear. I’m going to go soak in a hot bath.” She bent down and gave Kendal a kiss on the forehead. “I love you and you do make me proud.”

“I love you too, mom.” Kendal watched as her mother left the room, lay back on her bed, and stared at the ceiling. That was much better than expected, she thought. It could have been so much worse. Given her dad’s easy going temperament it would be easier telling him parts of the story. Her sister’s were another thing all together. Julie at 18 probably wouldn’t be a problem because she thought she knew all

about everything. Her youngest sister Dorrie at eleven was too young to understand the complexity of the situation and it would be hard to explain. Kendal finally decided she had to confer with her mother before saying anything to Dorrie, and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 5

“Hello, Kendal Richards speaking.”

“Well I’m hurt you haven’t even called to ask about my date,” Jeff sniffed loudly.

“Jeffy,” Kendal asked on cue, “how was your date yesterday?”

“Simply fabulous,” Jeff said with a big sigh. “I’m in love, my dear,” he announced with another heartfelt sigh.

“Again?” Kendal scoffed. “Isn’t that the third time this month and we’re only in the second week?”

“Those boys don’t *even* begin to compare, honey,” Jeff commented quickly. “It’s as different as night and day! This is the one, the only, forever and all that other stuff. I’m ready to hang up my single shingle and be happy, girl.”

“So you did the nasty, huh?”

“Not yet, but we did get pretty close,” Jeff confessed, shivering at the memory. “We decided to prolong the anticipation and I do mean long.” Jeff’s voice reeked of smugness. “The only problem is that he’s not free until Thursday. That’s simply forever,” he complained.

“That’s a first for you isn’t it?” Kendal quipped. “I thought you were Mr. Eveready?”

“Oh I was ready, don’t ever doubt that. But some things are worth waiting for, missy,” Jeff huffed. “On a more serious note, how did it go with your parents last night?”

“Beyond my expectations, way beyond,” Kendal replied. “My mom and I had the best talk last night. I told her about everything and she was so supportive. Said she loved me and that she would love the baby too. I feel so much lighter in spirit now.”

“Kendal, that is great,” Jeff raved. “And really, you have to admit that it’s in keeping with how your mother would react. You were all worried for nothing.”

“Yeah,” Kendal admitted. “Even though I tarnished the “good-girl crown”, I still didn’t lose many points with my mother. Can you imagine that? I thought for sure the earth would rise up and I would sink down into a hole once my mother found out about me and the baby. It didn’t, and now I think our relationship will be even stronger.”

“Did you tell her we’re moving in together?”

“Not exactly, we were concerned with other issues. Plus, I was bawling like a sissy. It was a little embarrassing,” she admitted sheepishly. “Besides, I figure I have a couple of months before we find a place.”

“But what if we find something right away?” Jeff pressed.

“Then I’ll deal with it then,” Kendal replied firmly. “Remember I’m pregnant Jeff, I can’t deal with too much stress right now,” she added sounding pitiful for Jeff’s benefit.

“You are so full of it, Ken,” Jeff declared. “Come over to my place for dinner tomorrow and we’ll narrow down the areas where we want to start looking. I’ll also give you some additional tidbits from my date,” he added with a wicked chuckle.

“Why would I want to hear what you and lover boy almost did?” Kendal asked tongue in cheek.

“Just be there at six-thirty,” Jeff growled. “Bye.”

“See you tomorrow,” Kendal replied with a laugh and hung up the phone. *That Jeff, you have to love him.*

Promptly at six-thirty the next evening, Kendal rang Jeff’s doorbell repeatedly. Her head jerked with surprise as Marco answered the door. “Hey, I thought you had to work until Thursday?”

Marco gave a gorgeous smile and said, “I got someone to switch nights with me. I hope it’s okay with you that I’m here?” he added quickly.

“Of course, it’s okay with me,” Kendal replied managing to keep from adding “silly” to the end of her sentence. After all she didn’t know Marco well enough to say that to him yet. “Now I’ll be able to hear all the details about your date.”

“So he told you about that already, huh?” Marco said stepping back to allow Kendal to enter. His hair was damp as if he’d just gotten out of the shower.

“We were both at work so he couldn’t tell me anything too juicy,” Kendal confided. “Jeff got me here with the promise of giving me details and dinner.”

“He’s in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on the Lasagna.”

“Um, I can smell it.” Kendal took a deep breath inhaling the smell of pasta sauce coming from the kitchen. “I have a hunch you and I will be seeing a lot of each other in the future Marco, so why don’t we sit down

and get acquainted?” Kendal suggested, as she hung her coat in the closet.

“I hope you’re right, Kendal,” Marco replied, again giving her one of his award winning smiles. “I have to admit I’ve heard a lot about you, and it was all good,” he was quick to assure her.

“It had better be,” Kendal joked. “I guess you know about the pregnancy thing? Please don’t think I’m too stupid,” she begged and hung her head.

“Listen, if you knew how many girls I slept with before I figured out what was up, you wouldn’t even be worrying, Kendal. Let’s face it, we’re just not brought up to think in terms of having romantic feelings about the same sex.”

“That’s true,” Kendal agreed ruefully, already liking Marco. He seemed like the kind of person who could find something nice to say about everybody – the perfect foil for Jeff, who had a tendency to be caustic. “So Jeff tells me you’re going to school and working a lot,” Kendal remarked,

“Yeah. I was working with the government as a social worker when I decided that I could do more to help people as a lawyer. I found this program that helps pay for my tuition if I agree to do some pro-bono work for them after I graduate.”

“That sounds really interesting, Marco. How much longer until you graduate?”

“About eight more months,” Marco replied with glee. “I have to finish up this semester and the next semester, pass the bar exam this summer and start to work. I’m so looking forward to it.”

“I know the feeling,” Kendal said nodding her head. “I couldn’t wait to finish school and get out into the “real” world. Looking back I realize that my college years seem like the good old days in retrospect.”

“I’ve worked full-time before so I know what to expect. No more waiting tables at night,” he added, his eyes lighting up at the thought. “Maybe even a little vacation.”

“What vacation, whose talking about a vacation?” Jeff asked, coming into the room to hear the last part of Marco’s sentence. He sat on the sofa arm closest to Kendal. Kendal couldn’t help but notice that his hair was damp as well. She felt she had a pretty good idea of what had been happening before her arrival.

“I was just telling Kendal how much I’m looking forward to having a little vacation after I graduate from law school.”

“We should go to my parent’s condo at the beach,” Jeff immediately suggested. “They never go there during the summer – go figure,” he added with a shrug. “Ken you can even come with us even though you’ll probably look like a beached whale by then.”

“You’re so wonderful, Jeff,” Kendal replied dryly. “Can you believe him, Marco?” she asked with a fake pout.

“As long as he doesn’t try to push you back into the water,” Marco said grinning.

“Oh, you guys are awful,” Kendal objected, looking down her nose at them. “Hey, when is dinner going to be ready, Jeff? I’m starving”

“I was just coming to tell you guys that my fabulous meal is ready,” Jeff said, standing up and offering his hand to Kendal.

“It certainly smells good,” Kendal said sniffing the air. “I smell garlic bread,” she added, rubbing her stomach in anticipation.

“Make way for the pregnant woman,” Jeff shouted as if a herd of cows were on stampede.

“I’m really not that bad, Jeff,” Kendal complained. “A girl could get a complex around you,” she pouted and pretended to wipe away tears.

“Now sweetie, don’t go soft on me,” Jeff replied putting his arm around her shoulder. “You know I love you like my own luggage.”

“And you know I love you like yesterday’s bread,” Kendal replied with a smirk.

“Are you two always like this?” Marco asked from the rear, enjoying the interplay between two obviously good friends.

“Wait until we start drinking.” Jeff turned around and gave Marco a wink.

“It’s not me Marco, it’s him,” Kendal noted, raising her arms as if to say ‘what can you do’.

“Don’t believe her for a minute, Marco. It’s her,” Jeff said in defense. “Now hush Kendal or you won’t get to eat.”

“Okay, okay,” Kendal grumbled, as she approached the kitchen table. “I was only trying to give Marco a clear picture of what he’s going up against.”

“Don’t you worry about Marco going up against anything, Missy.” Jeff seated Kendal and started putting the food on the kitchen table.

Kendal looked around the kitchen noticing that pots and pans filled the sink as was usual when Jeff cooked. He was one of those chefs who used almost every dish in the kitchen at least once during a cooking session. She let out a small groan knowing that she and Marco would be assigned clean up duty; well at least the food would be worth it.

Dinner was fun. Kendal, of course, enjoyed the Caesar salad, the Lasagna, and especially the garlic bread. *Jeff really outdid himself*, she thought with a contented sigh. *No doubt to impress Marco*. She also enjoyed the conversation. They disagreed amicably about a number of different subjects.

“Jeff, the food was fantastic,” Kendal said as she pushed back from the table. “My compliments to the chef.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” Jeff said, waving away her compliment.

“It’s definitely something,” Marco corrected. “You’re a wonderful cook, Jeff.” He put his hand on Jeff’s thigh and gave a squeeze.

“Thank you, Marco,” Jeff simpered. “It was all my pleasure to do it for you.” The hot look he gave Marco obviously referred to more than just dinner.

Kendal looked from one to the other. “I guess we threw out the notion of anticipation?” she asked one brow raised.

“Maybe,” Jeff replied with a sly grin. “Hell Ken, we waited for two whole days.”

“A record!” Kendal exclaimed, clapping her hands. “Listen boys, before it gets too hot in here for me why don’t we go discuss future locations,” she suggested and stood up. “We can clean up later.”

They spent the next hour narrowing down the neighborhoods they wanted to live in. Kendal and Jeff agreed that a place in-town was a must. Jeff liked the idea of living in a condo or loft, while Kendal wanted a detached house with a yard. “After all,” she argued, “the kid will eventually need a yard to play in. And I don’t want the neighbors banging on the walls when Junior screams all night.”

Since they couldn’t come to an agreement, Marco suggested a weekend field trip to some of the neighborhoods in question. He reasoned that if they visited some of the areas they would get a better feel as to what they really wanted. Jeff and Kendal agreed that Marco had the right idea. Kendal volunteered to drive figuring if she let Jeff have a few cocktails before hand he would be more willing to see her side of things.

All three of them ended up cleaning the kitchen; although Jeff ended up being more a director than a cleaner. After all he explained, he was tired from all the cooking he’d done earlier. Kendal and Marco chased him around the kitchen after that remark.

As she was driving home, Kendal thought back on the evening she had spent with Jeff and Marco. They had fit together rather well as a group. Sometimes she felt out of sync with some of Jeff’s friends, but that was not at all the case with Marco. In fact, it seemed as if he had made an extra effort to ensure she was included. “No doubt about it,” Kendal said, “that Marco is a good catch.” She hoped Jeff realized how lucky he was. Given all the touching and the looks that had gone on this evening, it seemed as if he did. It made Kendal feel a little sad that she didn’t have that kind of intimacy with someone. That’s what she really needed in her life.

Kendal pulled her Subaru Outback Wagon onto the slab of concrete next to the garage. She glanced at her watch to see the time. It was only eight-thirty so she still had plenty of time to broach the subject of moving to her mom. It might be a couple months before she moved out

but she could get her parents used to the idea. Kendal realized she felt a little hesitation at bringing up the subject. What else could she do though? In eight months she was going to be a parent and now was the time to start being responsible.

The first person Kendal encountered was her sister, Dorrie. “Hey Kendal, guess what?” Dorrie asked running up to Kendal as she shut the front door. Dorrie was so excited she could hardly stand still. Her eyes were lit up like Christmas lights and she was holding something behind her back.

“Let me see,” Kendal replied placing her finger on her chin while trying to see what Dorrie was holding. “You got the lead in the play?” she guessed. Dorrie had been on edge for the past week waiting to see if she would get the lead role in the fifth grade play.

“No!” Dorrie crowed, jumping up and down.

“Matt Kruger said he would be your boyfriend?”

“Oh gross, Kendal,” Dorrie cried with disgust. “Matt is so last month,” she complained rolling her eyes at Kendal.

“Sorry sis, I guess I can’t guess what,” Kendal admitted, holding back at smile at her sister’s grown attitude.

“I got the highest score on the math test! It was even higher than Stephanie!” Dorrie imparted with a substantial amount of pride and an all-teeth showing grin as she waved her test paper in front of Kendal’s face.

“Dorrie, that’s wonderful!” Kendal reached out and pulled Dorrie close for a hug. “So you finally did it, huh?”

“Yes, I beat Ms. Know-it-all.” She backed out of Kendal’s embrace and held her arms wide in victory. “You should have seen the looks she gave me.” Dorrie hooted with youthful exuberance. “But best of all, Maria got a picture of Stephanie’s face when she realized that I beat her. What a great day!” she shouted and ran up the stairs leaving Kendal behind to shake her head.

Kendal went to the front closet to hang up her coat. Ah, the good old days when you only had to worry about beating your rival. Please let my baby sister stay a kid for a little longer, she prayed silently. She heard the sounds of dishwashing and went to the kitchen to find her mom. Instead, she found her sister Julie loading the dishwasher.

“Hey Ken, I see your timing is still impeccable,” Julie remarked with a smirk as she set the timer on the dishwasher. “I just finished up cleaning and here you appear.”

“What can I say?” Kendal shrugged her shoulders and gave a laugh. “Luck of the Irish, I guess. So Jules, what’s been going on with you lately? I hardly ever see you around here anymore.”

“Me? You’re the one who is always out,” Julie replied good-naturedly. “Tell me if it’s none of my business, but what’s up with you and Jeff these days?”

“We’re just good friends like we’ve always been,” Kendal answered truthfully.

“I wondered because last weekend you guys were calling each other ‘dear’ in front of mother. Sounded like some sort of cover up to me.” Julie shot Kendal a pointed look. “Care to explain?”

Kendal made a quick decision. “Meet me in my room in ten minutes and I’ll explain,” she promised.

“Okay.” Julie nodded her head and frowned, this sounded much more serious than she thought it was.

Kendal ran upstairs, grateful for the opening that Julie had provided her. She and Julie had never been particularly close. The eight-year difference in their ages and opposite personalities kept them from having much interaction. Now that they were older, the difference in age was not as important and they discovered that they did have some things in common.

Kendal was relaxing to music when Julie knocked on the door. She placed the pregnancy book on her bed and bade Julie to come in. Julie came in, shut the door behind and joined Kendal on the bed. Her eyes immediately found the book. She quickly looked up at Kendal, her eyes wide in astonishment. “Kendal?” she said, her voice full of questions.

“It’s what you think it is, Julie,” Kendal said softly. “I’m pregnant,” she added with a rueful smile.

“Did you plan it? I mean I’ve heard a lot about woman wanting to have a baby without having to deal with the father.”

“I didn’t plan it at all. In truth, the rubber broke and as luck would have it the seed got planted.”

“Wait!” Julie protested and raised her hand. “I mean, let me get this straight. You actually had sex with a man and it wasn’t to have a baby? What about that talk we had last spring when you were home for spring break?”

“Um, it was more of an experiment than anything else,” Kendal mumbled feeling extremely foolish to have to admit this to her younger sister. *Okay, why did I decide to tell her?*

“Were you thinking that you weren’t a lesbian after all?” Julie was obviously struggling with the information being imparted.

“No, I was drunk and depressed and lonely. Plus there’s that whole thing of trying to keep to my image of being the “good girl,”” Kendal explained. “It was stupid, I know.”

“Have you told mom yet?” Julie asked with hesitation, unconsciously lowering her voice.

“Oh yeah and she really took it well, Jules.” Kendal smiled as she remembered her talk with her mother. “For some dumb reason I thought she was going to freak and throw me out of the house or something. I was really a nervous wreck about this.”

“Wow! What a head rush,” Julie commented, absently running her hands through her hair. “I mean, I don’t really know what to say, Kendal. What are you going to do now? I mean, a baby, that’s a big deal. Jeez, you’re just getting started.”

“Don’t I know it,” Kendal said, nodding her head. “But I’ve got Jeff to help me out and some of my other friends who have kids can also help.” Kendal sat up straight and said, “I’m accepting the responsibility for my actions, Julie. I know I could be out there partying and having fun, but that’s not how things are working out. Besides,” she said with a mischievous grin, “Jeff says the baby will be a babe-magnate.”

An idea dawned in Julie’s brain. “Jeff is the father of your baby?” she squealed. “You slept with Jeff? But he’s...”

“My best friend,” Kendal interjected before Julie could finish. “I knew he wasn’t interested in me and I knew he was safe so it seemed okay. We were both a under the influence of alcohol so everything seemed reasonable.”

“How was it?” Julie asked speculatively, she leaned toward Kendal all ears.

“Okay, I guess,” Kendal replied slowly and frowned. “Sex is just better with women though. I miss the softness, the breasts and the um, you know,” she added somewhat embarrassed. “With Jeff I feel affection but not sparks of lust.”

“I know what you mean,” Julie said nodding her head, a dreamy look on her face. “Um, not that I’ve ever done it,” she assured Kendal hastily, “but I have had some contact with the opposite sex and I know all about lust.”

“If you ever do, my advice is to double-up.”

“Point well taken,” Julie acknowledged. “So are you going to stay here with mom and dad? I mean, you know my room will be available in August.”

“Thanks for the offer but Jeff and I are going to get a place together. But don’t tell mom because I haven’t told her yet.”

“Not a problem,” Julie said quickly. “I have to confess that the bitchy part of me is kind of relieved that you’re shedding that image of perfection. It’ll be easier for me and Dorrie to measure up to you.” She gave Kendal a smile to show that there were no hard feelings.

“I understand that, Jules,” Kendal replied, giving her sister a warm smile. She felt closer to Julie than she ever had before. “Okay, enough about me, what’s going on in your life?” They ended up talking until midnight, sharing with each other in a way they never had before. The need for sleep eventually ended their conversation as they both fell asleep on Kendal’s bed.

Chapter 6

“Hey Kendal, are you ever coming out of the bathroom?” Julie asked while beating on the door. “I mean, I need to get ready for my date too, you know.”

“Alright, alright,” Kendal grumbled. She gave one last look in the full-length mirror to make sure her stomach wasn’t sticking out too badly. “Oh, well,” she sighed, “there’s nothing I can do with it now.” Kendal opened the door before Julie knocked it in. “It’s all yours,” she said with a sweep of her hand.

“About time,” Julie complained. “Good thing you’re moving soon,” she grumbled.

“Yeah, then I can have my own bathroom,” Kendal muttered back and pulled the door closed before Julie could say anything else. She felt nervous enough as it was without her sister adding to it. Her first date in forever and she wasn’t sure she knew how to act. Hell, it was really her first date because she and Gloria never really dated! *Calm down Kendal, it’s only a date.* She took some deep breaths to steady her nerves.

It wasn’t like she didn’t already know Sam, the woman she had the date with. They had been hanging around in the same crowd for a while now, kind of checking each other out from afar. Last week Sam had gotten brave enough to suggest to Kendal that they go out together, just the two of them. Kendal accepted eagerly. So, here she was practically biting her nails waiting for Sam to come pick her up. One last glance in the mirror in her room and she was ready to go downstairs and wait.

As luck would have it her loving family was downstairs in the den making no bones about wanting to see her date. *Oh great it’ll be a show. Why didn’t I wait and schedule this after I moved out? Because the thought of actually having someone interested in you blinded you, idiot.*

“Don’t you look nice, sweetie,” Joan said as Kendal entered the room.

“Thanks, mom,” Kendal replied nervously and sat down. Kendal was wearing her newest black jeans with a long sleeved button-up shirt and a black blazer. *Maybe if I pretend to be interested in the TV they’ll leave me alone.* Before she could pretend to be sucked into the television show the doorbell rang. Kendal immediately leapt up. “Uh, I’ll just get it,” she stammered, flushing red and fled the room. She quickly walked to the door to discover not only Sam but Julie’s boyfriend Dave as well. “Come on in,” she invited, stepping back so that they could enter.

Kendal took a moment to study Sam. She was a couple of inches taller than Kendal with the build of an athlete. Her platinum blond hair was cut very short with spikes on the top. Her blue, blue eyes were gazing at Kendal appreciatively. “Come meet my family before we leave,” Kendal said with a shy smile. Her heart was hammering so hard, she thought surely Sam could hear it. “Oh, this is Dave,” she said remembering her manners and pointing to Dave. “Dave this is Sam.”

Sam and Dave shook hands and smiled at each other. Kendal led the way to the den. She quickly introduced Sam to everyone and directed the conversation to mundane matters. After five minutes of general conversation, Kendal and Sam said their goodbyes.

As they drove to the movie theatre Kendal tried desperately to think of something to say. Not that the silence in the car was unsettling, but she did want Sam to know she could be conversational. “So Sam,” she began, “thanks again for inviting me out. I haven’t had a lot of chances to socialize one on one.”

“I’m just thankful you could make it, Kendal,” Sam replied with a smile. “We’ve seen each other a lot but it’s usually always in a group. Not that that’s a bad thing,” she added quickly.

“No, but sometimes it is nice to leave the group behind.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed with a nod of her head. “I hope this is a good movie. You know sometimes gay and lesbian movies are so depressing.”

“They can be,” Kendal agreed. “A lot of time it seems that the message is that we can’t have a happy life. But in some ways that’s a Hollywood thing because in a lot of straight films people are just as messed up.”

“But gays are always messed up more,” Sam pointed out. “And I hate the movies where the “supposed” lesbian winds up falling in love with a guy. That just really burns my butt.”

“Don’t you just hate that!” Kendal exclaimed, equally disgusted. “I just want to see movies where two women fall in love, court each other, have sex and live happily ever after. I don’t mind a bit of confusion here and there but give me a happy ending. There are enough unhappy endings in my real life, let me have a little fantasy in my movies.”

“I don’t necessarily have to have a happy ending,” Sam said thoughtfully. “But I do like a movie better if it has some closure. You know, like if they discover they don’t really love each other but can remain friends. I can deal with that. That’s more like real life.”

“Okay,” Kendal admitted with a laugh, “I can deal with that too if I’m in the right mood. Nothing, but nothing makes my heart go pitter-patter like a good Radclyffe romance novel. I have every book she’s ever written.”

“I like her books too, but my favorites are the mysteries,” Sam said eagerly. “I stumbled across one at sixteen and now I have an ever growing collection. They usually combine a good mystery and romance,

a perfect combination.” She gave Kendal a quick smile before turning into the parking lot.

“Oh,” Kendal remarked, “it looks like a good crowd.” A group of women was lined up near the door to the theatre, waiting to go in. “It must be good.”

“Either that are we’re just so starved for lesbian movies that we go to each and every one no matter what we hear about it,” Sam remarked. “Why don’t you go get in the line and I’ll get the tickets.”

The rest of the date went smoothly. Both Kendal and Sam enjoyed the movie because it had closure with a happy ending. They declined invitations to join friends and instead Kendal introduced Sam to the Blue Room. They ate greasy food and talked about almost everything under the sun, discovering many mutual interests.

As Sam was driving her home, Kendal reflected back over the date. Things had gone well, but she really didn’t have the feeling of wanting to go pack up the U-Haul. *Why can’t I be attracted to Sam? She is so nice and so cute and we have things in common. Maybe I’m trying to push things too soon. I should take my time and wait for something to develop. After all Kendal, remember that the moment you saw Gloria you were all hot and bothered and look how long that relationship lasted. Is that really the kind of relationship you wanted to forge this time? That’s an emphatic no! I’ll take it slow and let it grow to something lasting.*

They pulled up to Kendal’s house. “I had a real good time Kendal,” Sam said turning off the ignition and turning to Kendal. “Maybe we could do this another time?” she suggested.

“Sure,” Kendal said with a smile, “it certainly was fun.” *What a dork you are, Richards. Think of something better to say..* “How bout I give you a call later this week and we can plan something?”

“Okay,” Sam replied, before leaning forward and giving Kendal a quick kiss on the lips. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye,” Kendal got out of the car and walked to the porch. Once she was at the door she turned and waved to Sam to let her know she was okay. As Sam drove away, Kendal unlocked the door and went inside. “It’s a start,” she noted to herself and walked up the stairs to her room. The kiss was pleasant but it hadn’t given her that tingling feeling inside. She would just have to give her feelings some time to grow.

The next two months were hectic as Kendal and Jeff finalized their housing situation. Kendal with Marco’s persuasion was easily able to talk Jeff into looking for a house. They were looking at a couple of prospects on the south side of the city when Jeff told his parents about the baby while visiting them at Thanksgiving. By that time Marco was such an intrinsic part of Jeff’s life that Kendal was able to convince him to come clean with his parents. He did wait until his parents were dropping him off at the airport before sharing this bit of news.

Much to Jeff’s surprise, his mom called him that evening wanting more information about the baby. He was a little reluctant to let his mother know that the baby’s mom was Kendal because he knew it could bring back old hopes she’d long harbored. After much coaxing on Mrs. Macklin’s part, Jeff finally spilled his guts even admitting that he, Marco, and Kendal were looking for a house. He and his mother chatted for a little bit longer before saying goodbye. Little did he know what chain of events was started by that conversation.

Four weeks later Kendal and Jeff were closing on the house that Jeff’s dad all but bought for them. The house was in a more pricey part of town that they would not have been able to afford without the generosity of Jeff’s dad. Once he heard about the impending birth of his first and presumably only grandchild, he became a changed man. For reasons that Jeff’s mother vaguely alluded to, his father had extended the

peace branch. Mr. Macklin declared that nothing was too good for his grandchild. Before Jeff and Kendal knew it, he'd made the arrangements to buy them a house, for the baby's sake you know.

And what a house it was. It was much bigger and much more expensive than Jeff and Kendal had been looking for. With Jeff's dad overrode every objection that they had, the two finally gave in gracefully and let Mr. Macklin handle the sale. His only request was that they use the money they would have used for the mortgage to save for the baby's future. In the end, all Kendal and Jeff were required to do was show up for the closing and sign the forms. The house was theirs free and clear.

"Okay," Kendal said briskly as they walked to her car after the closing. "That's another thing to check off the list. Now, the store will deliver the new furniture on Friday and the movers will move your stuff in Saturday. Will Marco still be able to be there Friday afternoon to let them in?" She deactivated her security alarm and then unlocked the other doors.

"Yup," Jeff answered. "We're going to move a few things in tomorrow night so he'll have some place to study while he waits. You know this is a little spooky?"

"What's a little spooky?" Kendal questioned as she started up the car. She turned to give Jeff her full attention.

"In two months I go from bachelor to man with a baby on the way and a house. I hope it doesn't age me too much." He pulled down the vanity mirror on the visor in front of him and studied his features, looking for signs of aging.

"Jeff honey, I don't think this kind of stuff causes wrinkles," Kendal said with obvious amusement. "Now down the line Junior will probably cause some gray hair but I don't think the house will for awhile. It is new and everything checked out fine during the inspection, so I don't expect

it will cause too many problems any time soon. On the other hand, all this does make me feel like more of a grownup than I thought I'd ever feel at twenty-five." Kendal looked into the rearview mirror and pulled into traffic.

"I guess that's it," Jeff replied with a sigh. "No more bachelor pad with men parading through in an endless stream. No more traipsing naked around the house."

"Jeff, I think Marco put an end to the endless stream of men, and I certainly have no problems with you walking around the house naked." Kendal patted Jeff on the leg.

"Well," Jeff huffed, "it's not that I want to do those things but that I should have the opportunities to do them."

"Admit it Jeff, the only one stopping you from doing those things is you," Kendal pointed out. "We have to face the fact that we are taking on more responsibility, but I don't necessarily think that's bad. Life is always changing so the better you are at accepting adjustments, the easier the changes will come. Now enough of this serious talk, where are you taking me for lunch?"

"Hey, I just signed for a house," Jeff protested. "I can't afford to take you to lunch. Don't you know we have to start brown bagging our lunches?"

"When was the last time you took your lunch to work?" Kendal asked her voice full of skepticism.

"Don't you worry about that, honey," Jeff said haughtily. "You just worry about getting over a lane so that we can go to Bones which is just up ahead," he ordered, pointing the way. "I need a thick juicy steak and a cocktail."

Jeff, Marco and Kendal were in the family room late Saturday night. Kendal was situated in the rocking chair, Jeff was sprawled out on the sofa and Marco was in residence on the love seat, which was directly across from the sofa. They were all tired but happy nonetheless. The move had gone off as scheduled followed by an impromptu party that had ended twenty minutes ago.

The family room was one of the largest rooms in the house. It had a deep plush gray carpet to match the muted red walls. The entertainment center was filled with a large television, combination DVD/VCR, and a receiver. One of Marco's friends during the party helped him set up surround sound. The furniture they picked out was designed with comfort in mind. The soft leather sofa and matching love seat both reclined for maximum TV viewing. Additionally, there was a separate recliner and a rocking chair bought with Kendal and Junior in mind. The walls were still bare because they hadn't decided what pictures should be hung where.

"Well that went pretty well," Jeff remarked. "Your family, my friends, Marco's friends and your friends were a pretty good mix," he added looking at Kendal.

"You're right Jeff, it was a fun party." Kendal reached up and tried to cover the big yawn that took over her face.

"Especially since it was planned on the spot," Marco added. "I'm just glad we got everything moved in today and mostly set up. I see a very lazy day tomorrow," he said as he stretched.

"Very lazy," Jeff concurred. "We'll do brunch tomorrow. If you get hungry before then *Kendal* fix you some toast or something."

“Why do you have to say it to me?” Kendal asked. “Can’t Marco get hungry before your tired ass gets up and cooks tomorrow? Are you trying to insinuate that I’m always hungry?”

“I don’t feel the need to insinuate information that is a known fact, Kendal,” Jeff stated haughtily. “Marco, correct me if I’m wrong here but isn’t Kendal always hungry?” he asked giving Kendal a challenging look.

“Marco is not really here,” Marco announced in a fake voice. “Please call back at another time. Click,” he pretended to hang up the phone.

“What a cop out,” Jeff scoffed.

Marco shrugged his shoulders. “I learned from the beginning not to get between the two of you. By the way are we still on for next Thursday?”

“Count on it. I wouldn’t miss our office party for anything,” Jeff declared and sat up, showing signs of life. “They always have good food, plenty of liquor and outrageous party favors. Best of all they let us come in at ten the next morning. You know, this could be the first year that I’ll be going home with the people I came with.”

“What do you mean could be?” Marco demanded with a pointed glare. “I don’t even like the sound of that.”

“Now Marco, I didn’t mean it like it sounded,” Jeff replied in self-defense. “What I meant was that I don’t really remember if I took an escort to any of the other parties,” he backtracked.

“I’m sure that’s just what you meant,” Kendal said, her tone clearly stating the opposite.

“You hush woman, or we’ll leave you here,” Jeff threatened

“Fine,” Kendal said turning her head in dismissal. “I’ll just drive myself. Remember your boss invited me when I went to the Christmas party.” She stuck her tongue out at him.

“Hey!” Marco complained sitting straight up. “Don’t mess with our designated driver, Jeff! I don’t want to drive us home and I know you don’t want to either.” He gave Jeff the look.

Jeff held his hand up in defeat and then pantomimed waving the white flag. “Far be it from me to mess up your plans,” he said, rolling his eyes. “On that note, I’m going to bed. You coming, Marc?” Jeff stood up with a shake of his head and strutted out the room without waiting for a reply.

Marco turned to look at Kendal and mouthed “Queen” before getting up and following Jeff.

Giving a chuckle Kendal stood up, stretched and gave into the lure of her bed.

Thursday at six Kendal came rushing into the house taking off her work clothes on the way to her room. Today of all days her boss had decided that he needed to have an in-depth discussion about a major project she had been assigned. Of course he waited until three to seek her out. Finally at five-fifteen he wrapped up the discussion and it was only a sprint to the bus stop that had allowed her to get home at this time.

A slight wave of dizziness caused her to sit down on her bed and take a few deep breaths. *Idiot you can’t run around like crazy anymore, remember the baby?* . Kendal lay back until her head swam back into focus. She cautiously sat up and was pleased that her head felt clear. Taking off the rest of her clothes she wandered into the bathroom and stood in front of the floor length mirror. Try as she might, she couldn’t

see a single bulge in her stomach. The only sign that she was pregnant was that her breasts were larger than they had ever been.

“At four months pregnant you’d think that I would be showing just a little bit,” Kendal told her reflection. With a shrug she walked over to the shower and started the water running.

Kendal was staring at her reflection when Jeff knocked on her door.

“Ken, you about ready to go?” he asked, poking his head around the door. “Wow! Don’t you look *hot!*” Jeff stared at Kendal in shock. In all the years he had known her not once had he ever seen her in anything but pants or shorts. His stunned eyes took in the short tight white top that emphasized her breasts and the short form fitting skirt that left her legs looking long and sleek. “Do I know you?” he asked with a bewildered smile. “My name is Jeff, what’s yours?”

“I don’t really know,” Kendal replied, giggling at Jeff’s reaction. “I’m a totally different person tonight. Julie talked me into this outfit when she was here the other night. At first I told her she was crazy but the outfit kind of grew on me. I figure if I make a fool of myself tonight, it won’t matter because I don’t have to work with these people or even see them again. I can be anybody I want to be tonight.” She held out her arms and twirled around. Her hair, left unbound, was a flash of reddish-blond that followed her.

“I don’t think there’s any chance of you making a fool of yourself, honey,” Jeff replied knowingly. “The problem will be the guys from my office making fools of themselves,” he prophesized.

“Now doesn’t that sound interesting,” Kendal said a wicked smile lighting up her face. “I’m going to have fun tonight.” She reached for the ridiculously small bag that Julie had loaned her insisting that Kendal’s

wallet did not fit the clothes. "I'm ready." Kendal lifted her head up high and walked out the door.

"Now Ken," Jeff said, hurrying after her. He was just in time to catch the stunned look on Marco's face. A look that was bound to be repeated again and again.

"Who is this lovely vision?" Marco asked, reaching a hand out to Kendal. "Aren't we privileged to have you as an escort," he added, bringing her right hand to his lips.

"Why suh, thank you for the compliment," Kendal replied in her best imitation of Scarlett O'Hare. "I try my best," she simpered.

"All I know is that it's a good thing I've been working out with weights for five years now," Jeff said heatedly and flexed his muscles. "I feel like I'm going to be forced to kick some serious ass tonight," he walked over to the hall closet and pulled out his coat. "Come on you two lets get this over with. Plans have changed, *I'm* the designated driver tonight."

"Jeff," Kendal protested, "you know I can't drink anyway. You go on ahead and knock yourself out."

"The way you look it'll probably be somebody else who knocks me out tonight," Jeff grumbled.

"You're making way too much of my looks," Kendal pouted. "I'm starting to think I must have looked like a real dog before." She took the coat that Jeff handed her and put it on.

Marco stepped up to help her with the coat. "You looked fine before Kendal, but now you have that extra sexy look that straight males loose their heads over. I'm inclined to agree with Jeff that we'll have to

make sure you can handle all the attention you're going to receive tonight."

"Oh Marco, not you too," Kendal groaned and followed Jeff to the garage. She spent the entire ride to the party in silence as she had second and third thoughts about teasing the natives. The last thing that she needed was to be surrounded by a pack of hormone charged males. *Maybe I should have changed into my own clothes. Too late now.* Kendal shrugged and decided she would just have to hang on either Jeff or Marco the whole evening. With that decision made she felt much better and began to look forward to the evening.

Jeff deftly maneuvered his Jeep into the lighted parking lot of a downtown hotel. His company had rented the ballroom for this employee appreciation affair. They also provided complimentary valet parking. Jeff followed the signs to the parking area for his group. "Here goes nothing," he said with a sigh and opened the car door.

"Jeff you need to lighten up," Kendal muttered as Jeff opened her door and offered his arm. "We're here to have fun, okay?"

"Fun? Is that what you want to call it?" he asked wryly. Jeff handed his keys to the attendant and pocketed the tag, which identified his vehicle.

"Come on Jeff, you need to change your outlook," Marco declared. "Let's go have a good time." He urged Kendal and Jeff to follow the directions to the party. "You vill hav fun," he commanded Jeff in his Arnold Schwarzenagger voice. "From what I know of Kendal, she can handle these guys."

As they walked down the hallway towards the ballroom the sounds of a lively party in progress filtered out from the doorway. They checked their coats with the cloakroom attendant and entered the ballroom.

“Wow! They went all out for you guys,” Kendal marveled looking around the ballroom. The room had a real festive air, with balloons decorating anything that wasn’t moving. Some were on the chairs and tables while others gently bumped against the ceiling. Streamers came down from the ceiling in all the colors of the rainbow and confetti was everywhere. Against the back wall were several long tables laden with food. An elongated bar with several bartenders graced the right wall.

Jeff spotted a group of teammates and herded Kendal and Marco in their direction. “Let’s go check in with the boss.” Jeff couldn’t help but noticed that every male in the group, even his boss, was giving Kendal the subtle, and not so subtle, once over. Jeff made quick introductions and stood back. In no time Kendal was surrounded by a group of admiring males with more arriving by the minute. Since they were all polite, it being early in the evening, Jeff was content to talk business with his boss, leaving Marco to keep a close eye on Kendal.

“So Jeff,” Marc Blankard, Jeff’s boss, began. “I have some good news for you. I was so busy today I didn’t have time to share it with you.”

“Oh,” Jeff replied, knowing it could only be one thing. “You’ve finally hired someone for Ben’s old position,” he stated with glee.

“Yup, you got it,” Marc said looking smug. “I think we’re really lucky to get her. She accepted yesterday and I invited her to come here tonight. I figured she could meet you guys informally and learn more about you animals than she ever wanted to,” he joked.

“I hope you told her to come early,” Jeff said deadpan. “We don’t want to scare her off before she starts work.”

“You worry too much, Jeff.” Marc clapped Jeff on the back. “Now I need to go say a few words to the higher ups. You might want to go rescue Kendal from that crush. You’d think those guys had never seen a beautiful, sexy woman in a short tight skirt before.”

“What?” Jeff turned, astonished over the size of the group that had grown around Kendal. *Oh well, I told her that would happen. I need a drink.* Jeff headed straight for the bar. After getting his order, Jeff turned around and casually studied the ‘Kendal pack’. A smile lifted his lips as he noticed Marco and Kendal escaping in his direction. “Maybe, you two will listen to me next time,” Jeff said making no attempt to keep the smile off his face. He even went so far as to wag his finger at them saying, “I told you so.”

Marco and Kendal both stuck their tongue out at him and made a face. “I thought you were supposed to help out,” Marco said with a pointed look at Jeff.

“I had to get a drink first,” Jeff said unconcerned by the heat directed from Marco’s glance. “Just watching all those guys slobbering was making me thirsty. Besides Marco, you looked like you had everything under control. We here to have fun remember?” he taunted. Tipping his glass to his roommates he took a drink. Looking over in the direction that Marco and Kendal had come from he said, “By the way, it looks like you guys need to get your drink orders in because you have quite a following.”

Kendal twisted her head around and started to panic. “Marco, order me a coke with cherries,” she instructed. “I feel a sudden need to go to the restroom.” With a nervous smile to her admirers she beat a line to the women’s bathroom. She shut the door closed her eyes and leaned against it on the off chance that one of them followed her. “You’ve done it now, idiot!” she chastised herself. Straightening up and opening her eyes her sight was immediately captured by big brown eyes. One sleek dark brow was raised in question.

“Do I know you?” a beautiful black woman asked softly, clearly amused. “It usually takes people a few minutes to call me that.”

Kendal blushed and said quickly, “Oh, I wasn’t talking to you I was talking about my self.” She gave an embarrassed laugh. *Oh my lord, she is gorgeous!* Kendal struggled to keep her facial features even and her mouth closed. The woman before her was tall, athletic build, light brown skin, just below shoulder length brown dreadlocks, and beautiful full lips. Kendal unconsciously licked her lips, almost panting.

“That’s good, I guess,” the woman replied with a smile. “I would hate to think that I’ve already pissed off somebody at my new job; especially when I haven’t even started yet. My name is Nicole Fisher,” she walked closer and extended a hand to Kendal.

“Um, my name is Kendal Richards.” Kendal reached out and shook Nicole’s hand, noting the firm grip. “I don’t work for Newsys I’m just here with a friend,” she explained as she held onto Nicole’s hand.

“Would it be presumptuous of me to ask why you think you’re an idiot?” Nicole asked her eyes twinkling, a little smile on her face.

You could ask me anything. “Uh, I took my little sister’s advice and dressed up for this party so now I’m having a hard time getting the guys to give me some space.” Kendal put her hands up to her reddened cheeks. *You’re making a great first impression, Richards. With this stupid outfit she probably thinks you’re a dumb blond type.*

Wow, she is hot! I can see why the guys are crowding her. I’d like to do some crowding myself. “I’m getting ready to go find my new boss, do you want to tag along with me? I’m pretty good at handling myself in a crowd.”

“The way you look, you’ll just attract even more attention,” Kendal blurted out without thinking. Once again she felt her cheeks heat up, dropping her head she took a deep breath. “You know what I mean,” she said vaguely with a pained smile as she looked at some spot near Nicole’s head.

“Thanks.” Nicole gave a husky laugh that sent shivers up Kendal’s spine. “I’m sure that was a compliment,” she gave Kendal a saucy wink.

Is she flirting with me? Can I trust my gaydar and should I try to say something now or wait until later? Better wait until I talk to Jeff, he will know for sure. “You’re welcome,” Kendal said with a smile that she hoped denoted an interest. She stepped away from the door opened it, and allowed Nicole to proceed her out of the bathroom. Kendal couldn’t help but notice that the backside of Nicole was just as good as the front.

“Oh, there are my friends now,” Kendal said quickly spying Jeff and Marco talking to Marc and a couple of females. She only hoped no one noticed the direction of her eyes. “What’s your boss’ name, maybe I can help you find him and if I can’t Jeff certainly can.” She stepped up next to Nicole and turned to get a surreptitious look. *She looks too good not to already have a girlfriend, but a woman has got to have hope.*

“That’s him standing right in front of us,” Nicole replied motioning her head in the direction of Jeff’s group. Turning she gave Kendal another once over, making sure that Kendal was watching. *I’m pretty sure she’s interested if that blush means anything.*

“Oh, so Marc is your boss,” Kendal said. She could feel her cheeks getting red in response to the look. “Then you’ll be working with my friend, Jeff. He’s a real great guy.” She led Nicole over to Marc and Jeff hoping that the low lighting was concealing some of the redness. “Look who I found in the bathroom,” Kendal said upon reaching the group. “I believe you know this person, Marc?”

“Nicole, I’m glad you decided to come on such short notice,” Marc said and shook her hand. “Let me introduce you to two of your coworkers. This is Jeff Macklin and his partner Marco Brandt, and this is Janet Hughes and her partner Lisa Summers. Jeff and Janet are both in our department but on a different team from you. Since you and Jeff are

both team leaders, you'll be working with him a lot." He put his hand on Nicole's shoulder and said, "This is Nicole Fisher, she's taking Ben's place." Handshakes were exchanged all around. "Now why don't we go through the buffet before all the good food gets taken? I see some of your team members are already seated, Nicole," Marc noted.

Kendal unobtrusively slowed Jeff down a little bit so that they lagged behind the others. "Does she have a girlfriend?" Kendal whispered urgently for Jeff's ears only.

"I just found out about her tonight," Jeff replied just as quietly. "She is definitely family, but I don't know if she's available." By this time they had reached the other part of their group as they stood in line to get food. "I take it you have some interest?" Jeff was clearly amused.

"Just a bit," Kendal replied tightly. "This is serious, Jeff," she added. Kendal picked up a plate and started absently adding food, her mind consumed with thoughts of Nicole. She looked up to see Nicole and Marc already heading for a table. Making a quick decision she decided to leave the rest of the goodies for later and snatch up the seat next to Nicole. "I'll see you at the table," she threw over her shoulder and headed for the table.

Jeff shook his head, glancing at Marco to see if he had observed the maneuvering. Kendal had all but pushed Janet out of the way to sit down next to Nicole. "I've never seen her be this aggressive," he commented.

"All those poor guys," Marco said with a grin. "Left in Nicole's dust."

"It's just as well," Jeff said with an even bigger grin. "Now I can have as many drinks as I want. If those guys cause any trouble Nicole looks like she can handle it."

Kendal was a little embarrassed at stealing the seat right out from Janet, but not that embarrassed. *You snooze, you loose.* Kendal watched attentively as Nicole was introduced to her teammates at the table. She waited patiently while Nicole made small talk with the others at the table, all the while feeling the presence of the woman sitting beside her. *Please god, I know I've asked a lot of you lately, but please don't let her have a girlfriend. Oh, and please let her like children!*

"So Kendal, what's your line of business?" Nicole asked once she finished the necessary conversation. She turned to Kendal with an attentive smile. *She must be interested Nicole, she got out of line and practically tossed Janet to the side to get the chair next to you. You have to like that in a women.*

"I'm a programmer too but at a small company. I mostly create database applications for other small companies." Kendal wiped her mouth and took a sip of her coke. "Because we're such a small operation, I also get to help track down business."

"Do you like doing the administrative work or merely tolerate it?"

"At first I hated it," Kendal admitted, "but after awhile I found that I'm actually very good at convincing people to hire us. It's like all the years I spent on a debate team are paying off."

"Better you than me," Nicole laughed. "Give me the behind the scenes work. I don't have the patience to deal with clients. Just give me a concept and I'll come up with a great design. That really attracted me to this job."

"What brought you to Atlanta?"

"It's something different," the brown-haired woman replied with a shrug. "I spent all of my life in the northeast and I was ready for a change. Warmer weather if nothing else."

“Let’s hear it for warmer weather.” Kendal lifted her glass and touched it to Nicole’s.

“So we have something in common, eh?” Nicole grinned, showing her white teeth. “We like it warm.”

What a smile! I could easily loose myself in it. “I’m sure we have more in common than that,” Kendal replied with a sly smile. “I love books, listening to music and college football. Currently I’m on a Tracy Chapman and Indigo Girls kick. I go home and listen to them practically all night.”

“I love Tracy Chapman,” Nicole replied instantly, nodding her head. “Melissa?” she queried.

“I like her music, but I was totally embarrassed by her tell-all book and interviews,” Kendal said with a grimace. “Some things you keep to yourself.”

“I know exactly what you mean, Kendal.” Nicole gave a shudder. “I got so embarrassed watching that interview with Barbara Walters that I had to change the channel. And it was much too close to that whole Ellen-Ann thing,” she complained with another shudder.

“Makes a lesbian want to cringe,” Kendal said with deliberation and watched closely for Nicole’s reaction. Seeing the small smile getting bigger, she went on the offensive. Leaning towards Nicole she said, “So, what else could we have in common?”

Nicole’s smile turned positively wicked. As she started to reply she was interrupted by Marc who urged her to come along with him to be introduced to his bosses. As much as she hated to leave Kendal when things were just heating up, Nicole knew she didn’t have a choice. With a gracious smile she allowed Marc to lead her off.

With a shrug of resignation Kendal got up and walked over to the part of the table where Jeff and Marco were sitting. “Well damn,” she said as she sat down, “we were getting along so well.”

“Were you really?” Jeff asked pretending to be surprised. “Marco did you have any inkling that Kendal and Nicole were hitting it off.”

“Oh, you mean other than the fact that they were grinning at each other in that sappy sort of way?” Marco inquired.

“I’ll tell you comedians now,” Kendal said with a sniff, “don’t quite your day jobs.” Her eyes searched the room for Nicole’s location. No way was she leaving this party without getting Nicole’s number. That tiny voice inside of her was letting her know that this was not an opportunity she should let go by. *I know I’m interested in her and I’m pretty sure she’s interested in me. I haven’t felt sparks like that in a long time. I have to talk to her again tonight!*

“Kendal, you need a distraction,” Jeff said ten minutes later after noticing the way Kendal’s eyes kept zeroing in on Nicole. “Let’s go mingle, folks.” He stood up and held out hands to Marco and Kendal.

“Okay, but I’ve already decided that I would be absolutely crazy to go home without talking to Nicole some more.” Kendal reluctantly put her hand in Jeff’s and let him pull her up. “I was getting some great vibes from her.”

“That’s why we mingle babe, then maybe it won’t be so obvious to everyone that you can’t keep your eyes from following her,” Jeff said quietly.

“Am I that obvious?” Jeff and Marco nodded in unison. “We can’t have that,” Kendal said forcing a smile on her face. “I don’t want her to

think I'm desperate. Let's go back to the buffet. I didn't get enough to eat before."

"Nobody told you to go marching over there wrestling over chairs." Jeff gave Kendal a look down his nose.

"It was worth every minute, baby," Kendal responded grandly.

For the next couple of hours Kendal gradually relaxed and stopped obsessing over Nicole. Luckily more women had shown up so her previous group of admirers split up into smaller groups. She still kept Nicole in her sights as much as possible but in she hoped a much less obvious way. She was surprised to find that she was actually listening to what people were saying and so was able to make intelligent conversation in return.

Kendal was gently discouraging one of Jeff's more pesky co-workers when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to find Nicole's big brown eyes fixed on her. They starred at each other for what seemed like forever but was actually only a moment. "You found me," Kendal said her face lit up like Broadway.

"I never lost you," Nicole replied leaning close to Kendal's ear. Her husky voice sending shivers down Kendal's spine. Nicole noted the response with a satisfied smile. She shot Kendal's admirer a look that made him decide that he had other places to be. "You know I was just about to tell you something else we had in common when I was dragged off," Nicole reminded Kendal, her voice smooth as silk.

"Oh," Kendal said, feeling the heat moving down her body. *This is ridiculous. She hasn't even touched me and I'm getting all hot and bothered!* "What was that?" she asked, her breathing a little more sporadic as she caught a whiff of Nicole's perfume.

“We both like women,” Nicole said stepping even closer to Kendal. “I hope we’re both single?” she added as a question.

Kendal gave Nicole an appraising look. What she saw in Nicole’s eyes satisfied her. “Most certainly,” she said in all seriousness. “Can I interest you in my number?” Kendal beamed.

“Can I call you tonight?” Nicole wanted to know.

“Let’s go to the bar, I’m sure they have pens over there,” came the breathy reply. *Kendal, get a hold of yourself! If you don’t you’re going to melt into a puddle.*

Kendal and Nicole spent the rest of the night playing hide-and-go-seek. They mingled with different crowds but always made sure to meet every so often. It was one of the most exhilarating nights in Kendal’s life. She went home on a cloud of pure unadulterated lust.

Chapter 7

Kendal's alarm woke her up much too early the next morning. She groaned and stretched her arms and legs. In her dreams she and Nicole had been walking hand and hand on the beach. The sun caressed their bodies as they let the heat between them rise. Just as Nicole was putting her arms around Kendal, the stupid alarm went off. *Damn, even my dreams are frustrated!* She thought briefly about going back to sleep, but remembered that it was Friday and she had to go to work. Frustrated she got up and went to take a cool shower.

As she showered, Kendal let her mind wander back to the four-hour conversation she and Nicole had last night. She had to laugh as she remembered how much like teenagers they had acted. Even though they both had been ready for sleep, neither one of them wanted to hang up. Finally, they had both hung up on the count of ten. Now Kendal had to figure out how soon she could call Nicole without seeming too eager.

They hadn't made any set plans, but Kendal knew she had to see Nicole again and soon. She finished her toiletries and went to have breakfast. Kendal started whistling as she walked to the kitchen. The kitchen was one of her favorite rooms in the house. It was big and airy and situated so that it caught the sun for a good part of the day. In the middle there was a small island covered with a conglomeration of small appliances. The best part to Kendal was the wood cabinets that gave the kitchen a homey feel. They had a deep red finish that really made the kitchen look like something you'd see in a home magazine. Of course the up to date stained steel appliances contributed to the overall look.

"Must you be so damn cheerful this early in the morning?" Marco asked from the doorway. "I'm must be getting to old," he grumpily complained. Walking to the oval kitchen table, he pulled out a chair, sat down and rested his head on the table. "That damn Jeff talked me into

going out dancing until three in the morning. He's only a couple of years younger than me, where does he get all that energy?" he whined.

"You should know the man in a night owl," Kendal replied with no sympathy. "He can not be outlasted. That's why you don't usually see me riding with him to the clubs. I have to have my own transportation."

"Well, now that I think about it everybody usually meets us there," Marco said realization dawning. "I'll have to remember that next time he wants to go dancing on a week night."

"Why don't you just skip your classes today and go back to bed?" Kendal suggested as she set the coffee maker to percolating.

"It's my day to work at the free legal clinic," Marco said glumly. "I don't know why I didn't think of that until the wee hours of the morning. That coffee sure smells good," he said with an appreciative sniff. "Can you sneak me an early cup?"

"Coming right up," Kendal promised.

"We didn't really have a chance to talk before we dropped you off last night. I assume you got the digits you were looking for?" Marco gave Kendal an inquisitive look as she handed him the cup.

"That and a phone call," Kendal bragged. "It's so crazy, we talked for hours but now I'm wondering how soon to give her a call. She's just moved here so I know she has a lot of things to do, still I have to see her again and soon."

"Then call her today," Marco said, closing his eyes as he sipped the aromatic coffee. "Just what I needed," he declared after drinking half a cup. "If you're moving too fast for her, Nicole will let you know. It could be she'll be ready for your company tonight. She did call you right away."

Kendal mulled that over for a few minutes while she toasted her poppy seed bagel. “Okay, I’ll do it, but I’ll wait until this afternoon so I won’t seem too anxious,” she decided. She reached in the fridge and pulled out the cream cheese. “Umm, lox in the morning.” Kendal picked up her plate and walked over to join Marco at the table. “You know Marco, the best part of last night was that I had all those wonderful feelings of a new beginning,” Kendal explained. “You know, feelings of hopefulness, love, lust, and excitement. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll be able to live off those feelings for awhile,” she added with a self-deprecating smile.

“Isn’t that just a bit pessimistic?” Marco asked. “It hasn’t taken off and you’re already thinking about it not working out.”

“It’s not pessimism Marco, it’s called trying not to get my hopes up too high. I still have to tell her about our unique situation and Junior,” she said, rubbing her still flat stomach. “No matter what Jeff says, I still don’t see my being pregnant as advantageous to a new relationship.”

“Don’t worry about it until you have to, Kendal.” Marco placed his hand over Kendal’s and gave it a squeeze. “Remember those wonderful feelings from last night and go from there. You don’t have to marry Nicole and set up house. Just go out have some fun and maybe more.”

“You’re right again,” Kendal admitted with a sigh. “I need to slow down and start at the beginning. Thanks Marco, you’ve been a great help as usual. Now I need to go to work.” She stood up from the table, gave Marco a quick kiss on the top of his head and loaded her dirty dishes in the dishwasher.

Forty-five minutes later Kendal was stowing away her bag in her desk. She pulled out her palm pilot studied her schedule and prepared for the rest of the day. Although it was Friday, Kendal had a lot of work to do. She had a meeting with one of her current clients to discuss changes to a database she had developed for them a year ago. Rapid changes in

their business caused the need for an update. After that she gave a sales presentation to a potential client to convince them that her company was the best firm to hire for the job. Once that was finished, she jumped into her newest project, developing a complex database with extensive querying capabilities. Since she had written the proposal for the project Kendal already had a general outline to work from. The first thing to do was to detail the tasks from the proposal.

“Knock, knock,” a familiar voice called out. Kendal looked up to see her fellow coworker and good friend, Sandy, standing in the doorway. “How about lunch today?” Sandy asked.

“Is it that time already?” Kendal rubbed her eyes and looked at her watch. “Boy this day has flown by. Sure, I’m ready for lunch. I’ll meet you by the elevator in five minutes,” she promised.

“Okay, but remember it’s your turn to pick the place,” Sandy taunted with a laugh before quickly escaping.

“I did it last time,” Kendal shouted after her. “At least I think I picked the place last time,” she muttered to herself as she straightened up her desk. She and Sandy were both always indecisive about where to eat so they’d taken to alternating responsibility for choosing the restaurant. Kendal grabbed her wallet and coat and went to join Sandy by the stairwell.

“You’ve been real under cover today,” Sandy commented as they walked down the stairs. “I haven’t seen you walking around the place. What gives?”

“Two meetings and working on a detailed outline for my new project. Jack tells me I have to finish it before Junior gets here or I won’t get to take maternity leave. That gives me five months to finish something that should really take six to seven months. My nose will be to the grind,” she groaned.

“Don’t give me that,” Sandy said as they walked out of the office and into the street. “You know you love the challenge, Kendal. But if you need to get additional help, there’s money in the budget for that.” Sandy was the financial manager, among other things, for the firm.

“Maybe in the beginning, but I want to do a lot of the work at home,” Kendal explained. “Eventually, I will get bigger and it will be harder to get around. But really I just want to be able to use that great new office at home. I know I’ve mentioned my great new office, haven’t I?”

“Only about a thousand times,” Sandy muttered. “So, where are we going?” She turned to Kendal to remind her that it was her turn to pick. Sandy Jenkins was often mistaken as Kendal’s sister. They were both around the same height, same build, and same brown–green eyes. Their features were even similar. Unlike Kendal, Sandy’s hair was ebony and cut very short.

“Let’s hit the deli today. I’m looking forward to a roast beef sandwich and the soup of the day.” Kendal gave a shiver as the cold February wind blew about their heads. Reaching in her pocket she pulled out her gloves and put them on.

“Hey Kendal how was the party last night?” Sandy asked with a big grin. She still remembered the stories Kendal had told about Jeff’s Office Christmas party. “Was the food as good as last time?”

“Simply fabulous, darling,” Kendal gushed playfully. “The decorations were lavish, food everywhere and any kind of drink you could want. I wore the outfit I told you I borrowed for my sister, and the men were all over me. It’s incredible what a short skirt and bigger boobs will do for you,” she said giving an infectious laugh.

“Since when does it thrill you to have guys hanging all over you?” Sandy replied with a snort. “Okay, how many did you slap down?” she wanted to know.

“Not a single one,” Kendal said and stuck out her tongue. “Although, I was getting tempted,” she admitted quickly. “But something else happened that took my mind off of that whole situation.” She gave Sandy a smirk and reached for the Deli’s door. “We’ll talk after we place our order,” she told Sandy quietly.

“You met someone!” Sandy squealed loudly causing several heads to turn towards the door.

Kendal felt a flush run up her neck to her cheeks. “Patience,” she warned Sandy, blithely ignoring people looking her way. Once in line she turned towards the menus and studied them intently.

“Sorry,” Sandy mumbled. “Me and my big mouth strike again.”

“That’s okay, no harm done,” Kendal said with a wave of her hand. “I don’t know these people anyway.” She stepped up, gave her order and paid for it. “I’ll go stake out a table,” she told Sandy slipping her wallet back in her coat pocket.

Kendal barely had time to sit down before Sandy came barreling to the table.

“So, did you meet someone?” Sandy whispered impatiently as she sat down. Her whole attention was focused on what Kendal had to impart.

Kendal nodded rapidly as her face lit up as she thought of her new friend. “Nicole,” she said with a lot of feeling. “She’s a co-worker of Jeff’s who just got hired. I saw her and that was that,” she declared patting her heart.

“Give the particulars,” Sandy demanded motioning with her hands.

“She’s a few inches taller than me, medium build with nice muscles. You know well defined, but not too muscular. She’s light-skinned with kind of a light brownish tints in her dreadlocks. Nicole has a beautiful smile and mesmerizing big brown eyes. Plus the sexiest voice ever,” Kendal gasped. “I got hot and bothered just talking to her on the phone last night after the party,” she admitted with a quick blush.

“Ohhhh,” Sandy groaned. “That sounds so romantic. You should send her flowers, I sent Maureen flowers the day after we met and I’ve been getting good love every since,” she said dreamily.

“I know, I’ve seen it.” Kendal gave her a smile and jiggled her eyebrows up and down. “Oh, that’s my number. I’ll wait up there until they call yours.” She stood up and walked to the front counter. Since she and Sandy were regulars, the server handed Kendal a tray with the two orders on it. Kendal smiled thanks and made her way through the crowd back to the table.

“When do you see her again?” Sandy asked as she grabbed her sandwich from the tray.

“I don’t know,” Kendal said with a frown. “For some stupid reason I didn’t try to set a date during our four *hour* conversation last night. I don’t know what I was thinking. Or rather I wasn’t even thinking,” she amended. Kendal took the top off her soup and sniffed the warm steam rising. “This smells great. They make the best tomato soup here.”

“Then what are your plans? You have to do something to insure you’ll see her again.” Sandy urged.

“I’m going to call her before I leave work and see if I can set up something for tonight or tomorrow, or any other day,” Kendal said

quickly in order to calm Sandy down. *Sometime it seemed like Sandy is more interested in me getting a girlfriend than I am. She is too cute!* “If I can’t reach her then I’ll just keep calling until I do reach her. I really have to get to know this woman better.”

“Good. Then you won’t need my help to prod you. But I will be checking back with you,” Sandy promised. “Now tell me all the details of how you met. Don’t leave out anything.”

After returning from lunch, Kendal met with her boss, Jack, to discuss her plans to work at home later into her pregnancy and subsequent childbirth. Kendal had put a lot of effort into the proposed work plan so she was easily able to answer all of Jack’s questions about how the work would get done. Having worked with Kendal for a couple of years on a part time basis, Jack had no doubt about her ability to complete the job.

“Make sure we have your updated information,” was all Jack said as he left her office. That was his way of letting her know he approved her plans.

By four o’clock she had cleared off her desk and gotten the nerve to call Nicole. Kendal felt a moment of anxiety wondering if Nicole might have had a change of heart since last night. “If she didn’t want you to call, she wouldn’t have given you her number,” Kendal told her self, holding the number tightly. With some trepidation Kendal dialed the number. She wasn’t sure if she was happy or upset when Nicole’s answering machine picked up. She left a message for Nicole to give her a call at home and slowly repeated her number. Gathering up her belongings, she moped all the way to her bus stop.

Once there, Kendal gave her self a pep talk. *She’s probably running errands. When you move there are all sorts of things you have to take care of. I’ll bet there will be a message when I get home. Hopefully we can go to dinner and talk some more. I know we just met, but*

something really clicked between us last night and I do so want to explore the possibility that it could lead to something more. I promise I won't go into this thinking that it's forever but it's okay to acknowledge the possibility of further exploration.

With that in mind Kendal felt better as she got in line to get on the bus. It seemed as if her fellow passengers were also in a good mood. On other days the afternoon ride was usually filled with silent people, who seemed tired after a hard days work. Fridays were a different story. Everybody was smiling and laughing, not really caring that the heating on the old bus wasn't giving off enough heat. The spirit of TGIF permeated the air.

Kendal practically ran the two blocks from the bus stop to her house, intent on checking her messages. *This is why you need to get a cell phone, Richards.* The blinking red light on the answering machine lead her across the kitchen. Sure enough, her box was blinking. She pushed the button and Nicole's voice could be heard. Nicole apologized for not calling earlier and asked Kendal to return the call.

"Yes!" Kendal shouted, pulling down her right arm in victory. Going to her room she picked up the phone and sat down on her bed. From memory she punched in Nicole's number.

The phone was answered after four rings. "Hello," Nicole's husky voice said.

"Hey, it's Kendal. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time?"

"No," Nicole replied with a chuckle. "You could never catch me at a bad time, Kendal. I'm glad you called me back."

"There was never any question that I was going to do that," Kendal said in all sincerity. "Is it too late to ask if you're doing anything tonight?"

“No it’s not too late, and no I don’t have any plans tonight,” Nicole replied, promptly. “Do you have something in mind?”

You bet I have something in mind! Kendal shook her head to clear out those kind of thoughts. “I thought we could go out to dinner?” she suggested with hesitation – the slightest hint of a question in that statement.

“That would be great. I’ve been running around all day, I could use a nice relaxing dinner and some good conversation.”

“How bout I pick you up at seven and we can decide where to go from there?” While Kendal tried her best to keep the grin out of her voice, she didn’t quite succeed. “What’s your apartment number again?” *As if it’s not etched in my brain!* Kendal hung up the phone with a grin so huge it threatened to take over her face. “Now, what to wear?” She walked to the closet and started a thirty-minute session of trying on outfits. In the end she pulled on her favorite pair of well-worn jeans and a red sweater that was tighter across her breasts than she remembered. Kendal gave a nod and a wink to her reflection in the mirror.

In front of Nicole’s apartment Kendal drew a nervous breath and smoothed back her hair. Once again she hadn’t pulled it back in a ponytail but left it loose. She took another breath and rang the doorbell. The door opened immediately as if Nicole had been watching for her.

“Uh, hi,” Kendal stammered, her heart still beating fast. Big brown eyes caught hers and held them in place. Her body was suffused with a shot of electricity and she almost forgot to breath. *Wow, she’s more beautiful than I remember!* Kendal stood there totally bemused. Nicole looked so delicious in a black button down silk blouse and tight black jeans. She had some gold studs in her ears and a simple gold chain around her neck.

“Um, come on in,” Nicole said slowly, unwilling to break the connection between them. She took hold of Kendal’s hand and gently pulled her inside. “It’s so good to see you again, Kendal.”

“Thanks.” Kendal gave Nicole’s hand a squeeze. “It’s good to see you, Nicole. I’m glad you had some time for us to get together tonight.”

“Me too,” Nicole agreed with a grin. “Where are my manners? Here, let me take your coat.” She assisted Kendal with her coat and clamped her mouth shut to keep from drooling. “I’ll just hang this in the closet,” she said quickly. *She looks so good! I wish I could be that sweater that is so lovingly shaping her breasts. Down, girl.* Getting her libido under control, she led Kendal to the living room. “Have a seat. Can I get you anything to drink?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” Kendal sat on the plush leather sofa, while Nicole took a seat on the matching chair. She smiled at Nicole awkwardly, feeling nervous. *Okay what do we do now? Think of something to say!* “I really enjoyed talking with you last night Nicole,” she blurted out, her eyes flickering around the room.

“Is something wrong, Kendal?” Nicole asked concerned. “You seem uncomfortable.”

“Nervous is more like it,” Kendal admitted letting out her breath. Her head was hanging down as she watched the interplay of her own hands. “All day all I could think about was seeing you and now that I we’re here alone I’m nervous. I’m not too up on this dating thing.”

Nicole stood up and sat down next to Kendal. She put a hand under Kendal’s chin until she was looking Kendal right in the eyes. “I promise I won’t bite unless you tell me to,” she said solemnly, although a little twinkle could be detected in her eyes.

“Can I categorize that as a promise?” Kendal asked, tilting her head towards Nicole and grinning.

“Straight up.” *She looks so incredibly cute with that silly grin on her face. I wonder if I dare?* Nicole leaned forward and gently touched Kendal’s lips with hers. Her intention was for a quick, fleeting kiss, letting Kendal know that everything was okay. The moment her lips came up against the softness of Kendal’s they changed the agenda. What had started out as warm, gentle and inviting flashed into hot passion. Nicole pulled Kendal closer, increasing the pressure of her lips against Kendal’s until her tongue was allowed entrance. Nicole savored the sweet taste of Kendal’s mouth, as she played with Kendal’s tongue until they were both panting heavily. Slowly she pulled back, leaving a trail of quick kisses. Nicole put her hands around Kendal’s face, trying to get her breathing back under control. “I’ve been wanting to do that since I saw you in the bathroom last night,” she whispered.

“I wish you would have,” Kendal whispered back, leaning forward so that their foreheads were touching. “How about that dinner I promised you?”

“Yes,” Nicole said reluctantly with a big sigh. “I don’t want to go too fast and scare you away,” she joked, but with a silent question in her eye.

“No danger of that,” Kendal replied quickly. “But I do sense some danger if we stay here on your couch,” she added with a quick laugh and stood up. *It was ridiculous how good it felt to be in Nicole’s embrace, almost like a homecoming.*

“Since I have no idea about your likes and dislikes in food, I thought we’d go to Mick’s in Buckhead,” Kendal said as they took the elevator down from Nicole’s apartment. “They have generic “American Food”, I hope that will be okay?”

“I will eat just about anything,” Nicole responded. “When I was growing up I was known as the human garbage can. When my sister or brother didn’t want to eat something they gave it to me. I was always sure to at try it and most often like it. That’s why I’m Mama’s favorite,” she added with a proud grin. As their elevator came to a stop, Nicole put her hand over the door to hold it open and gestured for Kendal to get off.

“I was so lucky to get a parking space right out front,” Kendal bragged, leading the way to her car. She unlocked her door with her keyless entry device. “That doesn’t happen very often. Of course since you live here you have an off the street parking space.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have a car,” Nicole said as she opened the car door. Sitting down she buckled up her seat belt. “And my bike can be parked just about anywhere.”

Kendal turned to Nicole is surprise. “Define bike?” she queried. Kendal didn’t remember seeing a bike in Nicole’s apartment, but then again she we too nervous to notice anything about the apartment. *Well, that is, except for how soft the sofa was and how much I wanted to lie down on it.*

“Motorcycle.” Nicole shot Kendal a wicked grin and turned up the collar on her leather coat. “You still want to go to dinner?” she challenged.

“My favorite part of the Pride parade is always the dykes on bikes, Nicole,” Kendal shot back, returning the challenging look with one of her own. “Especially the shirtless ones,” she added with an equally wicked grin.

Nicole threw back her head and barked out a laugh. “I’ll remember that, Kendal,” she promised. She watched the blush creep up Kendal’s face with enjoyment. *I really like this women!*

Kendal reached over and turned on the radio before pulling into traffic. She spent the rest of the drive pointing out Landmarks they passed as they drove up Peachtree Street to the restaurant. Interspersed with the tour guide were tales from Kendal's teen years to keep Nicole amused.

"Now it's your turn to tell the tales," Kendal announced with a bright smile, bringing the car to a stop for valet parking. "And don't think you can weasel out of it either, Nicole," she threatened playfully.

"Fair is fair," Nicole agreed. She opened the door for Kendal to enter the restaurant. "You do remember that saying about being careful what you wish for?"

"I'd certainly like to get it," Kendal said catching Nicole's eyes with her own. They starred at each other, their gaze only interrupted by the hostess asking them if they would like to be seated.

"Two for non-smoking," Kendal told the hostess once she managed to pull her gaze away from Nicole. *Okay Ken, remember you were the one who wanted to take it slow. Quit giving out mixed messages! And quit looking at her like you want to eat her for dinner!*

"It'll be about twenty minutes," the hostess replied after consulting her waiting list. "Can I get your name please?"

Kendal gave her name and led Nicole in the direction of the bar. The restaurant was one oblong sunken room. The ceiling over the dining room was made of clear plastic so that you could see the clouds that covered the sky plus the street lighting and wiring system. The bar was to the right of the entrance door on the same level and back against a wall. Kendal found some empty seats at the bar and motioned for Nicole to sit down.

The bartender stepped right up to them and placed cocktail napkins in front of the two women. "What can I get you ladies this evening?"

"I'll have a coke with cherries," Kendal said.

"Bring me a Corona please, if you have it," Nicole answered.

"We sure do ma'am. I'll be right back with your drinks."

"Would you like me to start my stories now or when we get seated?" Nicole turned around so that she was facing Kendal. It was all she could do not to reach for Kendal's hand.

"Go ahead it'll make the wait seem shorter."

"Okay but remember you wanted this so if you get bored it's your own fault," Nicole warned before starting. "When I was a kid we lived in the projects and dares were a little more dangerous than kissing the fattest boy in the class," she taunted playfully. "As my mother was fond of saying, 'my baby always hangs out with the worst kids in the neighborhood'. One summer some friends and I were sitting around bored so we started playing truth or dare. Mind you we were only nine or ten so back then none of the dares were sexual in nature," Nicole clarified. "When it came my turn I took the dare to make things interesting. I had to go to this electronics shop down the street and steal something. I admit I was afraid, but I was with my posse, so I had to do it or lose face. We all went down to the store and they waited outside while I went in. Of course they were all watching through the window to make sure that I actually stole something. In a blind panic I grabbed the first thing I could get my hands on and ran like hell. Once the other kids saw me start running they took off too. The storekeeper ran after us but we were too fast for him. I've never felt so proud and so ashamed at the same time," Nicole admitted with a rueful smile. "I proved myself worthy

of being able to hang with the guys, but I knew my mother would never look at me the same if she ever found out that I'd stolen something."

"What did you take?" Kendal asked putting a hand on Nicole's arm.

"It was an electronic organizer that had been left out. Unlucky for it, it was right by the front window, where the boys were watching, and by the front door. I kept it for a couple of days. I didn't ever try to use it, I just took it out of the box to look at it and hold it. That organizer was the best thing I'd ever had," Nicole smiled as she once again felt the wonder of having such a beautiful possession. "But in the end I was just too guilty so I took it back to the store and apologized to the owner."

"Wow, that's awfully brave for a nine year old," Kendal responded. "I might have taken it back but I certainly would never go talk to the owner."

"Turns out it was one of the best things I ever did," she said proudly. "The owner gave me a fancy calculator for being so honest and I stopped hanging around with the neighborhood thugs. I took that thing home and learned all about mathematics. From there I got into computers and was such a total geek that I couldn't even buy any trouble," she added with a grin.

"Oh come on," Kendal scoffed shaking Nicole's arm. "Surely you have something juicier to tell me. I told you about groping the cheerleader in tenth grade." She stopped as the buzzer lit up. "I guess we have a table," she said, surprised at how fast the time had flown.

"Saved by the buzz," Nicole joked following Kendal to the Hostess station.

"Only slightly postponed," Kendal corrected with a saucy grin.

Although Kendal continued to tease Nicole, she was unable to get any good dirt out of her. It seemed as if Nicole had been the perfect little angle after her first attempt at stealing. Now if Kendal had only asked Nicole about college – that would have been a totally different story.

After dinner, unwilling to be parted from Nicole, Kendal suggested that they visit a gay bookstore with a coffee bar. Nicole, equally unwilling to let the evening end, agreed. She didn't tell Kendal but she had already stumbled on Outwrite while walking around her new neighborhood.

"Next time we go out, I'll take you to Charis," Kendal said as she opened the door for Nicole. "It's a feminist women's bookstore over near my house. I try to support them as best I can since it was there that I found my first lesbian novel. Lucky someone had misplaced it in the kid's section. Oh, the thoughts it opened up in my mind."

"Lucky you, I didn't really get my head out of a computer during high school so I didn't have a clue until I went to college," Nicole confessed. "I was too busy being to think of anything like being attracted to boys or girls. I just decided that I was one of those prudish girls who didn't like sex."

"I hope you were proven wrong?" Kendal inquired with arched brows.

"Oh, yeah," Nicole assured her with a chuckle. She signaled Kendal that she was off to claim one of the few remaining empty tables. Kendal nodded and got in line for the coffee. Nicole sat down and turned her attention to Kendal. She was getting good vibes from Kendal. A new relationship would help her take her mind off not being able to share Derrick's life anymore.

"Coffee for you, hot chocolate for me." Kendal placed a cup in front of Nicole, and one in front of the chair in front of her. She took off

her coat and hung it on the chair. "I'm not much of a coffee fan, but these cafes are good places to hang out and talk."

"I've enjoyed our time together so far." Nicole picked up her cup of coffee and took a sip. "I'm glad the evening didn't have to end after dinner." She boldly reached over and put her hand on top of Kendal's.

"Well you know I am, since I suggested coming here." Kendal turned over her hand so that they were palm to palm. She was enjoying the warmth radiating from Nicole's hand. "Although, I'm not sure what we have left to talk about since we talked so much last night. I feel like I know a lot about you already."

"I know you turn me on," Nicole replied, looking into Kendal's eyes. "I also know that you know how to kiss," she added for good measure.

"What more can a girl ask for," Kendal said softly as she returned Nicole's look trying not to get lost in those big beautiful eyes. A spasm in her abdomen not caused by Nicole jerked her out of her daze. She picked up her hot chocolate and blew on it. *Can't forget about Junior.*

"Don't forget about the motorcycle," Nicole reminded her with a sly look. "Maybe I'll even ride it without a bra," she enticed.

Kendal closed her eyes to break away from those beguiling brown eyes, but was immediately besieged by an image of Nicole without a bra. She took a deep breath. "Nicole, there's something I have to tell you before we take this any further," she said slowly, running her fingers through her hair. "Although I don't look it, I'm five months pregnant. Anyone that I get involved with will have to be willing to deal with my child as well. And me in the final months of pregnancy," she added with a grimace. "I wanted to tell you last night on the phone, but I chickened out."

“Uh, pregnant?” Nicole’s eyebrows almost left her forehead and she let out her breath she didn’t realize she was holding. She was silent for a moment. “What’s the situation? An old boyfriend or ex-husband?” Nicole tried to blank out her expression while waiting for a reply. *Just my damn luck! I find Ms. Right and she’s pregnant. I’m just not willing to put time and effort into another child that I don’t have a real claim to.* Without thought, she pulled her hand from under Kendal’s.

“Nothing like that,” Kendal was quick to assure her, hurting from the loss of Nicole’s hand. She wasn’t at all sure how Nicole was taking the news. Aside from the eyebrow movement, her features were fairly even. “What happened was one of the stupidest things I have ever done. The father is still in the picture but we’re only best friends. And although I didn’t plan to have this baby, I think the baby will be one of the best things I’ve ever done. Listen, I know you need time to think about all this, so why don’t I take you home and you call me later if you want to.” *Please want me to!*

“We’re so close to my apartment, that I’ll just go ahead and walk,” Nicole replied quietly. “I’m sorry, but I really have to think about this Kendal.” She stood and quickly left the bookstore unable to bear the look of hurt on her new friend’s face. *Damn! Damn! Damn! I can’t believe this is happening to me again. Things were going to so well between us and she wasn’t even turned off by my super nerd story.* Nicole gritted her teeth and blinked back tears as she walked to her apartment.

Kendal sat there for a minute, feeling as if a part of her had left with Nicole. *Some things are just not meant to be, Kendal. It’s good that you brought this up before you got in too deep.* Somehow her heart did not agree with this assessment. Rising Kendal blinked her eyes to keep the tears from falling and quickly walked to the door. On the way home all she could think about was chance. *Why couldn’t Nicole have come into my life before this fugue hit me? No way would I have even considered giving up Nicole to keep my stupid ‘good girl’ status. I am*

such a fucking idiot! Kendal spent the rest of the ride home, wiping away the tears that would not stop falling.

Pulling her car in the three-car garage and shutting off the ignition, she sat leaning on the steering wheel. All the emotions she held in check on the drive home came to the forefront and she cried her heart out. Kendal wasn't sure how long she'd been sobbing when the tears finally slowed down. *Remember, everything happens for a reason. Maybe this wasn't the right time for you to connect with Nicole. Pull yourself together before you get the baby all upset.* Kendal caught her breath and held it for a few seconds. She exhaled loudly while pressing her hands against her eyes. Gradually she was able to calm herself down and so that the flow of tears was intermittent.

Kendal raised her head up when the driver's side door was opened. "Kendal, are you okay?" Marco looked at her, concern written all over his face. "What happened, sweetie?"

"I told Nicole about the baby and it didn't go well." Kendal squeezed her eyes shut trying to keep the tears from starting up again. "All these stupid hormones have turned me into a crybaby," she complained bitterly. "The least little thing and I start crying. It's so embarrassing." She let her head settle back on the steering wheel.

"It's okay to cry about this, Kendal," Marco said. He reached over and put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I could tell you two really hit it off last night. There's bound to be some disappointment that things won't go any further."

"We were having a great time until I opened my big mouth." Kendal's voice was husky with tears. "Sometimes life is not fair." She lifted her tear-drenched face to look at Marco.

"Can't argue with that," Marco agreed. "At least you found out now rather than later," he added tentatively. "Come on, let's go inside so you

can sit in the recliner, put your feet up and have a snack.” Marco helped Kendal out of the car and caught her close in an embrace.

“You know all of my weaknesses, Marco,” Kendal sniffed, feeling in her coat pocket for a tissue. “How can I stay in the car crying when I know you’re going to fix me a snack,” she complained.

“I had to do something. In case you haven’t noticed it’s getting cold in this garage.” Marco put his arm around her and walked her to the den.

Jeff, who was seated on the sofa, glanced up when the pair arrived in the doorway. “What were you guys doing out there? I thought you would never come in.” He took a closer look at Kendal. “Kendal, what’s wrong.” Jeff jumped up from the sofa and quickly walked over to Kendal. “Are you okay?” he asked with a worried frown, and pulled her into his arms.

“Nicole dumped me because of Junior,” Kendal sniffed. The sympathy shown by Jeff caused her tear ducts to open once again.

“Oh my poor sweetie,” Jeff said as he pulled Kendal even closer. “I am so sorry.” *Damn! Those two seemed so right last night.* “Let’s go sit down on the sofa.” He led a passive Kendal to the sofa and pulled her into his lap. “I’m so very sorry.” Marco joined them on the couch and started rubbing Kendal’s back. Jeff rocked her until gradually the tears lessened and eventually stopped.

“Sorry,” Kendal sniffed and accepted a tissue from Marco. “I can’t seem to get the tear duct factory to shut down when I want it to.”

“Oh baby, that’s okay.” Jeff bent and gave Kendal a kiss on the top of her head. “You’re allowed. Besides remember that you have me, Jeff and Junior and we will stick around until you can round up a little filly.” Jeff was glad to see a shimmer of a smile on Kendal’s face at that sally.

“Round up? That sounds like I have a bunch of fillies corralled out back or something,” Kendal snorted. “That’ll be the day. I’ll just prepare myself to wait until Junior is in college.” Kendal gave a dramatic sigh, and put the back of her hand on her forehead in woe.

“Now Ms. Scarlett, let’s not get too carried away,” Marco said dryly. “I’ll go get that snack I promised you earlier.”

“Hey, what about me?” Jeff asked.

“I thought you wanted yours later,” Marco replied with a macho swagger.

“Well that too, honey!” Jeff said with a wave of his wrist.

An hour later, an exhausted and emotionally drained Kendal bade the boys goodnight and trooped to her room. The feeling of sadness for what might have been still lingered. She put her collection of Tracy Chapman CDs into the CD player and curled up on the bed. At some point during the third CD Kendal drifted off to sleep.

Across town Nicole was sitting in her leather appointed recliner starring pensively at nothing. She was wondering how her life had headed downhill so quickly. This morning she’d woken up feeling vibrant and alive, happy to have made this move to Atlanta. Three words had ruined that for her. Her stomach clinched in remembrance of Kendal’s proclamation. *Why?*

Nicole sat in the darkness brooding. After about an hour, a realization gradually dawned. She hadn’t reacted to Kendal and her baby but rather to the old hurt feelings that still lingered from her break with Tenisha and Derrick. Tenisha was her younger sister who had gotten pregnant at the age of sixteen. Nicole had gotten so used to looking out for her sister that from the moment of Derrick’s birth she’d automatically

extended her protectiveness to him. In a way, it was almost like he was her son and not her nephew. Nicole had happily thrown herself into the responsibility of raising Derrick while at the same time ensuring that her sister continued her education.

All her energies directed at Derrick and Tenisha had left Nicole little room for a social life. She dated on and off but nothing had come of these relationships but that was okay because Derrick was in her life. Nicole still remembered the shock and horror she felt when she learned that not only had Tenisha fallen in love, but she was also getting married and moving to North Carolina. Although this had happened two years ago she still felt the sting; it had been especially strong earlier this evening.

Wait a minute, Nic, you have got to get over this. Life goes on and you need to go with it, girl. Do you really want to throw away this opportunity to have someone in your life who could really mean something to you? Nicole took a deep breath and thought again of the first time her eyes had met verdant green ones. Something unconscious had passed between them and drawn her to Kendal. That had never happened to her before and who knows if it would ever happen again. She was not willing to chance it.

Who was that who said was the only thing we have to fear is fear itself? I think it was Churchill. Whoever it was, I need to take that message to heart and find a way to make up for the hurt I caused Kendal tonight. God willing, I'll get a lifetime to do it.

Chapter 8

When she woke up the next morning, the first thought on Kendal's mind was Nicole. She groaned and pulled a pillow over her face hoping that it would block out the sun and let her go back to sleep and forgetfulness. After a few minutes of thinking of nothing but her evening with Nicole, Kendal gave up the fight and sat up. She let out a sigh and pulled back the covers. There was nothing to do but get up and get on with her life. *Sure, it would have been great if things worked out with Nicole but they didn't so get over it.*

"You need to be focusing on Junior anyway, Kendal," she told herself as she looked at her puffy eyes in the bathroom mirror. Determined, she went back to her bedroom and got ready for her morning exercise. The mornings when she actually felt like running were almost in the past. While she wasn't showing outwardly, she felt plenty of development inside. At this stage Kendal rationalized that a nice brisk walk was as good as a run.

Setting off at a good clip, Kendal was quickly faced with one of the drawbacks of exercise. While she wanted to appreciate the lovely surroundings of her neighborhood, all that came to mind was the situation with Nicole. *I can't believe it's over just like that. Why didn't I keep my mouth shut and go with the flow?* Kendal angrily kicked a fallen pinecone. Sure she might not have developed a lasting relationship with Nicole but there still would have been the romance and excitement involved in getting to know someone. Romance was something that she had only read in books. With Gloria she'd skipped all the get-to-know-you steps and gone straight to the lets-sleep-together step. With Sam, Kendal hadn't really progressed beyond the step of getting-to-know-you because they both had determined early that they would only be friends.

Enough, Kendal! Stop wasting your time on what wasn't meant to be. Think about Junior and all the arrangements that you have to make

for him. He's going to be pretty central to your life for many years to come. With a conscious effort Kendal was able to redirect her thoughts. She focused on imagining her life as it would be at Junior's birth. How she would hold him in her arms and welcome him into this world.

What will Junior's entry into my life really mean? In how many more ways will it change life other than the changes that are already expected? Everybody says that things change, but how much? Kendal knew she was lucky that her family situation was real good. Her baby had two fathers ready to help in any way she needed. Her mother and father could hardly wait for their first grandchild to arrive and Jeff's parents wanted to be involved as well.

I need to appreciate how lucky I am today. I could have been all on my own trying to have this baby and raise it. There will definitely be a village to help raise this child. Let's face it, if it comes right down to it I'd rather have this baby than have Nicole. Kendal gave a start and realized that it was true. She'd already spent five months investing in Junior, and only two days investing in Nicole. While they both tugged on invisible strings attached to her soul, Junior tugged the hardest. Kendal almost laughed out loud as this realization hit her.

Approaching her house Kendal stopped, brought up short by the sight of a motorcycle with rider parked in the driveway. Her heart started to hammer as Nicole got off the bike and removed her helmet. *Surely this has to be good.* Kendal slowly walked to the driveway her heart beating a mile a minute. *Bad news you try to do over the phone or through e-mail.* "Hello, Nicole," Kendal said with a hesitant smile. "I hope you haven't been waiting too long."

"Hi there." Nicole responded, clearing her throat and wiping her palms on her jeans. "Sorry to drop in like this but I was out riding around and ended up over here," she added apologetically with a nervous smile. *That was lame, Nic!* "Do you mind?" She raised her eyebrows in inquiry.

“No, no,” Kendal replied quickly, smiling in return. “Come on in. I need to go take a quick shower. You can have a seat in the den.” Her hands shaking Kendal put the key in the front door and led Nicole to the den. “Make yourself comfortable. Can I get you anything while you wait?”

“I’m okay.” Nicole sat down in the recliner and placed her helmet on her lap. In her nervousness, she had totally forgotten to leave it outside with her bike. Not surprising really when her heart was pounding away like crazy.

“I’ll be a quick as I can.” With a smile, Kendal left the family room and all but raced to her room. As showers go it was pretty sketchy but she didn’t want to take any chances of Nicole leaving.

As soon as Kendal left the room, Nicole gave a big sigh. *Idiot, you should have called first! Who do you think is going to believe that BS about how you just happened to find your way over here. It’s not like you’ve ever been given directions to her house.* Nicole gave a shrug, what’s done is done.

Ten minutes later, Kendal came walking into the den. She’d pulled her wet hair back into a ponytail and changed into jeans and a University of Oklahoma sweatshirt. “Hope I didn’t take too long, Nicole,” she said with a nervous smile and sat down on the sofa across from Nicole.

“No, you were pretty quick,” Nicole said with a nervous smile of her own. *Okay, you’re the one who came to her house, say something!* She cleared her throat before speaking. “I came to talk about last night. I confess, I straight out panicked,” she admitted holding her head down studying her fingers.

“That’s okay,” Kendal assured her feeling her heart lighten with relief. “I did kind of spring that on you. No way you could have picked it up just by looking at me,” she added and put a hand on her stomach. “I

don't know, maybe it was presumptuous of me to bring it up given that we've only just met. I just thought you should know."

"The problem isn't you, it's me," Nicole replied, raising her head to look Kendal in the eye. "And I don't mean that as a brush off, Kendal. Hey, I love children and for five years I helped my sister raise her son. Then two years ago she got married and they moved away. It really hurt me to give up being his mom. So when you made your announcement last night, I immediately thought 'not again'."

What sorry timing! "And now?" Kendal asked softly, cringing inside.

"I've had a chance to think things over and I realize that this is a different situation and that I should treat it as such. That is," she paused for a moment before adding, "if you want to give me another chance."

"I guess I can," Kendal said in a shaky voice. The smile that lit her face belied her words. "I know we're lesbians Nicole, but we don't have to move in tomorrow," she added on a more serious note. "If at any time you feel like I'm asking too much of you, please let me know."

"So, does that mean I get another chance to impress you?" Nicole asked, a smile shaping her beautiful lips as a heavy weight left her soul.

"Yeah, what the heck." Kendal nodded her head and smiled. "Okay, so, uh what next? Do you have any plans for today?" she asked seemingly casual.

"No, I'm all yours," Nicole responded with a grin. "I did notice this funky shopping area up on Moreland when I was riding around. I'm sure you know it very well, but would you like to go check it out with me?"

Kendal stood up and nodded. "That area is called Little Five Points and it's well known for funky shops and funky people. Only in the past few years has a name brand store been allowed to creep into the scene.

It used to be more of a hippy hangout but now there are lots of suburban teens driving in to hangout along with the homeless. Why don't you leave your motorcycle here and we can walk there."

They spent the next hours shopping and enjoying each other's company. The first stop was Charis, the feminist women's bookstore Kendal had mentioned the day before. They left the store after an hour, each having purchased a couple of books. Nicole then insisted on going into all of the other shops and scrutinizing the merchandise. The two women teased each other as they tried on outrageous vintage clothing and accessories. In one store Nicole asked to see fifteen pairs of earrings before deciding on the fifteenth pair. Because the clerk had been so patient with her, Nicole also bought a pair of matching bracelets with the yin-yang sign. She fastened one on her wrist and one on Kendal's wrist, brushing it with a light kiss. *To anyone up above who's listening, thank you.*

Kendal's heart caught in her throat as a delicious shiver ran through her body. *The things this woman does to me!* "Thanks for the bracelet, Nicole. I'll treasure it for ever," she promised, leaning over and giving her a kiss on the cheek.

And I'll treasure you forever. "You're more than welcome," Nicole replied, her face beaming with joy. "It's the least I could do after you let me drag you all over the place. How about some lunch? My treat because you paid last night."

"You're on." Kendal rubbed her belly in anticipation. "I hope you have a credit card with a big limit because I eat a lot. Last night I ate before coming to pick you up because I didn't want you to know what a pig I am. Today is a totally different story."

"Uh, Kendal. Hate to break this to you but I was very much aware of everything you did Thursday night and that includes how many times you stopped by the buffet," Nicole let her know. "But I came today

anyway. Of course I brought my Gold Visa with the high limit so eat as much as you want," she joked. "Where to?"

"Funny, funny." Kendal stuck out her tongue, quickly pulling it back in as she met the sensual look on Nicole's face. Never before had she felt such an attraction for another human being. She felt a tingling below that had nothing to do with Junior and everything to do with Nicole. Luckily she had on a coat or the tightening of her nipples would have given her away. They felt so hard and sensitized pushing against her bra. Kendal closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Jeez, she didn't even touch me!*

"Kendal, are you okay?" Nicole asked tenderly. The hint of amusement in her tone let Kendal know that Nicole knew exactly what the problem was. "Can I help you with anything?"

"I'm not even going to respond to that right now," Kendal said with as much dignity as she could muster. "Let's go eat." Kendal took Nicole's hand in hers and led her across the street to the Bridgetown Grill. The restaurant was in the middle of the store front shops, set back a ways from the sidewalk. They specialized in Caribbean food.

The hostess guided them to a table. Neither of the two women paid any attention to their surroundings too focused on one another. Both secure in the knowledge that something big was happening between them.

They lingered over lunch taking the time to get to know each other even better. Each new discovery about the other solidified the rightness of their being together. Kendal and Nicole shared antidotes of family times, which in turn led to more disclosure. Eventually Kendal looked up and noticed the line of people waiting to be seated and reluctantly suggested to Nicole that they leave.

“This was such a fun day, Kendal,” Nicole said as they walked back to Kendal’s house. “I have a class from three to five today, but would it be too presumptuous to ask you to spend the evening with me?”

“Presumptuous?” Kendal stopped, turned to Nicole and looked her in the eyes. “No, it’s more of a necessity that you spend the evening with me, Nicole,” she added firmly with a beguiling smile.

“So it’s like that, huh,” Nicole responded with a satisfied grin. While maintaining contact, she reached out and grabbed Kendal’s hand. “That’s a load off my mind. Now I don’t have to pretend to be riding around the neighborhood again,” she joked

“Yeah Nicole, I think that only works once a day for most people. But since you’re so cute I’ll let you get away with it anytime you want,” Kendal promised. She squeezed Nicole’s hand wanting to stand there holding hands with this wonderful woman forever.

“Cute, huh.” Nicole wrinkled her nose at Kendal and couldn’t get the grin off her face. She gave another silent prayer of thanks to the above for putting this woman in her life. As they approached Kendal’s house she looked at her watch and was surprised to see that it was already two- twenty. “Kendal do you know it’s already after two?” she asked with amazement.

“Well we were having fun so I guess time flew,” Kendal joked. “Will you still be able to get to your class on time?”

“No problem. The dojo is fairly close to here off of North Highland Avenue. At least it looked pretty close on the map,” Nicole added.

“If it’s the one I’m thinking of, it is.” Kendal stopped at the mailbox and gathered the mail. “So what time should I expect you back? You know being that it’s a command performance and all.”

“Is six–thirty too early?” an eager Nicole asked.

“Do you really have to ask?” Kendal queried, coming over to stand next to Nicole.

“I didn’t want to presume anything,” Nicole explained. “I guess I need to go,” she said with reluctance. “I’m going to kiss you,” Nicole informed Kendal putting her arms around her and bringing her closer to her body. She slowly put her lips on Kendal, giving the other woman a chance to object.

Objection was the furthest thought from Kendal’s mind. She’d been wanting those lips on hers all morning. Kendal stepped into Nicole’s arms where she had wanted to be all day. The kiss they shared was magical for both of them. It held all the passion from the night before added in with the new discoveries they had made today. “Go while you still can,” Kendal chocked out, her voice husky with need. She stepped back and watched the brunette climb onto the motorcycle. Blowing Nicole a kiss Kendal watched as her new friend drove away. Then walking into the house she shut the door and leaned back against it. “Wow!” she thrilled, touching her lips reverently. “I must be back in the seventies because she just blew my mind.” Her head full of dreams, Kendal drifted to her room to do some cleaning. Once there, a huge yawn she was caught off guard. *The only thing to do in this situation Richards is to take a long nap.*

Kendal was awakened a couple of hours later by a knock on her door. She lifted up on her elbows calling, “Enter.” A couple of yawns escaped her as she tried to throw off that groggy after nap feeling.

Jeff opened the door and peeked into the darkened room. “You okay Ken?” he asked, his voice full of concern.

“More than okay,” Kendal replied and sat up and stretched out her arms. She ran her fingers through her hair to get rid of some of the bed head. “Come on in.”

“And where have you been all day, missy?” Jeff turned the light on dim and made himself comfortable on the bed. “Marco and I came to take your heartbroken ass out to brunch and find you were nowhere to be found. Then we go outside and notice a strange motorcycle in the driveway. What were we to think?” He huffed and gave Kendal the evil eye.

“Okay, okay. So maybe I had more on my mind than telling you and Marco where I was going,” Kendal retorted. “Just maybe the woman of my dreams came roaring up the driveway to take me away from it all,” she added with a big grin.

“I see she brought you back,” Jeff shot back with a snap of his fingers. “What should I be thinking now, girlfriend?” he taunted with a smirk.

“That she had an appointment and is coming back for me later, so there,” Kendal taunted snapping her fingers in Jeff’s face.

“Hey, what are you guys up to?” Marco walked into the room and joined his friends on the bed. “Kendal you sure look brighter than you did yesterday. Who was that on the bike anyway?”

“The woman of her dreams who came to sweep her away,” Jeff replied drolly.

“Does she have a name and do I know her, young lady?” Marco quizzed in a serious manner. “Because I can’t let just any woman charge in here and take a broom to you, Kendal.”

“Too, too funny, Marco,” Kendal deadpanned. “But yeah she has a name and yeah you sort of know her.” She laughed at Marco’s and Jeff’s puzzled looks.

“Okay who is it Kendal,” Jeff demanded. “You have a minute to release the information or else the tickle hands will be released on your hapless body.” He lifted his hands and wiggled his fingers.

“Jeez, you guys are no fun,” Kendal pouted. “Okay,” she added quickly as Jeff’s hand started their decent to her body. “The mystery woman is Nicole. She had a change of heart and came by this morning wanting another chance. Being the gracious person that I am, I thought about it hard and long and then decided to give her another chance. We had such a great time today, guys.” Kendal smiled in remembrance of the morning and the goodbye kiss.

“I’m happy for you, Kendal,” Marco said though the expression on his face did not match his words. “Did she explain about last night? I mean, you are still having a baby.”

“And she knows that,” Kendal pointed out. “Nicole was concerned about getting emotionally involved with the baby and having that taken away from her,” Kendal explained. “Seems this happened with her nephew that she helped to raise. She admitted to having a sort of knee jerk reaction at first but then took the time to think it through. For which I am eternally grateful, mind you.”

“I can understand that,” Marco replied thoughtfully. “But it seems as if like me she figured out that if you don’t take risks, you don’t gain anything.”

“That’s much too much profoundness for a Saturday afternoon,” Jeff declared, standing up. “Let’s go fix cocktails.”

Monday Kendal entered her office whistling and more than ready to jump right into her new project. The first thing to do was to e-mail her boss a copy of the detailed outline and get his approval. She noticed the message light blinking on her phone. Kendal hung up her coat and arranged her belongings before retrieving her messages. She had to laugh as she listened to the message from Sandy demanding to know all about her weekend and fussing at her for not calling before now. Her second message was from the doctor's office confirming her appointment for Wednesday. The last message was from a client thanking her for her timely work.

Next she logged onto her computer and checked her e-mails. As usual over the weekend she had gotten at least twenty messages requesting information or asking for help. She transferred the messages to the correct folders and ranked them by priority. "Well it's going to take me all morning to clear these out," she told her computer. "We might as well get started."

Methodically Kendal started working her way through the problems. As usual some problems were simple and could be answered off the top of her head and some took more research and thought. By eleven-thirty she had cleared up all necessary replies and was totally engrossed in double-checking her detailed project outline.

"Hello, anybody here?"

Kendal's head swung up with a jerk. "Hey you, you could have scared me to death." She let out a breath. "I was so caught up in my work I didn't even hear your little tip tap down the hall. So what's up?" she asked with a knowing grin.

Sandy put her hands on her hip and shook her head. "Lunch time, that's what's up. I've let you alone all weekend and all morning, now it's my turn to hear the facts. Finish up your work and meet me by the stairs

in ten minutes,” she commanded. “I don’t have the patience of Job you know.”

Kendal looked at her watch in surprise. “I can’t believe you let me go this long, Sandy. I’ll see you in ten minutes.” Kendal quickly put a sticky note where she needed to start checking again. Grabbing her wallet and her coat, she went to wash up and hurried to meet Sandy by the stairwell. Nobody ever accused her friend of being patient.

“Okay, start talking,” Sandy demanded as they walked down the stairs. “I mean I need to know everything. If you knew how hard it was for me not to call you Saturday or Sunday or this morning before work, you would have called me first thing when you got my message,” she scolded. “Poor Maureen had to forcibly keep me from calling you both Saturday night and last night I want you to know.”

“How did she do that?” Kendal asked. She couldn’t help grinning at her pumped up friend.

“Lucky for you she tied me to the bed last night,” Sandy sniffed hiding a smile. “And after what happened then, I forgot all about calling you,” Sandy admitted with a sheepish grin, her face flushed.

Kendal wasn’t sure if Sandy was blushing from admitting what she’d done or from remembering what she’d done on the nights before. *Kinky!* “I’m curious Sandy, did any of this involve the use of a whip?”

“Kendal!” Sandy complained. “That wasn’t the point of the story. You’re supposed to be telling me about your new found romance so that I can live through it vicariously.”

“Oh that,” Kendal replied matter of factly. “Well I saw her Friday night and we broke up, then I saw her on Saturday and we got back together and I saw her on Sunday,” she said succinctly and waited for the outburst.

“I’m not even going to let you get me upset today, Richards,” Sandy returned. “We will just walk to Rosa’s, get some pizza and talk. Now start from the beginning and do not leave out any details.”

While they waited in the long line to order their pizza, Kendal told Sandy every nuance of what happened Friday night. She also regaled Sandy with all the utter joy she felt Saturday morning upon seeing Nicole in the driveway. Once they’d placed their orders Kendal talked about the shopping trip and the great time she had just being in Nicole’s presence.

“Wow! That is so romantic.” Sandy sighed as she paid for her food. “I’m going to go grab a table in the back.” At Kendal’s nod she went and claimed one of the few on-level tables.

“This is the best pizza in the world,” Kendal said putting her tray on the table. She leaned over and sniffed the aroma coming off from the pizza. “I’ll have to introduce Nic to Rosa’s and get her opinion. She’s from New York and this is supposed to be the best New York style pizza in the city. I just want to see if she agrees.”

“Nic?” Sandy shot Kendal an inquisitive look.

“She said that’s what her friends call her,” Kendal answered with a self-satisfied grin. “I think it fits her better than Nicole.”

“It does sound sexy,” Sandy agreed with a wink. “Okay, so what about Saturday night?”

“We went to dinner at Hong Kong Harbor.”

“Oh, she must be special. You took her to one of your favorite restaurants.”

“She appreciates Spring Rolls as much as I do, so it must be love,” Kendal said smugly. “Then we went back to Outwrite because Nic said she wanted to wipe away the ending from Friday night. We sat there forever talking and debating about everything, about nothing. I haven’t been that mentally and physically stimulated in a long time. I could have stayed there all night. Unfortunately they had to close, so I took her home, got another mind-blowing kiss and sailed off on cloud nine. I wanted to jump her bones so bad, Sandy,” Kendal confessed fervently. “It made the desire I had for Gloria seem infinitesimal in comparison.”

“So when are you going to marry this woman?” Sandy joked. “We need to get together weekend after next so I can meet her,” she quickly decided. “You guys could come over for dinner Saturday. I’ll invite Patti and Geana too, and then we can look her over together.”

“Look but just don’t touch,” the blonde quipped. “Hadn’t you better discuss this with you wife since *she’s* the one who will be doing all the cooking?” Kendal asked dryly.

“If you insist I’ll call Maureen after lunch and let her know. Kendal you know she loves to have an excuse to cook a big spread. I’ll get brownie points for this,” Sandy returned with a smug luck.

“But I still think she would like to be asked, not told,” Kendal argued.

“Okay,” Sandy agreed with a dramatic sigh. “So now tell me what happened Sunday?” she prompted.

“We had brunch with Jeff and Marco at the Waffle House on Cheshire Bridge.”

“Waffle House?” Sandy sputtered. “You couldn’t think of any place better to take her?” she asked in disbelief.

“Hey there’s nothing wrong with pecan waffles, eggs over easy and hash browns,” Kendal stated. “I have to have it every two months or so or I get withdrawals. Nic might as well get used to this quirk of mine because I see her being around for a long time.”

“You are so peculiar, Richards,” Sandy said with a shake of her head. “Not about the being around, but about Waffle House. I’m not sure those places are even sanitary,” she said with a shudder. “Do I have to prompt you for everything? Now tell me what happened after brunch.”

“Much to my regret we had to drop her off at her apartment because she had a lot of things to organize. I haven’t seen or talked to her since then.” Kendal gave a little sigh. “But I am planning on calling her tonight. If I can’t see her at least I can hear her voice.”

“Do you ever have it bad, girl. I can see Nic’s going to be pulling you around by a nose ring,” Sandy joked, delighted to see her friend so happy.

“A collar maybe,” Kendal conceded. “But I’m not getting my nose pierced for nothin’, okay?” She and Sandy shared a laugh. Kendal glanced at her watch and said: “Time to go back to work.”

Chapter 9

By the following Friday, Kendal was more than ready for the workweek to end. Although she and Nicole had talked on the phone for hours, they hadn't been able to see each other in person. They had both firmly agreed to free their schedules so that they could spend some quality time together on Friday night and Saturday. Now Kendal was counting down the hours until she would see Nicole. For once she was happy to have a heavy workload because it kept the anticipation from making her go crazy.

She was reviewing a new contract when her phone rang. "Hello, Kendal Richards speaking."

"You're going to kill me," Nic said sounding blue. "That is if I don't kill myself first," she added.

"What's wrong, Nic?" Kendal sat up, all sorts of crazy scenarios running through her head.

"I have to go see about my sister and nephew tonight. That means I have to cancel our plans for this weekend," Nicole said glumly and held her breath waiting for the response.

"Don't worry about that, Nic. I hope everything is okay?" Kendal replied trying her hardest to keep the disappointment out of her voice. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Nicole let out the breath she'd been holding. "I'm not quite sure what the problem is, Kendal. My mother called all hysterical, which is very unusual for her, saying that Derrick was in danger. I can't reach my sister or her husband so I'm not sure what this all means. I do know that I've hardly ever heard my mother this upset. I've checked and there's a good chance I can fly standby tonight."

“I’m sorry Nic.” Kendal wasn’t sure what else to say. “I hope it’s not as bad as it sounds. Do you need a ride to the airport or anything?”
Me or my company?

“Thanks, but I don’t want to bother you?” Nicole said politely. *I need a hug and a kiss!*

“It’s no bother, Nic,” Kendal stressed. “Come on please,” she begged, “it’ll give me a chance to see you again. Touch you again. Kiss you again.” Kendal’s voice got progressively lower.

A big sigh came over the line. “Okay,” Nicole said trying to reign in her raging hormones. The tingling started in her stomach and spread downward. She felt the throbbing between her legs and the expansion of her clit as it pressed against her pants. “Pick me up at my place at six o’clock and thanks for the offer.”

“Which offer, the ride or ...?”

“You just be there at six, got it?” Nicole fired back, panting at the image Kendal evoked in her mind.

“Yeah,” Kendal said with a laugh and hung up the phone. *Now all I have to do is keep my sanity until then!* She had to squirm a little bit to relieve some of the pressure between her thighs.

Despite her misgivings, Kendal was actually able to get work done the rest of the afternoon. She left work on time and took the bus home. Once there she shed her work clothes and pulled on some carpenter jeans and a long sleeved shirt with no buttons. Checking herself out in the mirror she unloosened the drawstrings on her pants. Turning sideways she noticed that her stomach was starting to stick out so she untucked her shirt and let it hang to her thighs. *That’s better.* She put

her hands in the top of the jeans noticing how close they fit to her stomach. *I won't be able to get into these jeans much longer.*

Going downstairs, she quickly let Jeff know where she would be and went to the garage. "Now Kendal, remember this is not about you. Your only purpose is to help Nicole in anyway you can and to get her to the airport." With that pep talk, she buckled up and pulled out of the garage. It took her only fifteen minutes to pull into a parking space near Nicole's apartment building. Her watch read fifteen till six, so she decided to sit and wait for ten minutes so she wouldn't be too early.

Kendal was cleaning out of her glove compartment when Nicole rapped on the passenger side window. Kendal jumped, her eyes opening wide until she realized it was Nicole. She turned to the control panel and rolled down the window. "Why fancy seeing you here, Nicole," she joked.

"Yeah, I kind of thought I would be seeing you in my apartment, not on the street," Nicole pointed out, dryly.

"It's not yet six," Kendal explained as she pointed at her watch.

Nicole was forced to chuckle. "My bad, I should have told you to just come over. Please."

"Sure," Kendal responded with a sheepish grin. She rolled up the window and got out of the car. It was impossible for her to keep her eyes off Nicole who was stylishly dressed in a satiny goldenrod blouse and a red knit skirt that fit her figure perfectly. "Nice outfit," was all that accompanied Kendal's heated look.

"Thanks." Nicole reached for Kendal's hand and led her into the building. As they waited for the elevator they did not speak, but stood looking at each other. No sooner than the elevator doors shut were they in each other's arms, lips to lips. Kendal groaned as she opened her mouth to let Nicole's tongue explore. This was what she had been

waiting for since Sunday she realized. This earth shattering feeling that Nicole's arms were where she belonged forever.

The need for air drew their lips apart as they clung to each other fiercely. "Nicole," Kendal whispered, breathing heavily, "I think you have to push the button for us to go up."

"Hey Kendal, I knew that," Nicole huffed back. "I was just waiting to see if you did." She maneuvered Kendal over to the button panel and pushed the button for the ninth floor. Once the elevator started moving, she sought the lips that had been featured in her dreams for over a week. Slipping a leg between Kendal's she pressed her thigh against Kendal's center. Kendal could only groan in response, causing Nicole to pull her closer. They were lost in the wonder of each other.

"Are y'all getting off?" a querulous voice asked.

Kendal and Nicole quickly parted. "We're getting off alright," Nicole muttered and pulled Kendal off the elevator. Then she turned and smiled at the older woman who was now on the elevator.

"You are too bad," Kendal said, trying not to giggle.

"Now Kendal, she asked a question and I answered," Nicole said with an innocent look. "I was being polite."

"Sure baby, I believe you." Kendal gave Nicole a big wink. "Now how much time do we have before we have to go to the airport? I believe we were interrupted." She ran her hand up a panty hose clad leg.

"We have an hour," Nicole noted with a gasp. She hustled Kendal down the hall to her apartment. Unlocking the door, she stepped aside and gestured for Kendal to enter. Quickly following, she shut the door leaned against it and pulled the other women back towards her. "I think I remember what we were doing." Lowering her head she dropped gentle

kisses on the back of Kendal's neck and shoulders while her hands pulled aside Kendal's coat to cup her breasts.

"Oh, Nic," Kendal groaned, feeling the wetness spread between her thighs. She stretched her neck to give Nicole full access to her sensitive side. Shivering with delight, she was almost ready to cry with want. Her engorged clit was throbbing and calling for attention as her lover found her ultra sensitive nipples.

Before Kendal could move, Nicole turned her around and backed her against the door. Once again she pushed her leg between Kendal's and brought her thigh up against Kendal's moist center. Her mouth met Kendal's and their tongues dueled with each other. She used her hands to nip, tug and twist Kendal's nipples. The gratuitous responses from Kendal whipped Nicole into a higher state of arousal. She let go of that sweet mouth and targeted a sensitive neck.

Swiftly she undid Kendal's jeans, sliding them along with her panties down her thighs. Nicole's fingers parted the moist folds, welcoming the sweet dew that coated them. Knowing her lover was ready, she inserted three fingers into Kendal picking up the rhythm from her thigh. Her thumb found the center of Kendal's pleasure and began to stroke it. Kendal was beside herself with the pleasure that was rippling through her body. Such pleasure had been gone from her life for too long. Before she could stop, she moaned loudly as everything burst into stars and she reached her height. "Oh, Nic. Oh, Nic, Oh, Nic," was all she could mumble over and over again as she leaned back against the door waiting for her heartbeat to slow down and her legs to stop shaking.

Nicole kept the rhythm going until the clenching against her fingers stopped. Her mouth once again found Kendal's in a kiss that kept the passion going. "You are so hot, Ken," Nicole whispered in her lover's ear. "An hour is not enough, I need you all night," she added.

“Nic, that was too good,” Kendal said when she could talk. “We don’t have all night, but we do have time to take care of you.” She pushed Nic back and started undoing the buttons on her shirt. A tremble went through Nicole as she envisioned Kendal’s hands and mouth on her heated skin. Kendal relieved Nicole of her shirt and let it drop on the floor. She quickly pulled off the cotton undershirt that had been beneath the shirt. Stopping for a moment, she let her eyes feast on the beautiful sight of Nicole’s breasts. They looked bigger naked than they had under clothes. Kendal’s hand reached out tentatively and touched one of the brown nipples that was already puckered. Nic sucked in her breath as she felt the fire in her belly grow larger and slide down to the junction of her thighs.

Feeding on the desire, Kendal bent forward and first sucked and teased one nipple and then the other. She thought she would never get enough of the feel, the texture of Nicole’s nipples. Kendal kissed her way up to Nicole’s mouth and tried to consume it. One hand pulled up the red skirt in front and slipped into Nicole’s panties. Kendal moaned as she felt her partner’s moisture.

“Oh, you’re so wet baby,” she moaned against Nicole’s lips. Rubbing her palm over Nicole’s vagina Kendal was pleased to note the shivers that ran through Nicole. She started pressing harder and harder with her fingers on Nicole’s mound, still not directly touching her clit. Nicole started moving her hips to force Kendal to touch her. “What is it that you want, baby,” Kendal whispered in Nicole’s ear and licked it.

“Touch me. I want you inside,” Nicole begged, shivering with desire. “Give it to me please!”

“It makes me hot when you beg.” Kendal pulled down Nicole’s panties and spread her legs wider. She knelt down in front of her lover and pulled up her skirt. Breathing in the musky scent of Nicole’s arousal, she slowly slid her tongue up between the folds. Up and down she went with Nicole screaming her name. Without warning she thrust three

fingers in Nicole and concentrated her mouth on the quivering nub. Nicole grabbed Kendal's head and held it in place, rocking her hips back and forth against Kendal's mouth before blasting into an orgasm. Kendal withdrew her fingers and gave the nub a couple of gentle kisses. Nicole gave a sigh and slid down the wall to where Kendal was still kneeling.

"How am I supposed to think rationally after that, Ken," she gasped. "All I can think about is you and I all tangled up in each other, all night long."

"It'll give you something to come back for," Kendal suggested. She leaned over and gave Nicole a kiss, instantly re-igniting their passion. Knowing that they wouldn't be seeing each other for a while, Kendal truly wanted to give Nicole something to remember her by. The insistent ringing of the phone filtered into their consciousness, finally drawing them apart.

"This had better be important," Nicole growled as she got up to find her cell phone. "Hello," she barked.

"Niky?" a hesitant voice asked. "Is that you?"

"Tenesha, where are you and what's going on?" Nicole asked instantly alert. "Mom told me that Derrick is in danger."

"Oh, Niky," Tenisha said and started to cry. "I don't know what to do! Jamal has gone crazy!"

"Calm down, sis," Nicole said with gentleness. "I'll be there by eleven at the latest and I'll take care of everything," she promised.

"I just don't know what happened," Tenesha sobbed. "He started beating me and Derrick tried to stop him so he started beating Derrick. He was accusing me of cheating on him with some of his friends whom I

don't even hang out with!" she wailed with indignation. "I really thought I knew this guy, Nicky." Her voice was full of confusion and hurt.

"Hey, it's your big sis you're talking to Esha. I will take care of this," Nicole said with all the confidence in the world. "He will not hit you again. Where is he now?"

"I don't know." Tenisha sniffed and blew her nose. "He ran out of the house when I called 911. While the police were at the house, I packed up some of our clothes and left before he could come back. Derrick and I are on the bus on our way to Atlanta. I hope it's okay for us to come there?" she asked, her voice full of misery.

"Of course, Tenisha," Nicole quickly assured her. "I'm just so sorry I wasn't there for you, sweetie," Nicole said. She tried to put all the affection she felt for her sister into her voice. "How long before you get to Atlanta?"

"We're supposed to get there tomorrow morning at seven", Tenisha replied sniffing.

"I'll be at the bus station to pick you up," was Nicole's prompt reply. "How is Derrick holding up?"

"Pretty well. He's just as confused as I am about Jamal, but he's pretty psyched about seeing his beloved aunt again. I finally got him settled down enough to go to sleep. It's been a pretty tiring day, Nicky," she added in a little girl voice.

"Maybe you should do like your son and get some rest, Esha. I'll call Malcolm so he can go see mom and let her know what's going on," she promised. "Please try not to worry about anything. I promise to take care of everything. Remember, I love you."

“I could never forget that, Nicky. I love you too.” After a brief pause Tenisha asked quietly, “Are you sure we have to involve, Malcolm?”

“I’ll talk to him and make sure he knows not to hassle you about this,” Nicole said. “I just want to make sure that mom is okay with all this because she seemed pretty upset when she called me. You know he’s the right one for that job.”

Tenisha gave a sigh. “I guess you’re right as usual, Nic. Bye.”

“Bye.” Nicole clicked off the phone and sat down on the sofa finally letting the tears fall from her eyes. Kendal unsure of what to do sat down next to Nicole and put her hand on Nicole’s back as a show of support. Sensing no rebuff, Kendal started rubbing little circles on her friend’s back.

“I can’t believe it,” Nicole finally said her voice quivering. She raised her hands to wipe her eyes. “My brother in law, Jamal, has flipped out. He started beating Tenisha and accusing her of sleeping around. When Derrick tried to help out he started beating him too. He always seemed so nice and gentle, why didn’t I see this coming?” she wondered out loud as she clinched her hands into fists.

“How could you know, Nic?” Kendal asked gently, continuing to stroke Nicole’s back. “Did your sister ever mention any problems?”

“Well no, but maybe I wasn’t paying enough attention,” Nicole admitted rubbing her temples. “I’ve been so busy trying to distance myself from Derrick and changing my life that maybe I didn’t hear what was being said.”

“This situation is not your fault, Nicole,” Kendal was quick to say. “Most people usually build up to craziness. Even if you were distracted some of the time, repeatedly hearing about incidents would have eventually gotten your attention. In a lot of cases women get so worn

down and scared that they don't tell. Just maybe you didn't hear because nothing was told to you," she finished solemnly.

"I don't know, Ken. Tenisha has always told me everything. She knows that no matter the problem, I'll be there for her."

"And that's why she's coming to Atlanta and not New York," Kendal stressed. "She obviously knows you can be counted on. Why don't you wait until Tenisha gets here to second guess yourself, Nic."

"You're probably right, Kendal," Nicole said ruefully with a humorless humph. "But I've been a big sister to her for so long that I just can't get away from that role of always feeling responsible." She sat up and reached for a tissue. "I'm sorry you were brought back to earth so quickly, Kendal."

"Don't even think about that, sweetie." Kendal reached out and put a hand on her lover's leg. "As much as I've enjoyed this time with you, I should be getting home," she said with reluctance. "I know you have a lot to think about." Kendal stood up and pulled Nicole up to her. They held each other, taking strength from one another. Kendal reached up to give Nicole a gentle kiss that was totally unlike the other kisses they'd shared today. This one was simply meant to comfort and console.

"I'll let you go this time, Ken," Nicole whispered in her lover's ear, "but next time it will be much different," she promised.

"Don't think I won't hold you to that, Fisher." Kendal pulled back from the embrace while she still could. *I don't want to leave her.*

"I'm counting on it, Richards." *I don't want to let her go.*

"Ken is that you?" Jeff called out from the family room as he heard the door to the garage open. He looked at his watch to check the time.

“No, it’s a burglar. Carry on with your regular activity while I rob the place.” She walked into the family room and plopped down in the recliner. “Hey guys, what’s up? Why are you home on a Friday night?” she wondered, her eyes searching the two of them for any sign of trouble.

“If you hadn’t been so busy *mooning* over not being able to see a *certain* person, maybe you would realize that Marco and I have been out almost every day this week,” Jeff replied smartly. “We decided to spend some time at home tonight and rest. So is everything still okay with you and Nicole?” he prodded her gently.

“As well as can be expected given the times we live in,” was the cryptic reply.

“Do you need to talk about it, Ken?” Jeff asked, almost whispering.

“I don’t know, Jeff.” Kendal sat up and rested her elbows on her knees. She put her head in her hands and sat in silence for a few moments. “It seems like Nic and I have these obstacles in our way that are trying to keep us apart. I’m kind of wondering if that’s not a sign that we really aren’t meant to be together,” she added feeling glum.

“Obstacles?” Marco asked, his eyebrows rising. “Everyone has obstacles, Kendal. That’s what relationships are all about,” Marco explained. “It’s called life.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Kendal snapped back. “It just seems we can’t get a break. First there was the baby issue and now there’s another issue. How can we ever jell as a couple with this outside interference?” she wanted to know.

“Two issues and you’re ready to call it quits? Has Nicole indicated that she doesn’t think things will work out?” Jeff asked.

“No, no, not at all. I’m probably just being pessimistic here,” Kendal admitted with a sigh. “But when will there be a time when everything is going smoothly?” she demanded to know. “When will we have that honeymoon period?”

“After you’re married,” was Marco’s smart reply. “I’m sorry. I forget that you’re new to this relationship scene, Kendal. I don’t think that there are any relationships that don’t have issues. It’s all part of living in the twenty first century.”

“But you guys have always had it together,” Kendal complained. “I don’t ever remembering you having fights or issues.”

“That’s because I live with a soon to be lawyer,” Jeff quipped. “You can’t win an argument with them.”

“And the walls in this house are really thick,” Marco added.

“I’m serious, guys,” Kendal protested. “What big obstacles have you two overcome?”

“Oh, you mean like my not wanting to move in because I felt like I would be a kept man?” Marco shot back.

“And the whole big issue of money?” Jeff asked. “I make a lot more than he does and believe me Kendal, we struggled over these issues.”

“Okay, okay,” Kendal conceded. “I guess I have a lot to learn about relationships, huh?”

“Yeah, but you’ll get plenty of experience dealing with it,” Marco told her. “Let’s face it, if you’re not willing to work on the relationship, how good can it be?”

“Hey,” Kendal protested. “I’m pregnant, you can’t expect me to be rational all the time,” she joked feeling better. Her new relationship was worth working on and the issue of Tenisha was only a drop in the bucket. “Thanks guys. Anything interesting on the tube?”

“You know, we need to have lunch every Monday, Kendal,” Sandy said as she slid in the booth across from Kendal. “Every weekend it’s something different with you. It certainly helps me get up Monday morning and come to work.”

“Like a soap opera, huh?” Kendal replied with a laugh. She picked up the packet with the dressing and spread it all over her salad. “As Jeff and Marco tell me, it’s all part of a relationship.”

“You know according to the law of averages the drama should eventually die down a bit.”

“I hope so,” Kendal said fervently. “But really this whole thing with Tenisha hasn’t been as stressful as I thought it would be. I’m just so impressed with Nic’s ability to take care of this situation. By the time she met Tenisha and Derrick at the bus station she had a list of everything that needed to be done. That woman is truly amazing.”

“That’s why you’re with her, Kendal. So how much did you get to see her this weekend? Did you spend any *quality* time together?” Sandy asked.

“We went out to dinner Saturday night. Then went to my place to talk things out and then she went home early the next morning,” Kendal admitted unable to keep a big grin of her face.

Sandy's mouth fell open as she realized the significance of the last statement. She leaned over the table and whispered in amazement, "You guys did the do?" she asked with a leer.

Kendal gave an enthusiastic nod. "Friday night, most of Saturday night and into Sunday morning," she boasted with a wink. "It was all that and a bag of chips."

"Friday night? Wait, I thought her sister called Friday night?"

"She did," Kendal explained, "but remember the original plan was for me to take Nic to the airport. It just so happens, she had me come to her apartment a couple of hours before she had to be at the airport. We sort of attacked each other in the elevator and it lead to other activities."

"Absence makes the libido grow fonder," Sandy quoted wiggling her eyebrows. "The elevator, huh? Those five days apart certainly stoked the fire. Do you think you guys will be able keep your hands off each other long enough to show up Saturday night?" she joked. "Oh, I asked the wife and she's all for having a dinner party, just like I told you so." Sandy resisted the urge to stick out her tongue.

"Yeah, but I bet she appreciated being asked," Kendal shot back. "And Nic says she'll be back Saturday afternoon, so that should give us enough time to take care of business," she joked. "She took off for Chicago late last night and I'm already missing her," Kendal admitted with a sigh. "Anyway enough about me, what should we bring for the dinner party?"

"Just bring yourself and Nicole, of course."

"Can do," Kendal agreed. "I know this week will last forever," she sighed. "Another week where all I can do is talk to her. Don't get me wrong, Sandy. I like to talk to her, but I also would like to have my arms wrapped around her as we converse."

“Don’t we all. Cheer up and just think about last weekend and how good next weekend is going to be,” Sandy added with a broad wink.

Kendal was entering her room from a ‘raid-the-fridge’ mission when her phone rang. She automatically checked her watch for the time. “She’s early,” she noted and reached for the phone. “Hello.”

“I know I’m a little early but I couldn’t wait to hear your voice,” Nicole responded. “I miss you so much, babe.”

“Not nearly as much as I miss you,” Kendal said with a dreamy smile because of her lover’s words. She put her snack on the nightstand, arranged the pillows and made herself comfortable. “You sound a little down today Nic, has it been a bad day?”

“Not really,” Nicole hedged. “It really hit me what a mixed up world we live in when I met Jamal’s parents today. Talk about denial, Ken. Promise me that you will always make sure I keep in touch with reality, especially where Junior is concerned,” she begged.

“They were that bad?”

“Worse,” was the glum reply. “You should have heard his mother going on and on about how this was simply a case of misunderstanding between her precious boy and my money hungry sister.”

“Money hungry?” Kendal’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Oh yes,” Nicole said, her voice filled with sarcasm. “It seems this is all a ploy concocted by Tenisha to get her hands on the family’s wealth.”

“That is simply too weird, Nic. So Tenisha beat herself up and wrecked the house to get money?”

“That’s the case they are trying to make. I don’t know how they’re going to explain the four calls to 911 that did not come from Tenisha’s phone, or the fact that a neighbor saw Jamal leaving the apartment right after the “supposed” incident. I was so mad if it had been a cartoon smoke would have been pouring out of my ears.”

“Why would they take that position? Did they not know about the evidence?” Kendal questioned.

“They do now,” Nicole replied all smug. “Be sure to thank Marco for me, babe. The lawyer he recommended, who just so happens to be family, is on the ball. By the time she finished presenting the evidence to the nonbelievers they quietly agreed not only to a no contest divorce, but to give Tenisha a fat check to cover any damages sustained. Plus they agreed to ship whatever Tenisha wants from the apartment to Atlanta.”

“Great!” Kendal cheered. “It won’t make up for the suffering, but it does give her and Derrick something to help tide them over.”

“And it lets me get back to you and that luscious body of yours,” Nicole said, deliberately dropping her voice an octave. “It’s probably criminal the things I’ve dreamt about doing to you,” she admitted.

“How can it be criminal? I’ll be a consenting adult to any scenarios you can dream up, babe,” Kendal replied, her voice suddenly husky as need hit her between her legs.

Nicole drew in a loud breath. “I sure hope your schedule is clear from three until the time we need to get to Sandy’s house.”

Kendal

“Don’t even think of going anywhere by straight to my room after I pick you up from the airport,” Kendal purred.

Chapter 10

“I still can’t believe that you handled everything so quickly,” Kendal told Nicole as they were driving to Sandy’s and Maureen’s house. “You need to be running our country, Nic.”

“I’m not rich enough to do that. Besides whose going to vote for a black lesbian?” she scoffed.

“I would in a heart beat,” Kendal said loyally. “And I have plenty of lesbian friends who would vote for you, some of whom will be at dinner tonight. Add that to all the gay guys Jeff and Marco could round up and you could be in some office. This country is ready for a change.”

“Right Richards, and that’s why G. W. Bush got elected?” Nicole rolled her eyes. “Anyway, I’m way too young and much too involved with a beautiful woman to take time out for politicking. Knowing you were here and I was there was plenty motivation to get things settled quickly.” She rubbed Kendal’s thigh.

“A beautiful woman, huh?” Kendal’s smile widened. “Tell me about her.”

“She’s about my height, a redhead, beautiful green/brown eyes, and a body to die for. On top of that she’s dynamite in bed and good at helping me fill in crossword puzzles.”

“Wow, she sounds like a good catch,” Kendal raved. “You’d better keep her,” she urged pulling up in front of their destination.

“Oh, I plan to,” was Nicole’s quick response. As Kendal took the keys out of the ignition, Nicole reached over and tenderly turned Kendal’s face towards her. Looking Kendal in the eye, she repeated, “I plan to”, before giving her a kiss.

“I’m planning on it too,” Kendal said huskily after the kiss. “Now lets get in the house before we get carried away again,” she said pointedly, remembering how long they had lingered in bed this morning. Nicole had surprised her by coming in on an earlier flight.

The house was located in the neighborhood of East Atlanta on the southern side of the city. East Atlanta was one of the many intown neighborhoods being discovered by young professionals and families as still having affordable housing. Like Little Five Points, it had a distinctive shopping area. Unlike Little Five Points East Atlanta’s shopping district was a blend of hip establishments and traditional black commercial mainstays. The house they were going to sat up on a hill, surrounded by trees. A screened front porch went along the entire front side. The other two couples were already sitting on the porch.

“Kendal, look at you you’re finally starting to show, I think,” a gorgeous blond announced, standing up and waving at them from the porch. She walked over to the screen door, gathering up Kendal in a hug.

“Well it’s about time, don’t you think,” Kendal replied smiling proudly. “I was thinking for a while that Junior was going to come out no bigger than a handful,” she joked as she returned Maureen’s hug. “Everybody, I have someone very special that I want to introduce you to. This is Nicole Fisher a new friend of mine.” She turned and pulled Nicole forward. “This beautiful blond hanging on to me is Maureen, she and Sandy live here. Sandy, raise your hand,” Kendal instructed. “Next to Sandy are Patti and Geana. They live down the street with their two kids and a cat. Now everybody say hi to Nicole,” Kendal directed. Everybody promptly called out “Hi, Nicole.”

“What can I get you two to drink?” Maureen asked, directing them to sit down.

“Just water for me, with lemon if you have it,” Kendal replied, as she all but disappeared into the soft cushions of a worn chair.

“I’ll have a beer,” Nicole decided, noticing that everyone else was enjoying Rolling Rocks.

“I’m so glad you guys could come,” Sandy said. “Don’t worry about trying to memorize our names and faces, Nicole. Most of us will answer to anything,” she added with a smile. *Wow! Kendal was right, this woman is gorgeous.*

“Hey Kendal,” Geana began, “now that you’re showing can we start planning the shower? These things take time to put together, even for someone of my great skills.” Geana was one of the second lesbians Kendal met when she moved back to Atlanta. They literally bumped into each other at Charis and hit it right off right away. It wasn’t until weeks later that they realized that they had Sandy in common.

Geana was a tiny dynamo, wiry as she liked to call herself. While she only came up to Kendal’s chest, she was a whirlwind of energy. Her short brown hair was always combed back and she was wearing her usual overalls. Bright blue eyes were twinkling, signifying that she was ready for fun.

“I haven’t even left the room for five good minutes Geana, and you’re already bragging,” Maureen said, shaking her head. She handed Kendal and Nicole their drinks and plopped down on Sandy’s lap. “Dinner will be ready in about five minutes, ladies,” she announced.

“Do you need any help setting things up?” Kendal asked knowing the response would be no.

“Maureen, the Martha Stewart of our group, need help?” Patti said dramatically. “No way.” She shook her hands to emphasize her point. Patti, in contrast to Geana, was tall, medium build with plenty of long,

wavy dark hair. Fashion wise she was stuck in the 60s with bell-bottom jeans, a tie-dye shirt and sandals, definitely the earth mother type.

“Look whose talking. Ignore her please until you’ve been to her house,” Maureen told Nicole. “How long have you been in our fair city, Nicole?”

“I can’t believe it’s only been about five weeks,” Nicole responded. “It’s been great so far,” she added with a squeeze of Kendal’s arm. “I’m really enjoying being able to sit outside in February and not freeze.”

“Here, here,” Sandy said heartfelt. “I propose a toast to our lovely weather and new friendships.” They all clicked their drinks as a buzzer sounded.

“Dinner’s ready,” Maureen announced, jumping from Sandy’s lap. “Ladies, please join me in the dinning room,” she said formally and waved her hand in that direction.

“Maureen!” Kendal exclaimed as she entered the well-appointed room. “You’ve outdone yourself this time.” The oval table, topped with an ivory tablecloth, was set with a flower motif. Flowered cloth napkins with napkin rings, flowered plates and glasses made the setting complete. “Is this real china?”

“Nothing but the best for my friends,” Maureen insisted. “My grandmother gave me this set last month. She figured I was never going to get married in the traditional sense, so she gave them to me anyway.”

“Hey, you’re not even thirty,” Geana said pulling out a chair for Patti. “I bet in less than ten more years you and Sandy will be able to legally get married,” she predicted.

“No way, Rabble Rouser,” Maureen said with a shake of her head. “Sandy, come give me a hand with the food please.”

“I think it could happen,” Nicole spoke up. “It will be interesting to see how many gay couples will want to get married once it’s legal. It’s that ‘be careful what you wish for’ deal. Maybe some will decide that marriage is just too establishment.”

“No, the real thing is to see what the divorce rate will be,” Kendal interjected. “Then we’ll really get blamed for skyrocketing the divorce rate,” she added with a scowl.

‘Here’s the food, so only pleasant conversation,” Sandy admonished, placing two platters on the table.

“Ooh, my favorites,” Kendal beamed as Maureen placed a platter of salad on the table. “Seafood Pasta, salad and garlic bread,” Kendal beamed. “I’m glad I wore maternity clothes today,” she declared pulling on her top. “Plenty of room to expand.”

“For somebody whose real skinny, you sure can eat a lot,” Patti complained. “If I ate as much as you did, I’d be two sizes bigger.”

“I’m sure one day my metabolism will slow down,” Kendal conceded. “But until it does, I’ll keep eating.” She reached for a platter of pasta and filled her plate.

“Well speaking of eating, when should I have your shower Kendal?” Geana pressed.

“Geeez Geana, I have four months left to go,” Kendal replied, used to her friend’s strange linkages in conversations. She turned her head to smile as she caught the confused look on Nicole’s face. “Why don’t you wait until May, I hear it’s bad luck to have it too early.”

“May’s a good time,” Geana agreed with a nod. “That will give me plenty of time to plan.” She rubbed her hands together gleefully a positively wicked look crossed her features.

“I don’t even want to know.” Kendal rolled her eyes as she shook a finger at her friend.

“Don’t you trust Geana, Kendal?” Patti inquired with a laugh.

“Trust her to embarrass me you mean?” Kendal replied with a question of her own. “Yes I do,” she answered herself.

“I’m deeply hurt,” Geana said with a pitiful look. “Nicole, please don’t listen to anything Kendal tells you about what I may or may not have done in the past.”

“I’ll keep an open mind,” Nicole promised with a smile. “Maureen, this food is excellent. Is cooking a hobby of yours?”

“Thanks, Nicole. Yes, I love to cook, especially for a group.”

“Good thing, since Sandy’s always inviting people over,” Kendal smirked.

“Hey, she doesn’t mind,” Sandy protested. “Do you, babe?”

“Of course not,” Maureen agreed. She smiled as Sandy gave Kendal an ‘I told you so’ look.

Conversation slowed down as everyone gave strict attention to the delicious meal Maureen had prepared. The platters of food mostly depleted, the friends sat back with groans and full stomachs. Maureen directed everyone to the front porch while she went to make coffee. She decided that clean up could come later.

“Nicole, Kendal tells me you’re a computer geek like she and Jeff,” Sandy said as they settled into seats on the porch.

“Guilty,” Nicole admitted with a smile. She put her arm around Kendal and pulled her closer.

“It’ll help keep us close,” Kendal pointed out giving Nicole a quick kiss. “I know I can always talk about work stuff with her. Plus, Nic has very good suggestions,” she added with a wicked smile, making it clear that she wasn’t only talking about work anymore. That drew snickers from everyone.

“Tell me, how are the two prospective fathers doing, Kendal?” Patti asked as she accepted a cup of coffee from Maureen. “Last I saw Jeff he was all hyped about Junior.”

“He and Marco are still really hyped,” Kendal replied with a laugh. “It’s great though, I don’t have to do anything around the house anymore when they’re home. I just have to pretend I’m going to do something and they’re all over me. I can already tell I’m going to have to fight to get much contact with Junior beyond breast-feeding. But I tell you, those two have really been there for me.” She gladly reached for a cup of hot chocolate.

“Kendal, it’s the least Jeff could do for seducing you in a weak moment,” Sandy joked. Of course she and everybody else knew the circumstances of Junior’s conception. She reached up and assisted Maureen into her lap.

“Now Sandy,” Kendal scolded, “you know it was an immaculate conception.” She gave a fake pout. “The goddess came to me and told me of my future. Jeff and I are starting a new race of super homosexual kids, kind of like the X-men.”

“And Junior is only the start,” Nicole added smugly, patting Kendal’s stomach. “Why do you think they have that huge house?”

“Ah, breeding grounds,” Peggy said trying to keep a straight face. “Kendal you might want to tell the Goddess that she probably needs to speed up the human reproduction cycle. At one kid a year it will take you thirty years to have a good base,” she added thoughtfully.

“Tell her to come to us,” Maureen spoke up. “Sandy and I are willing to do our share to help spread homosexuality,” she added with a laugh.

“Kendal be sure and tell her that we don’t need to be in the procurement process,” Geana added quickly before her partner got any ideas. “But if she wants to convert our two, tell her go ahead.”

“One more wouldn’t kill us, Gee,” Patti joked.

“Speak for yourself,” Geana replied with a fake scowl. “I’m not changing another diaper in this lifetime,” she declared with a humph. “And speaking of babies, I have one more question about your shower Kendal. Do you want mixed company or just us wymn?”

“Mixed is good and then it can all be done at one time,” Kendal replied right away. “Either way it’s bound to be a fun time.”

“Geana, let me know if you want any help,” Sandy volunteered. “I’ll be more than happy to help you embarrass Kendal,” she added causing the group to laugh.

“Okay, who’s ready for dessert?” Maureen asked as she slid off Sandy’s lap. Five hands were raised.

“So, did you have a good time?” Kendal asked as they were driving back home.

“No Kendal, I had a great time,” Nicole responded with a smile. “Your friends are real nice and funny. It felt so good to be able to socialize openly as a couple and not be at a gay bar. I haven’t really experienced that since college.”

“It’s the first time I’ve ever experienced it and I think I’m addicted,” Kendal admitted as she returned Nicole’s smile. “I have to say I felt pretty good being able to sit right next to you and touch you whenever I wanted to. I wish it could be like that all the time.”

“Maybe it’s up to us to see that it is always like that,” Nicole suggested quietly. “I know we’ve only known each other a few weeks, but something in you calls to something very deep in me, Kendal. I’ve never really tried to be secretive about being a lesbian so I know I can’t be that way with you. People only have to see me with you to know what’s going on, I’d like to keep it that way.”

“My face lights up like Vegas whenever I just think of you, Nic.” Kendal pulled up to the stoplight and looked into Nicole’s soft brown eyes. “I love you and I want everybody to know that you’re with me, no matter where we are.” She leaned over and gave Nicole a quick kiss. “More later,” she promised with a wink.

The next morning found Kendal and Nicole sitting in the kitchen finishing up their breakfast. “So love, what’s on tap for today?” Kendal asked as she peered over the paper.

“I need to sit down with Tenisha and talk about making some decisions about the future,” Nicole said with a deep sigh. “My place is really too small for the three of us. If she’s serious about staying here in Atlanta she needs to get her own place or we need to get something bigger. Then there’s the whole issue of a job and school. Derrick has already missed a week of school. I don’t want him to get too far behind.”

“That’s a tough assignment, Nic,” Kendal paused a moment before adding tentatively. “I hope she has some idea that this is coming?”

“Oh yeah.” Nicole replied. “We talked about it before I left town. I know she’s still in shock that her life has taken such a drastic turn, but she realizes that life goes on. That’s especially true since she has Derrick to fend for.”

“Well I know it helps to have a sister like you to lean on.” Kendal reached over and put her hand on Nicole’s arm. “Why don’t I take Derrick some place fun while you have your conversation,” she offered. “He and I hit it off last Sunday so I don’t think he’ll mind going with me.”

“That would be a big help, Kendal,” Nicole replied gratefully. She gave Kendal’s hand a squeeze. “I was just wondering what to do with him. You’re sure it’s no bother?”

“For you, nothing is a bother,” was the serious response. “Besides, I need to get used to being around kids again.” Kendal patted her stomach. “This one will be here before we know it.”

“Are we expecting company today?” Jeff entered the kitchen, covering a yawn. He headed to the cabinet picked up a coffee cup and filled it up.

“I was referring to Junior, Jeff,” Kendal said with a laugh. “June’s not that far away now.”

“Don’t I know it. Mom called and said she and dad want to come down at the end of June. If that’s okay with you,” he clarified, taking a seat at the table.

“Not a problem,” Kendal assured him. “I’ll take all the assistance I can get. Besides, if anyone should get to enjoy the house it’s them.”

“I’m curious,” Nicole said cautiously. “They do realize your unique situation, don’t they?”

“Thanks to Ms. Blabbermouth,” Jeff grimaced. “I figured we would just tell my parents that we were a couple and they’d be none the wiser. Your friend,” he said with a pointed look at Kendal, “after agreeing with me, badgered me until I was forced to tell.”

“Of course he told them this right as they were dropping him off at the airport,” Kendal clarified.

“I am no fool,” Jeff declared snapping his fingers. “I’m forced to admit telling the truth did actually make things easier,” Jeff acknowledged reluctantly. “I’ve had a much better relationship with them since then. The weekend they came down to look at this house, my dad and I even had a civilized conversation.”

“Yeah, and his dad even shook my hand,” Marco interjected, walking into the room. “His parents are really charming people, not at all what I expected.”

“Me either,” Jeff said and laughed. “I keep telling you guys that something happened to that man that totally changed his outlook on gays. I don’t know what it was, but I’m happy for it.”

“It’s always good to hear a happy ending,” Nicole said gathering up her dirty dishes. “Now I need to go and try to make a happy ending for my sister.” She stood up and pushed her chair up to the table.

“How is that situation going?” Jeff asked.

“I’m sure you know by now that with Marco’s great recommendation I got most of that mess cleared up the last week.” She put a hand on Marco’s arm and gave him a smile. “Now I need to help

Tenisha get back trust in her judgment. It's the hardest part of all and today is just a start. Thanks for asking, Jeff."

"Honey, you may not live here but you are family."

"In more way than one," Marco added with a smile.

Nicole took her leave and Kendal went to call Patty to get some ideas of fun places to hang out with kids. Not only did she get a place, somehow Kendal ended up agreeing to take Patty's two kids as well. After making arrangements to pick up Derrick and Patty's kids, Kendal went to change clothes.

Ben, Patty's oldest, was around Derrick's age and the two of them took to each other right away. By the time they reached Kid's Zone, the two were firm friends. Hannah, Patty's daughter, was a few years younger but determined to keep up with the big boys. Kendal, the supposed adult of the group, was just as enraptured with the Zone as the kids. She and Hannah teamed up to beat the boys on a couple of games and used that to crow the rest of the day.

Four tired warriors made their way back to Patti's house. Derrick and Ben parted only after the adults promised that they could get together again. A yawning Kendal led Derrick back to her car.

"Let's get you home before your mother and aunt think I've lost you," Kendal remarked. "So Ben's a pretty cool guy, huh?"

"Yeah," Derrick replied with a big grin. "I had the best time! Thanks for taking me."

"I had the best time too, Derrick. And the food wasn't bad either, huh?" She rubbed her stomach.

“Yeah, it was good Kendal. Next time you’ll have to go for the foot long chili dogs,” Derrick said with a hum of satisfaction. “Maybe next time Aunt Nic will have time to go with us. She would like that place.”

“I’m sure she’d love to take you, Derrick.” Kendal turned right onto Nicole’s street and started looking for a parking space. Back-up lights ahead alerted her to a possible space. Deftly pulling into the now vacant spot, Kendal turned off the ignition and unlocked the doors. She walked around the car and took Derrick’s hand. Regaling each other with feats from the day, they took the elevator to Nicole’s apartment.

Their combined rhythmic knocks were answered by a smiling Tenisha. Her face, which had been a little swollen last week, was almost back to normal and she looked much less stressed. With her light brown skin tone, some brown bruising still showed up. Tenesha was almost as tall as Nicole, but her shape was more voluptuous. With a big smile she stepped back and let them enter. “You two decided to come back to us, huh?”

“It was pretty hard, mom,” Derrick joked, stepping up to give his mother a fierce hug. “I had the bestest time. We went with Ben and Hannah to the Kid’s Zone. They have every game there. Ben is so cool. He’s got two moms and a play station 2. He wants me to come over sometime and play with him. I said I’d have to ask you, so can I go over there mom?”

“We’ll see Derrick,” his mom said laughing at his enthusiasm. “So Kendal, how much sugar did you feed him?”

“Sugar? Oh they have that fake sugar, Tenisha,” Kendal fibbed with a big smile. “It doesn’t get kids all hyper and wound up. Derrick’s just happy he made a new friend. Right Derrick?”

“Yeah, right mom,” Derrick said, eagerly nodding his head yes.

“She takes you for a day and already you’re siding with her,” Nicole remarked, dryly. “Where’s your loyalty, Derrick?” she joked.

“Uh, I don’t know,” he answered with a shrug and ran to give his aunt a hug. “Next time you have to come too, Aunt Nic,” he declared. “It was the bomb.”

“Then I’ll definitely have to come,” Nic answered, returning the hug. “Kendal can you stay for awhile or do you have to go?”

“I’ve done my civic duty for the day, Nic.” She took off her coat and headed for the leather sofa. “Derrick is right. We did have the bestest time and the bestest food.” Gingerly she let herself down into the sofa, letting the soft leather sooth her tired body. “I’m amazed at the amount of energy it takes to keep up with three children.”

“Can I get you something to drink, Ken?”

“Ice water would be wonderful. They had all kinds of sweet drinks but no ice cold water.” Kendal gave a sigh and put her feet on the coffee table. “I don’t know how mothers with more than two kids do it,” she told Tenisha.

“Me either, my one keeps me busy enough,” was the reply. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go take a nap. I’m all talked out for now.”

“Sure,” Kendal smiled. “If you hear me snoring, just throw a blanket on me.”

“I’ll take care of you,” Nicole promised. She held out a tall glass of ice-cold water to Kendal. “And I told Derrick he could watch TV in my room,” she informed her sister.

“Good, now I can really nap,” Tenesha said with glee before leaving the room.

“Finally, I have you alone,” Nicole said in her deep husky voice. “Just you and me.” She sat down and pulled Kendal into her arms, her lips unerringly finding her lover’s. They kissed until they were both panting for air. “I’ve missed you,” Nicole murmured against Kendal’s neck. Her hands magically pulled to the luscious breasts hidden from her by Kendal’s overalls. “I want you naked and under me,” she whispered hoarsely into Kendal’s ear.

“Nic!” Kendal protested weakly with a squeak as Nicole slid her hand underneath the overalls. “Remember, we’re not alone,” she admonished her lover. “And don’t give me that sad puppy dog look, either.”

“What kind of look do you want then?” an unabashed Nicole asked as she managed to cop a feel while pretending to remove her hand from the overalls. “Look honey it’s begging me to touch it,” she said of the now erect nipple. Before Kendal could protest, Nicole pushed aside a strap, raised the shirt and fastened her mouth to said nipple.

“Nicole,” Kendal groaned, almost ashamed to find her hands pulling Nicole closer instead of pushing her away. She even undid the strap to give Nicole better access.

Taking quick advantage, Nicole undid the other strap, lifted the shirt on the other side so that she had access to both breasts. She proceeded to move from one to the other in abandon. Pulling Kendal down so that she was almost flat on the sofa, Nicole slowly lowered the overalls over Kendal’s hips. Returning her mouth to Kendal’s lips she slipped her hand along Kendal’s abdomen to the heated juncture between the thighs.

Kendal’s moans were lost in Nicole’s mouth. Her body went rigid as she bucked her hips to the magic fingers of her lover. She wrenched her mouth from Nicole’s to suck in some air, went rigid and started

convulsing in release. By covering her mouth with Nicole's neck she was able to keep from screaming as she reached her peak. Breathing heavily, she fell back against the sofa waiting for her heartbeat to slow down. "It would serve you right if I just fell asleep and left you hanging," she panted hoarsely after several deep breaths.

"I can't believe how sensitive your breasts are," was the response. "You came too quick, I was just getting into it," Nicole pouted. She was entranced by the sight of her lover flushed with passion. "Let's try it again, only slower. I want to taste what I'm rubbing," she added in a deeper voice that sent shivers up Kendal's back.

"Come to my place and you can take all night," Kendal promised pulling on Nicole until their lips met. "I promise to bring you home in enough time to go to work. In fact I'll take you to work," she whispered against Nicole's mouth while reaching down to caress her lover's breasts.

"I'll pack a bag and leave a note," Nicole huffed and dropped a quick kiss on Kendal's mouth. With a clear effort she managed to tear herself from Kendal's arms. In a matter of minutes she was back with the bag and the note. "Let's go, babe." Nicole grabbed Kendal's hand and pulled her off the couch. Although her body was calling out for the feel of Kendal's, Nicole resisted the urge to pull Kendal close. She knew if she did, there was no way they would get out of her apartment anytime soon.

"Do I look okay?" Nicole asked for the fifth time. She gave Kendal a look that begged for reassurance.

"Nic, you look so much better than okay," Kendal replied sincerely. She, Nicole and Derrick were still in the driveway of her parent's house, where they had been for the past ten minutes.

“Yeah Aunt Nic, you look good,” Derrick piped up from the back seat. He was tired of just sitting in the car doing nothing. The last time he was here Kendal’s sister Dorrie, had let him play on her computer.

Nicole turned around and smiled at her beloved nephew. “If you say it, it must be so,” she declared. “I’m ready to meet your family now, Kendal. But just to be sure you need to hold my hand, Derrick.”

“Okay,” Derrick readily agreed, happy to be going inside.

“Alright you two, let’s get out of the car before my grandmother strains her eyes trying to get of glimpse of you,” Kendal joked and opened her car door. She led the way to the front door that opened even before she could knock.

“Were you guys debating coming in or what?” Dorrie asked as she stood back to let them enter.

“Hello to you, Dorrie,” Kendal answered, giving her little sister a hug.

“Oh yeah.” Dorrie gave her sister a sheepish grin as she remembered her manners. “Hello Kendal, Nicole and Derrick. Hey Derrick I got a new game, you want to come up to my room and check it out?”

“Yes! Can I aunt Nic?” he pleaded, his eyes lit up with excitement.

“Go ahead,” Nicole said nodding her head. “Somebody should be having fun,” she added for her lover’s ears only.

“Relax Nic, we’re all family here.” Kendal paused to hang her coat up in the front closet. “Give me your coat and take a deep breath and we’ll go meet the grams,” she prodded.

“You should be ...”

“Nicole Fisher, no more of that,” Kendal warned putting a finger on Nicole’s lips. “Jeff may be the baby’s father but you’re the love of my life. They’re here to meet you, not him.” She pulled Nicole close for a quick kiss.

“Yes ma’am,” Nicole replied, somewhat settled by the contact with her lover. “I can do this right?” *I have to do this!*

“Yes you can, sweetie.” *She is too cute when she’s nervous!* Kendal took Nicole’s coat and hung it next to hers.

With trepidation, Nicole followed Kendal to the living room where the sound of conversation emanated.

“Kendal! Come here and let me see you, baby,” her maternal grandmother called out as soon as the pair appeared in the doorway. “I can’t believe how much you girls look like your mother.”

“Gram!” Kendal exclaimed, her face breaking into a big smile. She practically ran across the room into her grandmother’s arms. “It’s about time you came to visit us,” she scolded gently and squeezed her beloved gram tight and fought back tears. It had been almost two years since she’d seen her in person.

“Don’t I get one of those?” Mr. Hinde asked watching the reunion indulgently. “I haven’t seen you awhile either,” he grumbled playfully.

Kendal let go of her grandmother and turned to her grandfather with a teasing smile. “Oh Grumpy, no one’s forgotten you.”

“Mind your manners, young lady,” he said gruffly and gathered her into his arms for a long hug. “Is that your girlfriend?” he whispered loudly while wiggling his eyebrows.

“You old coot, if you’d let her go maybe she could introduce us,” Sylvia Hinde told her husband.

George Hall complied with his wife’s request. Kendal reached out her hand and pulled Nicole forward. “Gram, Grampy, this is Nicole Fisher, the love of my life.”

“Hello Nicole, I’ve heard so many good things about you.” Sylvia smiled warmly and took Nicole’s hand in hers. “I am so glad to meet you, dear.”

“Pleasure to meet you too, ma’am,” Nicole replied trying to hide her embarrassment. She let a small smile emerge.

“Well aren’t you the pretty one,” George Hinde added, chuckling as Nicole ducked her head this time not trying to hide her embarrassment.

“You have to watch this one, Nicole,” Dave Richards said. He walked over to the group and put his arm around his father-in-law’s shoulders. “He’s a notorious flirt.”

“It’s true, dear,” Sylvia said, nodding proudly. She let go of Nicole’s hand only to have it taken by her husband.

“Don’t listen to them,” he said with a wink.

“You know, Kendal and Nicole might want to sit down,” Joan suggested from the loveseat.

“Thanks for the rescue, mom.” Kendal nudged Nicole over to the sofa. She didn’t think Nicole could take being in the spotlight too much longer.

“I thought you were bringing Derrick today,” Dave remarked once everyone was situated. “I was looking forward to throwing around the football with him.”

“He’s here, Dave,” Nicole replied with a grin. “He got snatched up at the door by Dorrie.”

“She had some new game she wanted him to see,” Kendal explained.

“Of course,” Joan sighed. “She is quite the gamer now. Dorrie and some of her girl friends have started some sort of club. I don’t know too much about it because it’s all hush-hush.”

“That sounds so cool,” Nicole commented. “I wonder if they need an adult advisor.”

“Well that leaves you out, Nic,” Kendal snickered. “I know what happened the last time you and Marco had a gaming tournament.”

“Oh like you and Jeff weren’t right there with us,” Nicole protested.

“That poor baby will have to come over here to get any adult supervision,” Dave said with a sage look.

“Only when you’re not home, dear,” Joan added then joined the laughter of the others at the look of feigned outrage on her husband’s face.

From there the conversation drifted to family news as Sylvia, with input from George, got everyone up to date on what was happening on the west coast side of the family.

Kendal, Nicole and Derrick ended up leaving much later than they had planned. They had just finished a rousing card game suggested by

Derrick. As George put it, they all would have been naked if the game was strip poker; with the exception of Derrick who now bore the nickname “Card-shark”.

“That was fun,” Nicole remarked as she fastened her seat belt. “We need to institute a family night of food and games,” she suggested.

“I guess it wasn’t the nerve racking evening you were expecting, huh?” Kendal asked with a grin.

“I plead the fifth,” Nicole said with a sniff and a royal lift of her nose. “Now take me home, James,” she bade in a decent British accent.

“Remember I get to spend the night at your house, Kendal,” Derrick called out from the back seat.

“How could I forget?” Kendal asked facetiously. Derrick had announced to the family several times that he and his aunt Nic were sleeping over at Kendal’s house that night. Kendal had ended up having to promise Dorrie that she could come over and spend the night on another weekend.

“So Kendal, what do you think of the idea of having a family night?” Nicole prodded. “It’ll be a good tradition to carry on for Junior.”

“Sounds like fun. Let’s talk to Jeff, Marco, your sister, the rest of my family and see what we can set up. Maybe we could even have Julie show up if we give her enough notice.”

Chapter 11

“I can’t tell how much I miss having lunch with you, Kendal,” Sandy groused into the phone. “You’re going to have to come back to work just to take me to lunch one of these days.”

“I miss it too,” Kendal admitted, leaning back in the recliner. “Especially the food,” she said with a sigh. “Jeff has gone crazy and is making me keep to this strict diet that my doctor put me on last week. You won’t believe this but he even gets up in the morning and fixes me lunch. So now instead of craving pickles and ice cream, I crave greasy foods!”

“Sounds like to me, we need to make plans to sneak you off to ‘Mama Roses’ for some pizza,” Sandy replied. “I can’t believe it would hurt the baby that much,” she added in a wheedling manner. “It’ll be my treat.”

“How about tomorrow,” Kendal replied promptly. “Jack called me this afternoon all worried that the baby would come before I finished the database. So now I have a meeting tomorrow to update him. It starts at ten so I should be ready to go by eleven-thirty at the latest.”

“Why is he worried? You’re okay aren’t you?”

“I’m fine, Sandy. It’s just that I met with Mr. Johns Thursday about his new database and he called Jack concerned that I would burst any minute,” Kendal added with a chuckle. “He hadn’t seen me since we were awarded the project and was very surprised by my growth.”

“I admit I was pretty amazed by your growth the last time I saw you,” Sandy acknowledged with a laugh. “You’re growing at an astonishing rate, Kendal.”

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me that,” Kendal grumbled. “I can’t see my feet anymore, and I still have a month to go!” she groaned. “Surely one little slice of pizza won’t kill me?”

“Nah, in fact it’ll probably help clear out your system, Kendal. So tomorrow it is,” Sandy said. “I have something to tell you,” she teased. “But you have to wait until tomorrow,” she added in a singsong voice.

“Sandy, you’re talking to a hugely pregnant women here,” Kendal protested absently rubbing her round belly. “I’m not in any condition to wait for anything.”

“You have to wait for the baby, so you can wait for this as well,” Sandy said smugly. “Ta-ta.” She hung up the phone with a giggle.

“That dirty rat,” Kendal told the phone as she turned it off. “It’s a good thing I’m too fat to let anything worry me.”

“Kendal, did I just hear you say something about pizza?” Jeff asked from the doorway of the den. “Ken, you know...”

“Me?” Kendal interrupted with all innocence. “No it wasn’t me. Why would I be talking about pizza when I know you’re in the kitchen whipping up a nice healthy dinner for me?”

“You’ll thank me later, I’m sure,” Jeff predicted, catching the slight sarcasm in Kendal’s voice. “I will be vindicated,” he joked, knowing that Kendal was frustrated with the new diet and not him.

“Now Jeff, you know I appreciate all the things that you do for me,” Kendal replied in all seriousness. “It’s just sometimes you crave the things you can’t have,” she said with a shrug. “Listen, I’m doing just fine on the meals you’re providing for me, really I am.”

“Only four more weeks to go, doll,” he reminded her. “Your dinner will be ready in ten minutes. I’m trying a new recipe and I think you might actually enjoy this.”

“You’re the best, Jeff,” Kendal said with a smile. “I know I complain, but I really, really, really appreciate you, your cooking, and your friendship.”

“Thanks, babe,” Jeff replied with a self-depreciating smirk. “Since it’s going to be just you and me, why don’t we eat in here tonight?”

“Can I have something besides water with this scrumptious new dish you’ve prepared?” she begged prettily.

“For that compliment, I’ll even let you have diet caffeine free Dr. Pepper tonight,” Jeff promised grandly and returned to the kitchen.

While Jeff was gone, Kendal managed to catapult herself out of the recliner and go find the dinner trays stashed in the hall closet. After setting up the trays, she went to the bathroom. A place she visited much too often for her liking.

“Kendal, you should have let me get the trays,” Jeff scolded as he walked into the family room with their drinks. “They’re too heavy for you to be carrying around. Now come and sit and I’ll bring in your dinner. I must admit this new dish turned out better than even I expected.”

“It certainly smells good, Jeff,” Kendal remarked as Jeff sat her plate down in front of her. She scooped up a forkful and slowly chewed it. “Hmm, this is wonderful,” she moaned. “Are you sure it’s low in fat?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Jeff shot back. “Do you think I want Dr. Medlock coming after me? She made it perfectly clear that you needed to stick to the diet.”

“I could eat this stuff everyday. Chicken, vegetables, balsamic vinegar, and noodles, what more could I ask for? Oh, the Dr. Pepper.” She picked up her glass and took a sip. “Since Marco and Nic aren’t here will there be leftovers for tomorrow?” Kendal asked, eagerly taking in another forkful of pasta.

“You’re such a greedy child, Kendal,” Jeff said with a shake of his head. “I’ll make sure there’s enough left for you to have some later,” he promised. Jeff reached over to tousle her hair before sitting down to his dinner. “How is work coming along? It seems like you’re putting in an awful lot of hours lately?”

“Funny you should ask that. Jack called today in a tizzy because it just occurred to him that the baby might come before the database is finished. What he doesn’t know is that I’ve already finished it and am in the process of developing queries that the client didn’t even ask for in the contract.”

“So you finally got your reports to look like you wanted them to?” he asked remembering the day Kendal had pitched a fit because she couldn’t get the report to look right.

“Yes,” she said with a pointed look that she hoped told him not to bring that subject up. “Mr. Johns loved them when I showed them to him on Thursday,” she added pleased that Jeff got her unspoken message. “I’ve really enjoyed working with that guy. It’s funny, through out the meeting he was looking at me like I was a time bomb. After we met he called Jack all worried that the baby was going to come any minute. Not that he was worried about me missing the deadline, but that I might be working too hard at this late stage.”

“He has a point, Kendal,” Jeff admitted gingerly. “You need to be working only during the day and not half the night as well.”

“Jeff I work at night because I can’t sleep,” Kendal explained. “It keeps me from going crazy laying there doing nothing. Then doing the day I can take naps and not feel guilty that I should be working.”

“Okay, that’s different and I guess it makes sense,” Jeff slowly agreed. “You need to let me know if you need any help with the database. I do know a little bit about it, you know,” he smirked.

“I’m well aware that I have two database experts to draw on,” Kendal said demurely, clearly amused. “I’ll let Jack know tomorrow that I’m pretty much finished and can take on some extra work. It’ll make the time go faster, I think.”

“Don’t take on too much, Kendal,” Jeff warned. “I don’t want you taking your laptop into the delivery room.”

“From what we learned at the birthing class, I think work will be the farthest thing from my mind at that time,” Kendal noted with a raised eyebrow. Using her finger, she pushed the last of the pasta onto her fork. “That was wonderful, now what’s for dessert?”

“No-fat yogurt with banana slices,” Jeff said cheerfully.

“Oh well, the meal was delicious and dessert will be too. As soon as I spit out Junior, I’m going to have a banana split. Maybe even a double banana split.”

“Kendal, you have double checked and made sure you’re not carrying twins haven’t you?” Sandy asked as Kendal walked into her office the next day. “Didn’t I just see you a week ago?” She scratched behind her ear and gave Kendal’s bulging stomach a concerned stare.

“Sandy, it’s not polite to stare,” Kendal said, reaching for Sandy’s chin and forcing her head up. “Talk to me, not to my uterus. In answer to your question, yes Dr. Medlock has checked me for multiples. There’s only one in residence.” She held up one finger to emphasize the point.

Sandy gave Kendal a dubious look and thought about telling her friend to get a second opinion. It didn’t seem possible that one small baby could be so big. “Alrighty then,” she said in her best Jim Carey imitation. “Shall we go to lunch?”

“On the way you have to tell me your news,” Kendal prodded. “No more stairs, Sandy,” she added as Sandy automatically went towards the stairwell. Kendal walked over to the elevators and pushed the down button. “So tell me, does this news have anything to do with turkey-basters?”

“Maybe yes, maybe no,” Sandy teased as she held open the door for Kendal to enter the elevator. “You have any other guesses?” she asked with a big smile.

“Sandy,” Kendal growled softly, after she’d made sure no one else was on the elevator, “there is a tiny elephant stamping on all my internal organs. I don’t have anymore guesses, so tell me now!” she all but shouted.

“Is this what pregnancy does to you?” Sandy wondered out loud. If so maybe she didn’t have good news after all.

“That and cutting fat out of the diet,” Kendal replied dryly. “Sorry San, things are getting away from me these days. I think it has something to do with lack of a decent nights sleep.” She shook her head as if to clear it and prepared to step off the elevator.

“It’s okay. You guessed it right in the first place,” Sandy said with reassurance. “Get this. My brother, the moral right of the family, heard

from my mother that Maureen and I were ready to start a family. What does he do you ask? He calls and volunteers his services.”

Kendal stopped her slow forward progress and turned to give Sandy an incredulous look. “Wait a minute, this is your brother who didn’t talk to you for five years because he found out you were a lesbian?”

“The very same one who sent us all that material on the bible, homosexuality and hell,” Sandy admitted with a grin as she took in the look of disbelief on her friend’s face.

“So was the offer to come and fuck Maureen thereby freeing her from lesbianism?” Kendal’s voice dripped sarcasm.

“No, get this,” she said putting a hand on Kendal’s arm. “He wants to apologize for being so closed minded,” Sandy said piously. “John says he’s done some soul searching and he needs to change his mind set. Apparently a new woman in his life has caused him to rethink some of his beliefs. So now he wants to fly down from Washington and talk to us about his new found doctrine face to face.”

“What’s Maureen think about all this?” Kendal wondered as she tried to take in this tremendous change in attitude.

“Like me she’s real skeptical about this seemingly sudden change of heart. We both think it could be just a ploy to sabotage us.”

“That’s a tough call, Sandy.” Kendal laid a consoling hand on Sandy’s arm.

“It really is, Kendal. But after talking to my mother and my brother Paul, Maureen and I decided that we would at the very least talk to John in person,” Sandy said with a shrug. “But I’m still real torn about this situation.”

“Has your mom met his new woman yet?”

“Yeah, that was one of the factors that made us decide to hear John out. Mom says quote: “she’s great and just what that stuffy John needs to make him more human.” Maureen and I sort of insisted that she come with him.”

“Wow! I’m blown away,” Kendal admitted and started walking again. “I wasn’t expecting this. But,” she said thoughtfully, “maybe this is a sign of things to come. I mean, look at how Jeff’s dad has turned around.”

“That’s deep, Kendal,” Sandy said after giving some thought. “Let’s go eat I need energy to process all this information.” She matched her steps to Kendal and they walked to the Pizzeria each in her own thoughts.

The line at Mama Rosas was as long as always. They walked past the food fixing area on the left to join the end of the line that was on the right against the wall. As she stood in line the smells of garlic, dough and tomato sauce assaulted Kendal’s senses. She caught her breath as her stomach turned. Choking back bile she clapped one hand over her mouth, grabbed Sandy’s hand, and motioned her head towards the front door.

Sandy took one look at Kendal’s pasty face and sprang into action. She pushed and shoved until they were outside. Kendal leaned up against a wall and took some stomach calming deep breaths. Sandy grabbed an empty chair and helped her friend sit down.

“Are you okay?” she asked, clearly frightened. “The baby isn’t coming is it?” This was said with much trepidation.

“No,” Kendal answered with a slight shake of her head. “All of a sudden my stomach almost revolted. The smells in there just didn’t agree with me at all today.” She rubbed her protruding stomach as if to

make it better. "I'm sorry Sandy, why don't you go in there and get you some pizza and I'll sit here and wait."

"Yeah right," Sandy snorted. "I can go get pizza any day, Kendal," Sandy declined. "Let's go to the deli and get you some soup and a sandwich." She held out a hand to help Kendal up.

"Thanks for understanding." Kendal grabbed Sandy's hand and let herself be pulled up slowly.

"It'll be good practice for me," Sandy said with an impish grin and led the way across the street. "I know I'll earn some brownie points when I tell Maureen that I gave up Rosa's pizza for a pregnant woman."

Soon they were seated at a table enjoying soup and sandwiches. "I'm curious Kendal, how is Nicole taking all these changes in your figure?"

"You really want to know if we're still having sex don't you Sandy?" Kendal shot back with a knowing laugh.

"The thought never crossed my mind," Sandy said full of pretend indignation. "But are you?" she asked with eagerness.

"As often as I can get it," Kendal replied in a prim voice. She quickly dropped the pretense and added, "I'm so horny all the time that poor Nic doesn't know what hit her."

"I bet she's hanging in there for the ride, though," Sandy quipped and lifted her cup in salute. "Pun intended."

"Yeah, she says she has to go to work to get any rest these days," Kendal smirked. "I do love that woman." She jiggled her eyes up and down causing Sandy to break out in laughter. Kendal soon joined in. "On a more serious note, when is John coming for his visit?"

“He and Sunshine, that’s his new woman, are flying in Friday,” Sandy said, an almost panicked look on her face.

“As in day after tomorrow?”

“That would be right,” Sandy nodded. “Maureen wants to get this over with quickly. Her clock is ticking and she’s ready to have a baby. I think I can blame you and your pregnancy for that, Kendal,” she added and smiled to show that she had no hard feelings.

“How do you really feel about having a baby, Sandy,” Kendal gently questioned, reaching across the table and putting a hand on top of Sandy’s. “You’re not being pushed into anything are you?”

“I want the baby as much as Maureen does,” she told her friend. “I just don’t know how I feel about dealing with John. He’s said some pretty hateful things to me in the past and I don’t think I’m over it yet. Worse,” she added after a pause, “I’m not sure I can ever get over it.”

“Now is a good time to start working on it,” Kendal suggested. “Whether he will be the father of your child or not he’ll still be part of the baby’s extended family. In this day and age I think we need to have as much extended family as we can get.” Kendal stopped and looked Sandy in the eyes. “I think you’re smart to take this chance to see if John has really changed. Think about all the cousins you’ve told me stories about. Don’t you want that for your child?”

Sandy gave another big sigh. “You’re right Kendal. I guess I know this is the right thing to do and if John’s willing to extend the olive branch the least I can do is reach out and take it.” She smiled and sat up straighter. “I knew there was a reason I needed to have lunch with you.”

“Hey, I’m only doing for you what you do for me,” Kendal said and smiled back.

“Okay, enough about John,” Sandy declared. “Besides lots of sex, how are things going on your side of the world?”

“Going smoothly so far,” was the quick response. She quickly knocked on the wood table. “I’m ready to sit back and let Junior baste slowly until the thermometer pops out letting me know he’s done.”

“Sounds like you’re ready for the baby shower this weekend. I can’t wait,” she added with a wicked grin.

“You know we probably should have had the shower earlier,” Kendal said adjusting her position. “It’s getting harder and harder to have any shame, Sandy. I just don’t think I can be embarrassed. I was telling Nic the other day that I feel like a contented cow let out to graze.”

“That’s okay, Kendal,” Sandy replied. “Patti already threatened Geana about doing anything too outrageous. All you have to do is sit there and let all your friends make fools of them selves.”

“Now that sounds like fun,” Kendal said with a wide grin.

Kendal was in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on a fruit smoothie, when she felt familiar arms slide around her thickened waist. Her hair was pushed aside off her neck and soft lips dropped kisses here and there. Kendal leaned her head forward to give her lover more room to work with.

“Ooh, Nic,” she said, putting up her hands over her lover’s. “That feels so good.”

“Hey sweetie, how are you and Junior doing today?”

“Much better now that you’re here,” Kendal replied. She turned around and pulled her loved one’s face close for a kiss. She basked in the warmth drawn from her partner. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Nicole replied. “A woman could get used to being greeted like this everyday.” Pulling Kendal closer she nuzzled at her neck, breathing in her scent. “How did your meeting go this morning,” Nicole said after a couple of minutes of snuggling.

“Everybody was happy that the project was mostly finished, and after protesting fiercely my boss agreed to give me more work. I had to promise to only do it at night when I couldn’t sleep though.”

“Good.” Nicole nodded in satisfaction. “I know I don’t have to tell you this *but*, you’re getting bigger by the hour and you need to rest more.”

“I think it’s by the minute now, Nic,” Kendal joked. “By the time Junior comes they’ll probably have to cut me out of the house or something.” She finished blending the smoothie and poured it into a glass. “You want some?”

“None of that healthy stuff for me dear,” Nicole said, making a face. “You know I only like them with ice cream.”

“I was just being polite,” Kendal returned with a smirk. “Come on let’s go to the den,” she motioned for Nicole to follow her. “What are you doing here so early anyway?”

“You mean I can’t visit my best girl anytime I want?”

“You know you’re always welcome here anytime,” Kendal replied rolling her eyes. “It’s just that you haven’t been over here before nine in the last two weeks. What gives?”

“Could it be that some wonderful, young, computer expert gave me such brilliant advice that I was able to rap up my part of the project that I was working on?”

“Okay, what’s her name?” Kendal demanded, fixing Nicole with a scowl. “I get a little fat and you start running after sweet young things,” she said accusingly.

“Duh,” Nicole replied, rolling her eyes in return, “Kendal it’s you.”

Kendal pointed to her own chest to make sure she’d heard Nick correct. “Me? I didn’t give you any advice, did I?”

“Do you remember our phone conversation last night?”

“Sure.” She plopped down on the sofa and patted the space next to her for Nicole to sit down. “You called and said you weren’t coming over because you were fixated on a programming glitch. Disappointed though I was,” she paused to give a dramatic sigh. “I let it slide this one time.”

“Magnanimous of you,” Nicole replied and stuck out her tongue. “Do you remember us talking about anything else last night?”

Kendal could tell by Nicole’s tone that there was something she was supposed to have heard the night before, but for the life of her she couldn’t remember what it could be. “Oh, general things,” she bluffed.

“You don’t remember do you?” Nicole accused, wiggling her finger at Kendal.

“Well, it was late, I was tired and you know I’ve got all these hormones running through my body. It’s not that I didn’t want to pay attention...”

Nicole reached over and placed a finger on Kendal's lips. "Honey I'm just teasing you," she admitted, quickly pulling back her finger at the appearance of Kendal's teeth. "You're so cute when you're flustered." She reached for Kendal's hand intertwining their fingers together. "But seriously, you did help me when you told me to approach the problem from a different angle. I thank you for that." Lifting their linked hands to her mouth she kissed the back of Kendal's hand.

"Okay, I'll accept that." She snuggled up against Nicole and they sat cuddling each other and talking about the future. Looking back Kendal came to realize it was one of the closest moments they had shared.

Chapter 12

“Hello?”

“Hey Sandy, it’s Kendal. Do you have time to talk?”

“Sure. What’s on you mind, as if I didn’t know?” Sandy teased.

“Don’t I get any points for waiting a whole extra day?” Kendal whined. “So tell all,” she demanded. “And start at the very beginning.”

“Kendal, pregnancy is supposed to make you complacent,” Sandy charged.

“Well I didn’t show up at your door step yesterday morning did I?” Kendal shot back. “Now quit stalling and get to the important stuff. I know it must be good news or else you would have called me Friday night,” she added.

“Patience is a virtue, Ken,” Sandy smirked. “But far be it from me to keep a pregnant woman waiting,” she declared grandly. “We met John and Sunshine at the hotel restaurant.”

“Sunshine? Her name is really, Sunshine?”

“You got it and she looks a lot like her name. Anyway,” Sandy said with a sniff at being interrupted. “At first it was awkward because we didn’t know what to talk about and Maureen and I were still leery of a trap. To tell you the truth I kept expecting John to pull out a bible and thump us on the head with it.”

“Wouldn’t that have been a sight,” Kendal hooted.

“If that had happened you would have heard from me sooner when I called you to come bail us out for assault,” Sandy joked. “It didn’t happen and by the time we finished dinner everyone was much more relaxed thanks to Sunshine. I’d forgotten what a funny guy John can be when he’s not telling me I’m going to hell.”

“Imagine that,” Kendal said dryly. “I hate to interrupt but I have to know what a person named Sunshine looks like.”

“Like a dyke.”

“What? Did I miss something?” Kendal sputtered.

“Calm down girl, I just said she looks like a dyke not that she is one,” Sandy explained patiently. “To start off with she’s tall, nice athletic build and she exudes confidence. I can easily see why my brother is so attracted to her. Now on top of that she’s a beautiful person both physically and internally. She’s the type of person who makes you feel warm and fuzzy just being around her.”

“Sounds like she gets an A plus from you, huh?”

“A plus, plus,” Sandy corrected. “Maureen and I agree that if this wonderful person sees something worthwhile in my brother he has to be a changed man.”

“That is so cool! There is hope for this world after all,” Kendal declared. “I guess we need to change one person at a time,” she added, her eyes getting tearing at the sentiment.

“I got mine,” Sandy said. “And we’re going to accept John’s generous offer for a sperm donation. If nothing else so that the child can have Sunshine be a part of their life.”

“I’m so happy for you and Maureen,” Kendal chocked out as the tears started to flow. “Damn stupid hormones,” she grumbled and wiped her eyes with her shirt. “When are you guys starting the process?”

“Well I did suggest to Maureen that she get drunk, sleep with Jeff, have the condom break, and ...”

“Very funny,” Kendal growled in a threatening manner. “You just be glad you’re not her in person where I could sit on you.”

“As long as it’s on my face I don’t have a problem with it,” Sandy quipped.

“Maureen might have a little problem with it, you pervert.”

“You love it,” Sandy taunted.

“I’m going to tell your wife,” Kendal taunted in return.

“Spoilsport,” Sandy grumbled.

“You love it,” Kendal replied. “Oh my sweetie is here, I’ll talk to you later pervert.”

“Right back at you, girl.”

At six-thirty sharp, Kendal, Nicole and Marco arrived at Geana’s doorsteps for the shower. Jeff was still looking for the perfect parking space for his brand new Expedition. Kendal rang the doorbell while opening the screen door. “I’m here,” she called out and beckoned the others to follow her.

“Are you ever!” Geana exclaimed loudly, walking quickly towards the group. “I haven’t seen you in three weeks and look at you now.” She paused to give Kendal a hug, her eyes wide. “Glad you guys could make it,” she said to Nicole and Marcos. “Hey, where’s Jeff, he didn’t weasel out did he?”

“No,” Nicole said with a shake of her head. “He had to find the right spot for his new monster truck,” she explained with a smile.

“New SUV right?” Geana quipped. “Well come on in, we’re gathered in the back yard since it’s not so hot today.” Geana led them down the long hall and out to the deck.

Kendal was immediately surrounded by well wishing friends who, like Geana, were amazed at her large size; especially the friends who hadn’t set eyes on her for a couple of months. They insisted on seating her in the guest of honor chair, a rocker with an extra pillow for padding. Kendal gave a silent thanks to Patti for knowing a pregnant woman’s needs. Before she had time to think a plate full of food and some fresh squeezed lemonade was given to her.

“Okay, I’m in heaven now,” Kendal said, quickly looking over her shoulder to see if Jeff was about. “All of my favorite appetizers,” she added, getting a little teary-eyed. She took a deep breath and widened her eyes to keep them from tearing.

Patti came over and put a hand on Kendal’s shoulder. “Isn’t it a bitch that you cry at every little thing?” she whispered. “I wish I could tell you that it will go away but it doesn’t really.”

“Patti, that’s not what I need to hear,” Kendal protested. “This is my baby shower, you’re supposed to be positive, even if you have to lie.”

“Okay,” Patti replied putting a silly smile on her face. “Everything will be wonderful. After birth you’ll feel like getting up and cleaning the house. The baby will sleep all day. Any more tales you need to hear?”

“That’s enough,” Kendal declared, her voice dry. “Nicole you’re going to have to help me eat all this food. My brain might think I’m hungry but my stomach knows it can only take so much.”

“I thought you would never ask,” Nicole replied reaching for a chip and dipping it into the Mexican dip. “Um, this is good. Here babe, just try a little bit.” She held out the chip for Kendal to taste.

“I see you have her trained already, Kendal.” Sandy said as she walked up to the guest of honor. “Maureen, don’t you even think about trying that with me,” she added deepening her voice.

“Oh Sandy, you know you do that stuff already,” Kendal said with a smirk. “You’re not fooling anyone here.”

“Hush, woman,” Sandy playfully slapped her friend on the thigh. “Nicole, how are you doing today?”

“I’m doing great, thanks. Good to see you and Maureen again. I really had a good time over at your place last week. Maybe next time we play cards we can use real money,” she added with a smirk.

“Oh no,” Sandy protested. “We would all be broke,” she joked. Lowering her voice she added, “But you can still come over when nympho over there lets you out of the bed.”

While Kendal put her hand over her mouth to stop the lemonade from spewing out Nicole just winked and lifted her beer in a toast.

“I’m so glad that Jeff’s friends showed,” Kendal said, giving Sandy the evil eye.

“Marco and Geana arranged all that,” Patti said oblivious to the byplay. “I only cooked the food for this gig.”

“Where are the kids?” Kendal asked as she tried to ignore the whispering of Nicole and Sandy.

“My brother, bless his heart, came and got them for a couple of days. He and his wife are trying to decide if they’re ready for kids so they borrowed ours for three whole days! I love my kids but it’ll be fun to just be with Geana for a few days.” There was definite gleam of anticipation in Patti’s eyes.

“And here she is, my baby mama,” Jeff said proudly leading some friends across the deck to where Kendal was sitting. Like everyone else, the guys joked with Kendal about her size. Luckily Marco caught the glint in Kendal’s eyes, and redirected the conversation.

After an hour of mingling and drinking, Geana stood on a crate and whistled loudly. “Can I have your attention,” she shouted, waving the crowd quiet. “It’s time for the games to begin,” she announced with an evil grin.

There were groans from the crowd. “Hey, I thought we were just going to eat, drink and make fun of the presents,” someone shouted from the crowd.

“Come on you queers,” Geana yelled back, “you will have fun. Now let’s play!” she commanded.

At the end of the games, everyone was still chuckling from playing the stupid games Geana and Sandy had concocted. There was pin the ass on George W. Bush, spin the baby bottle, twisted gay trivia and hit the diaper shaped piñata. Some of the guests were still wandering around exchanging the unusual trinkets from the piñata. Kendal lorded over the

festivities from her rocking chair. At times she worried that her uncontrollable laughter would lead to an early birth, but since Nicole hardly left her side, Kendal knew she was in good hands.

“Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Geana asked, still all wired up. She quickly ducked the empty cup coming her way. “All right Patti, I know that was you. You just wait till later,” she threatened pointing a finger at Patti.

“I will baby, I will,” Patti promised and blew her a kiss amidst the hooting from the crowd.

“Um, as I was saying,” Geana continued, slightly red in the face. “It’s time to open the presents. Why don’t we move to the living room so the keg won’t get blocked,” she suggested. “Jeff and Marco, you get to assist Kendal to the living room, Nic you can hand them the gifts to open.”

Kendal and Jeff looked at the pile of presents in amazement. A no gift policy was supposed to have been in place. Obviously their friends had trouble following directions. They looked at each other, shrugged and sat on the couch. With a gracious smile, Kendal accepted the first gift from Nicole. Marco with a loud sigh, dutifully assumed the duty of keeping notes of who gave what.

The process started with Kendal and Jeff trying to guess what the gift was before opening it, but after the third lewd gift was unveiled chaos reined. Kendal and Jeff were laughing so hard they could hardly rip open presents. It got really bad when Jeff started suggesting ways to use some of the items. Kendal, not to be outdone, began demonstrating Jeff’s suggestions. By the time the last gift was opened, there wasn’t a dry eye in the place. The last gift from Geana and Patty was a stack of pre-written cards thanking everyone for their lewd gift. Included were addressed and stamped envelopes.

“I really should have had a contest for the most lewd gift,” Geeana mused as she looked over the gifts, now neatly arranged on the sofa. All the guests were gone and most of the damage had been cleaned up. “Hey Kendal, here’s a thought. If you don’t want to go back to work after the baby comes you can always open a sex shop out of your house.”

Kendal peering over Geeana’s shoulder scoffed, “Sex shop? I’m using that stuff for my own gratification.”

“Wait a minute girl,” Jeff chimed in, “half of those are mine.”

“What about me?” Marco asked. “I’m the daddy too.”

“But everybody knows that the mother should get everything,” Nicole said, sliding her arms around Kendal’s waist. “She has to go through all that pain and suffering, after six weeks she’ll need all these toys.”

“Honey, you’re just saying that because you know you’re going to be in on the action,” Jeff snorted.

Kendal and Nicole looked at each other, grinned, turned to Jeff and said in unison, “Duh!”

“And these are the parents?” Sandy asked from the doorway as she and Maureen prepared to leave.

“Scary isn’t it?” Patti added with a fake shiver. “This is what Pat Robertson has been trying to warn the world about.”

Geeana walked over to Patti and rubbed her on the back. “How many glasses of beer did you have, baby?” she asked solicitously. “When you start talking about Pat Robertson without an attached curse word, I know you’re intoxicated.”

Patti just giggled in reply and let herself lean back against her beloved. "I'm okay."

"You'd better be," Geeana growled into her ear. "I have many plans for you later on."

"I think that's our clue to go," Marco announced and looked at his watch. "Do we need to leave any of the toys for your entertainment, ladies?" He paused in the act of putting the gifts into a bag.

"Nah, we're taken care of," Patti assured him with a wink.

"So, you can have kids and still have sex?" Sandy asked with a straight face.

"Of course," Geeana replied. "But we try to save the wild stuff for when their out of the house," she added with a broad wink.

Marco and Jeff gathered up the bags of goodies, while Nicole helped Kendal to the door. They left with many thanks and lots of hugs and kisses. Before they pulled away from the house, Marco admonished Jeff to drive extra careful because they wouldn't want to explain all the gifts to the police.

Kendal woke up the next morning feeling strange and disoriented, the sheets twisted about her body. She vaguely remembered having weird dreams of dancing baby girls who stayed just out of her reach. What was that all about, she wondered trying to untangle her legs from the sheets? Kendal lifted her hands to her face and rubbed her temples. She felt the faint beginnings of a headache.

Her eyes fell on the radio clock next to the bed. Eight o'clock! She hadn't slept all night in the bed in a long time. No wonder she was feeling out of sorts. "What a weird dream." She looked at the other side of the bed and noticed her lover's absence. "I can't believe Nicole got out of here without me noticing," Kendal muttered as she sat up. Her bladder immediately let her know that she had a quick stop to make.

After freshening up, she headed for the kitchen. Absently rubbing her stomach Kendal debated what she wanted to eat for breakfast. Just for last night Jeff had agreed to look the other way while she sampled forbidden food at the shower. Now, even though she wouldn't admit it out loud, she was actually looking forward to something nutritious.

Before she reached the kitchen, the front door opened and a sweat soaked Nicole walked in. Kendal's eyes grew wide at the sight of her lover in a jog bra and tiny running shorts. Those long brown legs looked like they went on forever. A smile lit up her face. "Don't you look good this morning, love."

"Why thank you, Ken." Nicole walked forward to give Kendal a quick kiss on the lips, careful not to touch her with her sweaty body. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"A little strange, like aliens kidnapped me or something."

"I told you to lighten up on all that junk food last night," Nicole returned with a grin. "You're system is not used to it in such high doses anymore."

"You're probably right," Kendal acknowledged, nodding her head. "When I woke up I remember dreaming about all these baby girls bouncing around. The frustrating part was that I could never grab one."

"Now that was probably the hot wings," Nicole declared knowledgeably with a chuckle. "Let me go take a shower and then you

can tell me all about the bouncing babies.” She gave Kendal another kiss and sauntered to Kendal’s room, knowing that she was being watched.

Kendal gave a wolf whistle at the sight of the taut, round behind being wiggled for her pleasure. She smacked her lips and walked into the kitchen. A bold note attached to the refrigerator drew her like a magnet. It was from Jeff giving her specific instructions on what to eat for breakfast and where to find it

“I would have done the right thing without your instructions,” she told the note and stuck out her tongue at it.

“Just trying to be sure,” Jeff drawled as he entered the room. “These last two weeks are crucial and I did let you slide last night,” he pointedly reminded her.

“And I appreciate it, Jeff.” Kendal reached out and gave his arm a squeeze. “Actually, my stomach has pretty much decided that I need to go light this morning.” She opened the door to the fridge and looked inside. There on the top shelf was a delectable looking dish of yogurt and fruit. “Mm,” Kendal said as she reached for the dish. “This should hold me for a couple of hours.”

“Don’t worry Kendal, I already have your lunch and snacks already picked out.” Jeff walked over to the counter and started the coffee pot going.

Kendal opened the drawer with the silverware and pulled out a spoon. Unable to wait until she got to the table, she took a big spoonful. “This tastes too good to be good for me,” she declared, eagerly scooping up another mouthful. The need to be off her feet drove her to the table.

“Is Nic up yet?”

“Yeah, she came in a little while ago looking absolutely scrumptious in her jogging outfit,” Kendal said with a big grin. “It’s almost a shame what that women does to me. Only almost though,” she added with a roughish grin.

“I hear you,” Jeff said with a wink. “I’ll go ahead and cook breakfast then, since Marco will be down in a minute.” He turned on the stove and started gathering ingredients.

“Good morning, all,” Nicole said as she walked into the kitchen. She walked over to Kendal and gave her a kiss, this time pulling her close. “Babe, you lips taste good.” She licked the particular lips in question to get another taste.

“Okay you two, give it a rest,” Jeff ordered, flicking them with a dishtowel. “I run a clean establishment around here.”

“Since when?” Marco asked, coming up behind Jeff and giving him a hug. “Why am I always the last to know everything?”

“You nut,” Jeff said affectionately as he leaned back against his lover. “Now go get you some coffee while I whip up some omelets.”

Marco fixed his coffee and joined Kendal and Nicole at the table. “Morning ladies.”

Kendal reached into her shorts and slapped a ten-dollar bill in front of Marco. “You might as well take this now,” she said with a pout. “You’ve earned it.”

“How exactly have I earned it? You know what we did the other day was for free right?” he joked.

Kendal rolled her eyes and shook her head. “The sex of the baby. Remember, you said it was a girl and I said it was a boy. Although I hate to admit it, you were right.”

“I’m missing something here,” Marco said, brushing his hair back. “I can tell by looking at you that you did not have the baby last night, so how do you know that it’s a girl.”

“Trust me,” Kendal replied, folding her arms over her extended stomach. “I spent a good portion of last night chasing bouncing baby girls. Junior has to be a girl.”

“Could it just be all that junk food you ate last night?” Nicole asked gently.

“No,” Kendal said with a shrug. “It’s a girl, I know that now,” she added with certainty.

“I guess we can’t keep calling her Junior then,” Jeff announced from the stove. “But I can go get her that gorgeous pink outfit you talked me out of buying last week, Kendal,” he smirked.

“Oh not that hideous thing,” Kendal groaned. “With any luck it’ll be gone before you get there.”

“Now Kendal,” Marco protested, “it may have been a little ostentatious but it wasn’t hideous.”

“I don’t care what anybody says, I’m going to go find it right after breakfast,” Jeff declared. He walked over to the table and plunked down a plate in front of Marco and one in front of Nicole. With his hands on his hips he turned to Kendal. “And you’re going to like it.”

“Okay,” Kendal replied, throwing up her hands in defeat. “When she sees the pictures years from now let’s be sure she knows who made her wear that outfit.”

“Well at least she’ll be covered and not bare ass naked on a rug,” Nicole noted. “I always hate it when my mother shows those pictures to other people.”

“I bet you look adorable, honey.” Kendal reached out and stroked Nicole’s arm. “If you like I could take some new pictures with you spread out on the rug,” she suggested hopefully, a huge grin on her face.

“Ken, why is that you went in to heat after you were pregnant?” Jeff asked with a lifted brow. “I always thought bitches went in to heat and then they got pregnant, hmm,” he pretended to give the matter some thought.

“It’s a good thing Nicole is here to hold me back,” Kendal replied with a fake growl. For good measure she grabbed Nicole’s hand and put it on her own arm.

“Who’s going to be the child, when the baby arrives?” Nicole asked Marco, dryly.

“Don’t worry, Nicole. They’ll all be children together,” Marco said with a laugh.

“I’ve think we’ve been insulted Kendal,” Jeff complained.

“I know we’ve been insulted,” Kendal shot back with a sniff. “I’m going to have to go to the family room and meditate, so that I can calm myself down,” she announced dramatically.

“That’s what you always do, Richards,” Nicole scoffed.

“And today should be different, Fisher?” Green eyes locked with brown before both women fell into laughter, to be joined by Marco and Jeff.

Two a.m. found Kendal, plodding around the den. The pressure in her back had increased to an uncomfortable level. Even sitting didn't relieve the ache. *Baby girl you need to come soon. I know you're not due for two weeks, but I don't think my body can stretch any further.*

“Kendal, are you feeling okay?” Nicole asked quietly from the doorway. She came up behind Kendal and gently rubbed an arm. “Can I do anything to help?”

“I think I'm okay,” Kendal replied, getting teary eyed at the sympathy expressed in Nicole's voice. “My back just doesn't want to stop aching tonight. And I'm not sure I can take this much longer.” Her lip started to tremble and tears fell down her face. “Oh Nic, what made me think I could do this? I don't know anything about babies or children!” she wailed and started to cry in earnest.

“Oh sweetheart, it will be okay.” Nicole put her arm around her partner, guided her to the sofa and sat down next to her. “This is just pre-birth jitters,” she assured Kendal, taking her hand and kissing it. “Women go through these emotions all the time. I know you haven't been around babies a lot but you'll learn quickly. I promise to be there with you and help you all I can.”

“But what if I'm a terrible mom and the baby doesn't love me?” she sobbed. “I just don't think I can take it.”

Nicole reached out and pulled Kendal into her arms, gently rubbing her back. “Oh baby, you're going to be the best mother ever. You're so

kind and generous that any child would be ecstatic to have you for a mother. In a couple of weeks we'll be laughing over this. Why don't we go back to bed and I'll massage your back. We can break out that special vanilla oil we've been saving."

"Okay," Kendal sniffed. "I feel so stupid," she added sitting back and wiping her face with her hands.

"You should never feel stupid with me, Ken. I love you," Nicole said simply. She knelt in front of Kendal and pulled her back into her arms.

"I love you too," Kendal replied with a tremulous smile and tightened her arms around Nicole's neck. "You're pretty good at this calming down thing, did you have to do this with your sister?"

"She was much worse," Nicole swore faithfully. She stood up and offered Kendal a hand. "Let's see if I can't make your back feel just a little bit better."

"Just talking to you is making all of me feel better. I really panicked here for a minute. I mean the baby keeps getting bigger and I'm wondering if my body can keep stretching to accommodate her."

"The human body is a wonder." Nicole placed her hand on Kendal's back and assisted her to the bedroom. She helped her lover sit on the bed and gently removed her oversized sleeping shirt. "Your body certainly is a wonder, baby," she said reverently as she feasted her eyes on her lover's body grown heavy with child. "You are so beautiful to me."

"Even all poked out?" Kendal asked, searching for compliments.

"Especially all poked out. Now lie on your side and I'll go get the oil." With a quick kiss for the baby, Nicole went to the closet. "This oil's claim to fame is that it heats up as you rub it on," she said reading the label.

“Sounds kinky babe, come and spread it on me,” she said in a sexy voice.

“Gladly.” Nicole sat down beside Kendal, squeezed some oil on her hands and started rubbing it into her lover’s skin. She was pleased to hear the sigh of relief that came from Kendal’s mouth. With smooth gentle strokes she soothed the kinks from Kendal’s back. As Nicole worked she told Kendal how special she was, and all the things that would ensure she would be a wonderful mother. Nicole stopped only when she realized that Kendal had drifted off to sleep. Feeling very content, Nicole curled up behind Kendal and joined her in slumber.

The next morning Kendal woke up feeling rested and ready to take on the world. She stretched a little and noticed her back felt better. With a smile she remembered the “break down” and Nicole’s loving support. Turning to the one she loved, Kendal gently ran her hand over Nicole’s cheek. Her lover looked so peaceful.

Whatever I did to deserve you, I’m grateful. I’ll spend the rest of my life proving that to you, I promise. Kendal smiled as Nicole unconsciously turned her head in the direction of Kendal’s hand. Thinking about her life before Nicole was a part of it gave Kendal pause. Just nine months ago she had been in despair of ever finding someone to love, and now she was full of that love.

Big brown eyes opened sleepily, making contact with pair of green/brown eyes. “Good morning. How do you feel today?” Nicole asked with a big smile.

“Like I’m ready to conquer the world,” Kendal replied cheerfully. She leaned over to give the love of her life a quick kiss. “Thank you so much for last night, Nic.”

“I’m just glad you felt comfortable enough to break down in front of me, Ken. It let’s me know that you truly trust me and that makes me feel so special. I love you.”

“I love you more,” Kendal replied and kissed Nicole before she could respond. Nicole let herself be distracted and they spent a pleasurable hour communing with each other.

Chapter 13

Kendal reached down absently and picked up the phone on her lap. She was on the last few chapters of an exciting murder mystery novel and was loath to answer the phone. Before answering she checked the caller id. "Hello, Jeff."

"Hey, Kendal. How are you and Jeffina feeling today?"

"Jeff, I thought we weren't going to use that name," Kendal complained mildly. "I don't want you to get into a habit of saying that name. It just might stick."

"Never," Jeff retorted quickly. "I just use it cause I know it riles you up. Lately you've been getting so complacent that I know you need a little bit of stirring up."

"You'd be complacent too if you had a calf sucking up all your vitality," Kendal pointed out.

"So how are you and the baby feeling today?" Jeff asked again. For the past week as the due date approached Jeff had taken to calling Kendal mid morning. He had also made arrangements with Marco and Nicole to call her at other times of the day and then report back to him.

"A little antsy, like something is going on," Kendal replied slowly. "But it's probably because today is the official due date. I've managed to put that partially out of my mind by reading this great, convoluted thriller though."

“You’re not in labor are you?” Jeff demanded shakily, gripping the phone. “Do I need to come get you?”

“No, no, I’m okay Jeff,” Kendal quickly reassured him. “Despite my best effort to not fixate on this date, I’m fixating on this date. I’m just feeling things because of what day it is.”

“Okay, but I’ll keep my phone with me at all times. *Do not* hesitate to call me, Kendal. Oh, and you make sure you carry your phone with you wherever you go.”

“Yes, ma’m,” Kendal said meekly, she’d only heard this spiel everyday for the last two weeks. “I promise I won’t even go to the bathroom without it.”

“Good girl. Now your lunch is in its usual place and because Dr. Medlock said you needed to eat smaller meals I divided it into two portions. You need to eat one at eleven and the other around 3.”

“Gottcha. I’ll see you this evening, Jeff.” Kendal hung up the phone smiling. She rubbed her bulging stomach with affection. “Baby girl, you’re going to have to watch out for daddy Jeff. He will try to run your life. Not that that’s a bad thing baby, but you need to be prepared. And while we’re having this conversation could you please quit doing all that moving around when I lay down. It makes it hard to sleep,” she explained gently. She’d hardly gotten any sleep last night because Junior decided to jump hurdles most of the night. “Of course it’s probably no picnic for you to be smashed into that tiny space all the time,” Kendal added as she continued to rub her stomach. “You know you could fix all that by just coming out. I’m not trying to rush you or anything like that, but just give it some thought.”

Feeling as if she’d nagged the poor child enough Kendal returned to her mystery. When she finished, she went to pull her lunch out of the

fridge. She had to laugh at the artfully decorated lunch Jeff had left for her. *There will be some interesting moments between Jeff and Junior over food choices. I can't wait!*

After finishing her lunch Kendal decided to take a quick nap. Some sort of popping noise accompanied by pressure on her abdomen jarred Kendal awake. She sat up and looked around for the source of the noise. It took her a moment to feel the watery discharge that was coming from her lower body. "Oh my god, I think my water broke!" she screamed holding her hands in the air. Her first thought was to jump out of bed and take a shower. Before she ran out of the room, she remembered that she was supposed to look at the discharge to make sure it was clear. She went back to the bed and checked. "Good, it's clear." Her heart was racing and Kendal took some deep breaths to calm herself down. *It will be hours before this baby comes. Don't get all bent out of shape yet, Richards.*

Taking more deep breaths she finally calmed herself down enough to plan, Kendal gathered up her toiletries to add to the hospital bag Jeff had packed weeks ago. Then she took a quick shower, and got dressed. To be on the safe side she called the doctor's office to let them know that her water had broken. As expected the nurse advised her to labor at home until the contractions were closer together.

Kendal looked at her watch all the while thinking of how nice it would be to lose most of the excessive weight. It was almost noon, so she had five hours before anyone would be home. She debated briefly whether to call the other parents to be, but decided to wait a couple of hours. There was no sense in all of them sitting around waiting. She was pulling the soiled sheets off the bed when her phone rang. "Hello."

"Hey you, it's me," Nicole said. "I traded check-in time with Marco today because he's still in court."

“And here I just thought you called to say you love me,” Kendal joked. “Aside from my water breaking, I’m fine,” she added nonchalantly.

“What did you just say!” Nic yelled.

“Nothing much, just that my water broke about five minutes ago,” Kendal said conversationally. “But the doctor’s office told me not to go to the hospital until the contractions were five minutes apart.”

“I’m on my way,” Nicole said abruptly. “I’ll bring Jeff with me.”

“Honey, I still have hours to go. You guys go on ahead...”

“No way, babe,” Nicole interrupted forcefully. “I’ll be home in fifteen minutes tops, do I need to pick you up anything?”

“No, just bring yourself and your wonderful backrubs. I guess you can bring Jeff, if you insist but calm him down first,” she advised. With a sigh, Kendal turned off the phone. *So much for a restful few hours.* She went back to the task of changing the sheets so that she would have clean ones on the bed when she returned. Giving the way Jeff had been acting the last month he might make her go to the hospital right away.

Her first contraction hit her as she zipped up her travel bag. Forcing herself to do the breathing exercises, Kendal started slowly walking around the house until the pain subsided. “That wasn’t so bad, eh Junior,” Kendal said rubbing her stomach. “I can deal with this no problem,” she boasted to her baby, feeling full of confidence. Now all she had to do was to keep moving for the next fourteen to fifteen hours and everything would be okay. Her knees almost buckled at the thought of having to stand and support her weight for that length of time.

Well I will have to lay down for the backrubs and general coddling I’m sure to get from Nicole. In addition, I can use Jeff and Marco as walkers. I should be able to get through this. No. I will get through this!

“Oh Lucy, we’re home,” Jeff announced running in through the garage door. “I hear rumors that this show is about to get started,” he added, unable to contain his excitement.

“Ricky, I just made it through my first contraction,” Kendal announced with a smile. “Where’s Nic by the way?” she added looking at the doorway.

“Right behind me,” Jeff answered absently as he walked over to Kendal and gave her a kiss. “She decided to obey all the traffic rules for some foolish reason,” he announced with a flip of his hand. “Now are you keeping track of when the last contraction was?”

“I’ve got the stop watch going, Jeff,” Kendal said pointing to the watch on her right arm. “I want you to know I’ve talked with the nurse and she advised me to stay away from the hospital until the pains are closer together. If I go to the hospital now they’ll just hook me up to a baby monitor and make me stay still. You do know this labor could last until tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, Nicole kind of sat on me and reinforced that notion,” Jeff admitted with a grin. “Then on the way home my brain shrunk back to normal size and I remembered what we learned in class,” he added. “If we go the hospital too early they will just send us back. But I’m so revved up that I’ve go to do something or I’ll go crazy.” Jeff shook his hands in agitation. “I got it,” he snapped. “I’ll turn this room into labor room central. You go sit down and save your strength for contractions. I also need to put that special medicine bag I bought in the SUV, incase we get tied up in traffic on the way to the hospital.”

“You do that, Jeff,” Kendal encouraged. *Anything to keep him occupied!* “And I’ll sit here quietly waiting for Nic,” she promised. As she settled into the rocking chair, that had been her one of her favorite places of rest for the past two months, Nicole arrived.

"I finally made it," a nervous Nicole announced. She crossed the room to give Kendal a kiss and a hug. "How are you doing, sweetie?"

"Real good, Nic."

"And how is Junior?" she asked rubbing Kendal's stomach.

"Ready to leave her cage I think. Thanks for keeping Jeff calm."

"Where is he, anyway?"

"Getting the emergency medical kit," Kendal replied with a laugh. "You know, in case we get stuck in traffic and he has to deliver the baby."

"Don't even joke about that, Ken," Nicole said with a shudder.

"Joke about what?" Jeff asked. He walked into the room with a large black bag. He had taken the time to change into shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt.

"Oh nothing," Nicole replied. "Did you remember to leave a message for Marco?"

"Actually I caught him on break and he said he should be here by four-thirty."

The trio spent the rest of the afternoon laboring. Jeff and Nicole took turns walking and breathing with Kendal during her contractions. They both gave her back rubs to keep her relaxed and as pain free as possible. Kendal refused food but consumed plenty of liquids. She and her helpers were coming to understand why it was called labor.

When Marco arrived home at five he shoed Jeff and Nicole off to rest and took over labor duty. Although he'd worked all day he was more

than eager to do his fair share. He managed to keep Kendal entertained for a while between contractions with exaggerated tales of his day in court.

By eleven o'clock that night, Kendal was almost a mass of pain. There was simply no position that she could be comfortable in for any length of time. The contractions were nearing the five-minute mark and getting stronger and stronger. After a particularly painful contraction, Kendal declared that she was ready to go to the hospital and take drugs. Her threat that she would remove the baby surgically with a kitchen knife if she did not come shortly convinced the others that it was time to bring in professional help.

What could they do but call her doctor, bundled her up into the car and drive to the hospital? Dr Medlock, who as luck would have it was on call, met them at the nurse's station. As Kendal was preparing to sit down an intense contraction overtook her. She reached for her stomach and took some deep breaths. Without a word Marco and Nic grabbed a side and assisted her as she walked away some of the pain. Jeff looked on in consternation as he was checking to make sure the medical information the hospital had on record was correct.

"I see you guys have the system down pat," Dr. Medlock said with a smile as Marco and Nick lowered Kendal into a chair. "There's going to be a slight delay while they find you a room, Kendal. It seems several babies decided that they had to be born today," she explained. "When we get you set up, I want to do a quick check and see how dilated you are."

"Okay," Kendal said weakly leaning back against the chair. Her forehead was dotted with sweat despite the coldness of the hospital. "But I think this baby really wants to come soon, Dr Medlock," she bit out just before succumbing to another contraction.

"Kendal, let me see if I can find an empty exam room," Dr. Medlock replied, giving Kendal's hand a quick squeeze. *These contractions are*

coming too close together! “Tell that baby to hold on for a minute.” She walked briskly to the nurses’ desk and conferred for a couple of minutes.

Very soon there after, Kendal was whisked into an examination room. In minutes she was hooked up to a fetal monitor and the baby’s strong heartbeat resounded through out the room.

“Okay Kendal, you were right,” Dr. Medlock announced with calmly after a quick examination. “This baby is ready to see it’s mama. I can tell you’ve been doing some hard labor. Ah, here’s the nurse to assist you while I go throw my weight around and scrounge up a birthing room.” She motioned the nurse over and gave Kendal a reassuring smile. “With the next contraction, I want you to push until the nurse tells you to stop. I’ll send Jeff in here to help you.”

Dr. Medlock was back ten minutes with a couple of orderlies and a bed. “How’s it going in here?” she asked cheerfully, checking Kendal for any signs of distress.

“Too slow,” Kendal bit out. Her hospital gown was soaked with sweat and there wasn’t a spot on her body that didn’t hurt. “Tell me again why I wanted to do this without the benefits of drugs?” she huffed.

“Because it’s so much better for Junior,” Jeff replied. He reached over and wiped her face with a cool rag.

“Kendal, you’re doing just fine,” Dr. Medlock said in a soothing voice. “We’re going to switch you to a birthing room because you’ve done such a wonderful job of getting the baby in to position.”

With hurried calm Kendal was efficiently moved to a birthing room. The new room had enough space for Nic and Marco to join the birthing process. As Dr. Medlock predicted Junior arrived within thirty minutes of leaving the other room. She came out screaming her frustrations for the whole world to hear.

“What a beautiful baby girl!” Dr. Medlock exclaimed as she held the baby up for all to see before handing her to the nurse. “They’ll clean her up a bit and she’ll be right in your arms, Kendal.”

Tears fell from Kendal’s eyes as the baby was placed in her arms. She gently dropped a kiss on the baby’s head, which was sparsely covered with straw like hair. The storm of emotions that raced through her body took her by surprise. How could she possibly have thought that she could give her little girl up? The attachment was just too strong.

“All right Kendal, quit hogging the baby,” Jeff said as he took in the slight shudder in Kendal’s shoulders. He could do nothing to prevent the tears from streaming from his eyes. “We want a turn too.” He put a hand on her shoulder and dropped a kiss on her wet head. “You done good, Ken.”

Kendal gave the baby another kiss before reluctantly passing her to Jeff. Nicole took the opportunity to step forward. She grabbed one of Kendal’s hand and raised it to her lips. “You are so strong,” she said in wonder, unashamed of the tears on her face. “I love you.”

“I love you more,” Kendal replied with a weak smile. “But after all that work I think I deserve more than a kiss on the hand.” Nicole gladly pulled her lover close for a kiss and a solicitous hug.

Marco walked to the chair where Jeff was sitting with his daughter. Sitting down on the arm, he gently brushed away the tears falling from Jeff’s eyes. Jeff turned this face up to Marco him with a beaming smile. “I love you, daddy.”

“Right back at you, daddy,” Marco said and leaned in for a kiss. It wasn’t a kiss of passion so much as it was an expression of their professed love.

“I can already feel her roots tangling around my heart, pulling me in close,” Jeff said reverently. “These really are the ties that bind. And if any of you tell anybody I said that, I won’t cook for a month,” he threatened.

“You old softie,” Kendal said warmly. She thought her heart would burst as she watched Jeff and Marco who were clearly in awe of the new addition to their family.

“I hate to break up the bonding process but I need to steal the baby away for a little bit,” the nurse said gently. “Also, we need to move Ms. Richards to her room.”

“But Marco and Nic haven’t had a chance to hold her,” Kendal protested weakly and gave a big yawn. The adrenaline high was wearing off and tiredness hit like a brick wall.

“Okay,” the nurse agreed. “You each get a minute, but no more.”

Once the nurse whisked the baby to get cleaned up and evaluated, Nicole shooed off Jeff and Marco to get some sleep. She promised to stay with Kendal until they returned later in the day. They said good night to a quickly fading Kendal and promised to make all the necessary calls to family and friends.

Nicole walked over to Kendal’s bedside and looked down upon the person she loved with all her heart. With a self-derisive laugh she remembered her need to flee from this wonderful woman. It seemed so long ago now. *Thank god I fought off those old demons. My life is so much fuller with her in it. We’re all a big family and we have a brand new addition. It’s time I stopped hedging and made the full commitment.* Nicole bent over and kissed Kendal gently on the forehead. Then she sat down and watched her sleep.

Kendal came to with a start as the nurse entered her room to take her vital signs. She was groggy because it felt like she'd just gone to sleep. *Get used to it Richards, you're a mother now.* She shook her head to clear it a little and rubbed her eyes.

"My name is Jamie," the nurse said softly. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a big truck exited my body," Kendal whispered as she tried to get into a more comfortable position. "Who would have thought something so small could hurt so big," she grimaced.

"A couple of days and you won't even remember the intensity of the pain," Jamie assured her. "You'll still be sore, mind you."

"She's worth it," Kendal was quick to assure. "When will they bring her to my room?" she asked anxious to hold her baby again.

"It shouldn't be too long now, dear. You should get all the rest that you can now."

The sound of loud angry cries startled Kendal from her daze at what seemed like moments later. This time Nicole woke up as well. "You'd think we were in the maternity ward," Nicole said as she yawned and stretched. "Must be feeding time at the zoo. You need me to help you to the bathroom, honey?"

"I'm almost afraid to get up. What if my uterus falls out?" she half joked.

"We're in a hospital, silly. The doctors will simply push it back up in there."

"And you're here why?" Kendal asked aggrieved as she pulled back the covers and gingerly swung her legs off the side of the bed. "Man, my

lower body is a flaming fire,” she complained. “I feel like getting a fire extinguisher and blowing it up my vagina.”

“See sweetie, you’re already getting better,” Nicole said with an encouraging smile. “A little humor is a good thing.”

“I wasn’t joking!” Kendal protested indignantly.

“Sure you were.” Nicole replied calmly. She took Kendal’s arm and assisted her to the bathroom. After making sure Kendal was secure on the toilet Nicole left the room and pulled the door partially closed.

By the time Kendal was tucked up in bed, a technician came in with a red faced, crying baby. “She’s got a good set of lungs, Ms. Richards.” She said loudly as she gently settled the baby girl in Kendal’s arms.

Kendal opened up her hospital gown and offered the baby a nipple. The minute the nipple touched her cheek, Junior stopped crying, rooted around and latched on.

“She’s a natural. We don’t have to worry about her not eating. I’ll be back in thirty minutes to check on you two.”

“Can you believe how loud she was?” Kendal asked Nicole as soon as the nurses’ assistant left. “I won’t need that baby monitor after all.”

“Junior does sound pretty demanding,” Nicole agreed. She stepped closer to the bed to stroke the downy head, marveling at this glorious wonder. “Did we ever decide on a name yesterday? My memory is pretty fuzzy.”

“Marco and I narrowed it down to Kristina or Victoria after you guys zonked out. We’re both leaning towards Kristina.”

“Kristina,” Nicole said, trying it out. “I like it”

“Now we just have to convince Jeff. I want this name to be a unanimous decision.” Kendal gently detached the baby from her nipple and switched her to her other breast. “After all, this is our first big decision about her life.”

“I can hardly believe she’s here,” Nicole said in awe grabbing the tiny hand curled up against Kendal’s breast. “She’s just perfect, Kendal. When I held her in my arms it felt so great. It reminded me of when Derrick was born.”

“I know, it’s like Jeff said you really feel that tug on your heart.” Kendal’s eyes watered up just at the thought. “Oh bother, here I go getting all mushy again.” She reached up and wiped away the tears.

“Oh babe, that’s the result of all those hormones being flushed out of your system. Remember Dr. Medlock mentioned that this would happen. It’s perfectly normal.” Nicole reached over and gave Kendal a quick kiss. “I love you so much, Ms. Richards.”

“I love you, Ms. Fisher,” Kendal replied through her tears. “I’m glad you’re here with me now and that you were with me yesterday. I wouldn’t want to have gone through that experience without you by my side. Helping me every step of the way.”

“Where else would I want to be other than with my two girls?” She raised Kendal’s hand to her lips and kissed it reverently. “Forever and ever.” Brown eyes locked with greenish ones.

Kristina chose that moment to pull back from the nipple with a grunt. “Sign of the times,” Kendal muttered ruefully. “Here you burp her Nic, you do have experience with that don’t you?”

“It’s been awhile, but I still think I remember how,” Nicole answered as she reached for the baby. She grabbed a cotton diaper from under the

bassinet and expertly burped Kristina. “Can I hold her for awhile?” with her hurt puppy dog look.

“Of course, silly. Better do it now before Jeff and Marco get here and try to hog her,” Kendal said with a wide smile. Her heart almost burst with joy to see the tenderness in Nicole’s eyes. *You might not have an orthodox upbringing but it will be one filled with love, my little one.*

Nicole sat down in the chair next to the bed, holding Kristina close. As she stroked a soft, downy cheek she was again reminded of Derrick. She decided then and there that she would try her hardest to let nothing keep her from this child’s life. *I promise to stay in touch with you always, Kristina.* “Kendal,” Nicole began softly and stopped to clear her throat. “How ‘bout I get Jeff and Marco to help me move my stuff in. I know you’ll want all the help you can get with this one here.”

Kendal’s face suffused into the brightest smile. She was so happy she could only nod her head repeatedly as tears streamed down her face. Everything was falling into place.

“Okay, here she is.” Jeff deposited a sweet smelling alert Kristina into Kendal’s lap. “Squeaky clean from her bath and ready to eat I believe the way she was rooting around my chest. Is there anything you need, love?”

“I’m fine,” Kendal replied adjusting her shirt for Kristina. “Why don’t you sit down and put your feet up for awhile. You’ve been running around like crazy.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” the proud daddy said, sitting down on the sofa next to Kendal and Kristina. “Can you believe we’ve been doing this parenting thing for three months now, Ken?”

“Not really, Jeff. I think more people should look into co-parenting,” Kendal said. “Look at how much easier it’s made everything. I have three other adults, who care as much about Kristina as I do, to depend on no matter what the situation. This has really worked out well for all of us.” She put a hand on his leg and rubbed it affectionately.

“Yeah, remember how hysterical you were when you found out you were pregnant because you were so afraid of telling your mom?” he reminisced with a sly smile. “Now we can hardly keep your mom away from Kristina. That goes for the rest of your family as well.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Kendal admitted and laughed. “You should have seen her showing off Kristina to her co-workers last week. Kristina can’t even talk yet but mom knows she’s very bright.”

“Maybe she’s been talking to Marco,” Jeff supposed with a smirk. “The other day he said the same thing. When I asked him how he knew, he told me it was in her eyes. So we have two votes for intelligence.”

“You know we should write this down and remind them of it when she hits puberty and goes off the deep end,” Kendal said with a wry smile. “I just want to make sure that I don’t put too many expectations on her. You know, to let her grow up to be free to be what she wants to be. God that sounds corny,” she quickly added with a grimace.

“Seriously earth mother type,” Jeff noted. “But I know what you’re trying to say. We’ll just be there to help her see right from wrong and occasionally put our foot down on something.”

“And what would that be?” Kendal teased.

“That she has to eat her dad’s gourmet cooking,” Jeff replied promptly. “Without complaining,” he added. “No fast food burgers for our little princess.”

“That one will be between the two of you,” Kendal said, quickly distancing herself from that future argument. “Maybe we should wait twelve more years to discuss this,” Kendal suggested diplomatically. “Let’s just enjoy her as the sweet baby that she currently is.”

“I’m all for that.” Jeff patted Kristina’s smooth head that had tiny wisps of blond hair spouting up.

“All for what?” Marco asked from the hallway. He put down his briefcase and stepped into the family room. His eyes went to Kristina as she lay on Kendal’s shoulder. “What luck she’s still awake.” He crossed to Kendal and held out his arms. Marco accepted Kristina and went to the recliner. Once seated, he began to talk baby talk to her until she seemed to focus on his face.

“Now that boy is never going to be able to put his foot down, Kendal,” Jeff proclaimed to Kendal with an indulgent smile. “Well, hello there Marco,” he said louder. “It’s nice to see you too.”

Marco looked at Jeff with a sheepish expression, “It’s the first day this week she’s been awake when I’ve gotten home,” he said explaining his actions. He stood up walked over to Jeff and gave him a kiss. “Hello hunny-wunny, I missed you today.”

“Much better,” Jeff replied returning the kiss. “You don’t have to sleep on the couch tonight.”

“Oh you know you’d miss me too much to put me out,” Marco said with confidence, sitting back on the recliner. “So anyway Jeff, what are you all for? You know what you guys were talking about when I came in,” he added at Jeff’s puzzled look.

“Oh, that! Kendal and I had just decided that we would wait for twelve years or so to start worrying about a teenage Kristina.”

“I shudder to think of all those testosterone filled boys beating on the door,” Marco said with a shudder. “I agree that we shouldn’t think about it until it happens.” He gathered Kristina closer as if to ward off immediate harm. “So Kendal, are you up for going back to work half-days?”

“I think so,” Kendal said with a little hesitation. “I’ve got her bottles all made up in the freezer. I just need to pack the pump so I can express milk at work. Now if I can only keep myself from calling Jean every other minute Monday checking on her, I might be okay,” she added wistfully.

“Kristina already knows Jean, so it shouldn’t be so bad,” Jeff said by way of comfort.

“You have been taking her one day a week for a couple of hours,” Marco added. “Besides I think our little princess is so sociable that she’ll be fine and there will be other kids to catch her interest.”

“I know, I know,” Kendal sighed. “But I’ll miss the little tyke,” she pouted. Kendal paused as she heard the side door open. “Here comes Nic.”

Nicole’s heels clicked on the hardware floor as she walked towards the den. “Hey guys,” she called out as she entered the room. Nicole set down her briefcase, went straight to Kendal, and gave her a kiss.

Kendal returned the leisurely kiss. “You’re home earlier than expected,” she remarked.

“Today was one of those days when everything goes right,” Nicole explained and sat down next to Kendal. “We finished another project,” she announced with a triumphant grin.

“Great!” Kendal leaned over and gave Nicole another kiss. “Extra time on the horizon,” she added with a leer.

“Congratulations, Nicole,” Jeff said. “Nice going. You should be set up for a nice summer vacation.”

“The first thing I need to do is focus on my family,” Nicole replied, hugging Kendal close. “It seems like I haven’t seen you guys for a week. Kristina looks like she’s grown.” She cast a wistful look at the baby.

“She’s fading fast but maybe you could bond for a couple of minutes,” Marco said. He stood up and walked to the sofa to put the baby in Nicole’s willing arms.

“Kristina, it’s Mimi,” Nicole said softly. She bent over and gave the baby little kisses. “Oh she’s so sweet.” Nicole closed her eyes and pulled Kristina close to her chest. “It felt so good to finish that project today, but holding her is so much better,” she added heartfelt.

“I know what you mean,” the other three said in unison and laughed.

“That was weird,” Jeff said. “Nicole, have you eaten yet? There’s plenty of food in the fridge.”

“I’m fine Jeff,” Nicole declined. “I think I’ll go put Kristina to bed and take a shower. I can’t wait to stretch out on the bed.”

“I’ll help you, babe.” Kendal shepherded Nicole towards their room, her body tingling just thinking of all the help she would give her lover.

“I know we won’t see them again,” Jeff said after they left the room. “I sorry Marco, I forgot to ask if you’ve eaten yet.”

“Yeah, thanks. But I could use a shower and a back rub,” Marco said plaintively as he stood up.

“It’ll be my pleasure, Marco,” Jeff said with a wicked grin and allowed his lover to pull him up from the sofa.

“Do you want me to put her down while you take a shower?” Kendal asked as they walked into Kristina’s room.

“No, I get to do this infrequently as it is,” Nicole responded. “I’m glad to have the opportunity to go through this ritual with Kris.”

“Okay, I’ll go get ready for bed then.” Kendal almost sprinted to her room. She quickly took off her clothes and found the sexy peek-a-boo nightgown that always excited Nicole. Kendal then arranged herself artfully on the bed and waited for Nicole to arrive.

“I don’t know what Kristina is dreaming of but she has a smile on her face,” Nicole said, partially closing the door. “Do you suppose babies...” she stopped in mid-sentence as she caught sight of Kendal. She started pulling off her clothes as she stared at the vision on the bed. “This has been a wonderful day,” she remarked as she stepped out of her pants and panties. Nicole walked to the bed and stood naked in front of Kendal. She ran her hot eyes over Kendal’s delicious body before straddling Kendal and seizing her lips.

With a groan, Kendal wrapped her arms around Nicole’s neck and deepened the kiss. She adjusted her legs to bring their bodies even closer, pulling up on Nicole’s behind while making a circular motion with her hips. Nicole responded to the rhythm, lifting her head and shoulder to rest her weight on her arms. She pressed her lower half into Kendal and speed up the motion.

Kendal leaned up on her elbows and grasped one of Nicole’s breasts with her mouth.

Nicole bit down on a cry, shuddering with pleasure. “Oh baby, oh baby,” she moaned, her movements frantic. She was so close, so close. With a muted cry she started falling off the cliff, it was so sweet. The spirals of pleasure contorted her body as spasms caused her to jerk. She continued to press into Kendal only to hear Kendal cry out as she came as well.

She collapsed on Kendal, breathing hard. “It’s been such a long week without you,” Nicole complained. “I hope you didn’t plan on getting much sleep tonight.”

“Hey, I can feed Kristina with my eyes closed. I’m ready for all you can give me baby,” Kendal said biting her lover on the neck.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Nicole promised. She moved her head so that Kendal could have better access to her neck. “You can wear this sexy piece anytime.” She ran her hand down the gown that stopped just before the crotch. Nicole didn’t stop as she continued past the gown to the moist, damp heat between Kendal’s legs. She purred at the pleasure of touching her lover’s wet sex, easily imagining her fingers superseded with her mouth. Nic brought her hand up to her mouth and inhaled the essence of Kendal before licking her fingers. “Finger licking good,” Nic said with a sexy smile for Kendal. She began her decent downward, leaving a trail of wet kisses.

Kendal awakened to the noises coming from the baby monitor. She realized at once that she was almost buried under Nic. Gently she disengaged herself and sat up. With a huge yawn she looked for the alarm clock. It was six o’clock! Kristina has slept for six hours! Kendal jumped out of bed and ran to the baby’s room. There lying on her back was her beautiful angel just beginning to fret as sucking on her fist brought no relief. Kendal quickly backed out and headed for the bathroom. She did a quick clean up job and returned to the baby.

Kendal

Kristina was screwing up her face to cry when she spotted her food source. Kendal whisked her up and settled Kristina at her breast. After a few grunts Kristina latched onto a nipple and settled down to nurse.

“I missed you,” Nicole said from where she was leaning on the doorway. “Why don’t you two come and keep me company,” she begged. “That way I can hold both of you.”

“That’s an offer I can’t refuse.” Kendal got up and followed Nicole to their bed.

Nicole arranged the pillows and leaned against them. She spread her legs for Kendal to sit in front of her. Giving a sigh of contentment she wrapped her arms around the two most important ladies in her life.

Epilogue

“Ladies, and I use that term loosely, if you could keep your hands off each other we could get ready for this party,” Jeff complained as he pounded on the door.

“You’re just jealous,” Kendal taunted. “Besides, the party does not start for another four hours, Jeff.”

“Why do I bother,” he muttered and stomped off. “If you want something done right, you need to do it yourself.” He marched into the kitchen and continued making the pastries.

“Jeff?” Marco asked hesitant. “Is there a problem?” He was standing in the kitchen door with two-year old Kristina attached to his leg.

“Not really,” Jeff admitted with a sigh. “It’s me. I just want Kristina’s birthday party to be perfect.”

“It will be,” Marco assured him. “Everything on the to-do list is checked off, the backyard looks like a carnival, we have balloons galore, most of the food is ready and the birthday girl is just about to take a nap.”

“I guess I need to calm down then.” Jeff held his arms out to Kristina. “Come give daddy a hug, baby.” With a squeal, Kristina ran to Jeff knowing that she would be lifted high into the air.

“Two years and she still has you whipped,” Marco said with a smile as he enjoyed the interaction between father and daughter.

“Oh, and you’re not?” Jeff challenged. He lowered his daughter and gave her a big smacking kiss for which he received a slobbery one in return.

“Reporting for duty, sir,” Kendal said as she and Nicole entered the kitchen. They gave Jeff a salute and stood at attention.

“Mama, Mimi,” Kristina chortled and leaned towards her mothers. Nicole quickly broke rank and rescued the toddler from her precarious position.

“I’m glad to see you can follow instructions,” Jeff said putting on airs. “However, I’m told that everything is taken care of and that your services are not longer required. Dismissed,” he added with a shake of his wrist.

“Okay Kendal, you have to take him down because I’m holding the baby,” Nicole told her partner, tongue-in-cheek.

“Sorry Nic, but you do see that he’s making pastries don’t ‘cha,” Kendal replied, pointing to the masterpieces in work. “He can boss me around all he wants to today.”

“You and your stomach,” Nicole muttered into Kristina’s neck. “You’re in luck today, Jeff.”

“Oooh, I’m shaking in my boots.”

“You should be,” Nicole taunted and stuck out her tongue. She looked down in time to see Kristina sticking out her tongue as well. “Kristina honey, sticking out the tongue is not very nice,” she tried to explain. “Mimi was just joking with daddy. Uh, Kendal, a little help here.”

“Sorry,” Kendal said with a shrug as she tried hard not to laugh. “She did see you do it, Nic. Lets face it Kristina is much too young to learn – do as I say, not as I do. Just another way you homos have

perverted the poor child,” she said with a dramatic sigh and quickly left the room.

Nicole gave Kristina a kiss and passed her off to Marco saying, “Isn’t it still your hour? You teach her right from wrong.” With a smile she went after Kendal. “So wait up, Ken.”

“How you doing, beautiful?” Kendal asked with a smile. She turned and watched her lover walk towards her. Her heart beat faster as it always did at that lovely sight. In the two and a half years they had been together she’d only grown deeper and deeper in love.

“Great,” Nicole said with an answering smile. “You ready to go put the final touches on the play house?”

“I’m always ready to strap on a tool belt for you, baby,” she answered with a leer.

“I thought we just did that.”

“The more times the better,” Kendal said with a swagger.

Nicole laughed, draped her arm over Kendal’s shoulder and led her off to the shed where the playhouse waited. The little house had been the idea of Mr. Macklin, who was still overwhelming his precious granddaughter with toys. The two grandfathers had done most of the hard work on the house the day before; competitiveness caused them to try to outdo each other in the handyman department. Eventually the two succumbed to the lure of Jeff’s barbeque and decided to leave the finishing touches for Nicole and Kendal.

Now the two worked efficiently to decorate the three inside rooms with appliquéés of Kristina’s favorite Disney characters. Once the furniture was arranged, they stepped back to enjoy the final product.

“She’s going to love this place,” Nicole declared with satisfaction. “We’ll have to literally drag her and her ten thousand dolls out of here each day.”

“I’ll just bring my laptop out here and work while she plays.”

“Like you really work while she plays,” Nicole scoffed. “I’m on to you, Ms. Thang. You’re as much into those dolls as she is.”

“Hey, not as much as Jeff,” Kendal retorted with a pout. “Besides, I get plenty of work done when she’s goes to her play dates. Listen to me,” she shouted suddenly. “I sound so yuppie. Did I really say play dates?”

“Yes my love, I’m afraid you did,” Nicole nodded with a grin. “You know, what with you being close to thirty and all you have to face the fact that you’re getting old.”

“I’m not close to thirty!” Kendal protested loudly. “Why only the other day I got carded. Besides, you’ll be thirty before I will.”

“Yes,” Nicole agreed with a smirk. “But I didn’t say, “play date”,” she taunted as she motioned quotes with her fingers. “That makes me younger.” With that she took off running.

“Why you dirty rat!” Kendal called out and took off in pursuit. She caught up with Nicole on the back porch and proceeded to tickle her into submission. She was assisted in this task by Kristina and Marcos who were drawn outside by the laughter.

Later that evening the four parents were sitting around the den. Kendal and Nicole were sprawled all over each other on the carpet and

Jeff and Marco were cuddled up on the sofa. They were tired but basking in the glow of successful party.

“Okay, so maybe I over did it with the invitations,” Jeff admitted to no one in particular. “But this way we don’t have scads of leftovers.”

“Actually I thought the number was just right,” Nicole commented. “It was wonderful having a whole house full of people and a zillion kids running around. I had a great time.”

“Me too,” Kendal piped up. “And I think our little princess had the best time of all. I swear I had to wait until she fell asleep in her play house before I could move her to her bed.”

“I foresee a lot of hours spent in the play house,” Marco said, stating the obvious. “I have lots of great footage of her in the house and everybody else. That new digital camcorder is the best, Jeff. I’ll be able to burn CDs for everyone in a heartbeat.”

“If I wasn’t so tired, I say we should be toasting each other to a great two years of parenting,” Kendal said with a yawn. “We done good, people,” she declared with a look of satisfaction. “Any takes for a second round?”

Four hands were raised high.