

BEACH BLANKET CRASH (Chapter 23)

The first summer of their relationship was, for Sophia and Warren, all in all, idyllic.

They worked. They went to the beach. They went to parties. Warren, under Nick's tutelage, started lifting weights—and Sophia even started a bit, also. Warren had a noticeable improvement in two months—on and off the ice. They skated. They hung out together, at the mall, at one of their houses, wherever. They made love as much as possible. Warren got Sophie hooked on the computer, and she met a lot of his internet friends. Even Peg Kelleher came to better grips with their relationship—she worried about them having sex, but she had to agree that their relationship was much, much more than that—and that it appeared incredibly solid, especially for their ages. Watching them spend hours at a time at her house—watching TV, playing on the computer, playing chess, just talking, sometimes they'd even be cuddled together reading separate books—all of this had convinced Peg that the relationship was by no means just hormonal. That came as a great relief.

It was all coming to an end, however, as Labor Day weekend was fast dawning. It was the Thursday before Labor Day, and Warren called Sophie on the phone. Caller ID let her know who it was.

“Well, good evening, Snugglebear. You read my mind—I was just about to call you.”

“Great minds think alike, Pookie. Listen, I've got a question. Do you mind some company at the beach tomorrow?”

“Great minds **do** think alike, dear heart, because I was going to call to ask you the exact same question. Who did you have in mind?”

“Crash. You?”

“I'd love to have Crash come with. Might get him out of his funk. I was thinking of Jessie.”

“Jessie does the beach?”

“Occasionally.”

“Great! Bring her along. Your mom is dropping off and mine is picking up, right? Crash will meet us there, he actually lives closer.”

“Then it's all settled. Jessie and Crash, eh? This might be combustible!”

“You ain't fixing me up with no Preppy, guys!” Jessie said accusingly in the car the next morning.

Warren laughed. “Nobody was fixing anyone up with anybody, She-Devil. This is purely a coincidence. Crash called me, I mentioned we were going to the beach, and he asked to come along. He got dumped two months ago and is in a funk. It’ll do him some good to gaze at beach bunnies for a day. When I called Sophia to clear it with her, she told me that you had asked to come, also. Pure coincidence.”

“Well. All right.”

“Besides which,” Sophia said with a giggle, “at least you two can commiserate about having best friends who are in this sickeningly sweet lovey-dovey relationship.”

“Why, does he give you guys the same kind of shit I do?” asked Jessie.

“Very similar,” smiled Warren.

“Hmmm. I like him already.”

“Where to, guys?” Ellen Kovach interjected, driving.

“Right up ahead, Mom,” said Sophia. “In front of the ice cream stand, there.”

“Yup, there’s Crash.”

They got out of the car, grabbing their towels and stuff. Warren said hi to Crash and handled quick introductions: “Jessica Reidel, aka Jessie; Jason Kowalski, aka Crash.”

“Nice to meet you,” Crash said, shaking Jessie’s hand. “Another set up, Warren?” Crash asked with a smile.

“I’ve been assured, no. Mere coincidence.” Jess told him.

“OK, if you say so. I got dumped a couple months ago, and Romeo and Juliet here have been trying to fix me up with every female they can drag out of the mall or something.”

Jessie laughed. “You got it easy. I’ve been without boyfriend for almost a year. I think Sophia’s tried to fix me up with the entire St. Michael's Prep football team.”

“I can relate. They keep trying to spread those True Love Vibes they got all around. It’s disgusting, I tell you.”

“Uh huh. Well, at least I’ll have someone to roll my eyes at when they start **kissing**.”

“I will be happy to oblige. We’ll even have sand to throw at them.”

“And water to dump on them if they get **too** disgustingly cozy.”

Warren and Sophia had to stifle smiles at all this.

They grabbed a good spot, and outerclothes started to come off. Sophia was down to her swimsuit as Warren took his shirt off.

“My God, Prep Boy,” Jessie gasped. “What the hell happened to **you**? You’ve actually got peccs!”

“That’s my Studmuffin,” quipped Sophia. “All summer in the weight room.”

“WOW.” Jessie was amazed. “I may have to change your nickname from Prep Boy to Prep Stud. Two months, and you did this?”

“Well, I had help,” Warren smiled. “Nickie set me a hell of a program. It’s really worked out. I raved about him so much to some of the staff that they hired him as a part-time trainer.”

“Great! Nickie loves that stuff,” Jessie commented.

“Yeah, he’s great,” said Warren. “He immediately grasped what I was going for, and set up a great routine. And he’s always there with me, encouraging and stuff.”

“Well, it **has** worked,” said Jessie. “Help out on the ice, too?”

“Immensely,” smiled Sophia.

“Great.” Meanwhile, Crash was taking off his shirt. Jess glanced over, and turned an appreciative eye at him. “HMMMMM. What have we **here**?”

Crash just laughed. “I’ve been lifting weights a lot longer than Warren has.”

“Well I certainly like the view.”

“The view from my end is pretty damn good, too,” Crash said. Jessie was wearing her black one-piece, which accentuated her long, lean frame and seemingly endless legs. Jessie was tall, 5’10”, and slim without being skinny—not as buxom as Sophia, but all the curves in all the right places.

“Well then, big boy, would you mind spreading some of this suntan lotion on the view?”

“Surrre.”

“Watch out, Crash,” Warren teased. “She bites.”

“I claw, too,” put in Jessie. “So, I’d be **real** careful with the application of that lotion.”

“If I miss, you’ll bite and claw me?” Jessie nodded. “Oh, look at that! I missed!” Crash said with a wink. Jessie just stared up at him in disbelief—then broke out laughing.

Sophia was lying on her stomach, tanning her back. Jess and Crash were spread out on a towel, sunning. Warren was reading a book.

“Hey, War.”

“Soph?”

“You’re being checked out.”

“Huh?”

“Those two blondes over there.”

Warren looked around casually, and let his eyes wander to where Sophia was looking. There were, indeed, two lovely blond girls seemingly checking out Warren. That was confirmed when one of them winked at him. Sophie laughed, while Warren blushed.

“See? You’re even hotter than before, Studmuffin. She even winked at you!”

“Jesus Christ, Sophia,” Jessie interjected. “Why don’t you just send him over there to fuck her? We can take pictures so you’ll have proof of what a stud he is.”

Crash cracked up. It was the first of many times. They spent all day swapping one-liners.

“There’s a bathing suit in distress,” Crash quipped about a woman wearing a too-small suit.

“Gravity’s such a powerful force, innit?” Jessie agreed.

“Look,” Crash pointed. “Hi, I’ve got four kids under the age of six, and I’m going to bring them for a nice, relaxing day at the beach! And if I’m lucky, my blood pressure will only quadruple!”

“She’s probably dearly hoping for at least one accidental drowning.” Jessie offered.

“Look at them,” Jessie pointed to a guy and girl in a clinch. “He’s actually got his hand down her bikini top.. They make War and Soph look positively discreet.”

“Well, Warren doesn’t have to go looking that hard. He reaches up, and there they are. Look at her—I think **I** have bigger tits.” He realized what he had just said, and thought that Jessie might be offended, but she just cracked up.

“Speaking of guys with their hands all over a girl’s body, put some more lotion on this one?”

“Sure. You want I should let my hand slip in your front? I certainly wouldn’t have to go on a search mission.”

“You just remember the claws, buddy.”

“Haven’t forgotten them for a second,” Crash grinned.

Sophia and Warren decided to get up and go for a swim. Crash and Jessie declined, so Sophie and Warren head off, hand-in-hand.

“Oooh, look,” quipped Crash, “they’re holding **hands**. Pass me the Pepto.”

“Pass **me** a blindfold. Or a shotgun, whichever,” agreed Jess. Then she sighed. “I really shouldn’t be so bad. I love both of them, I think they know that, and I think what they have is great. But I can never let a sarcastic comment pass, especially when I feel like a fifth wheel around them.”

“I’m never much at letting a good one-liner go by myself, so I can relate. And I’m particularly vulnerable to the fifth wheel thing, myself—but Warren’s been through that, with me and Ally before he met Sophia, so I owe him.”

“It can be tough, when your best friend is in such a serious relationship, and you’re **not**. I don’t see her enough, and I definitely don’t have her to myself enough. Now, Warren’s **really** good with that kind of stuff—you need a night out with Jessie, then you go have one—and that helps. But they want to spend time **together**, and I certainly can’t blame them. Don’t get me wrong—I love Warren absolutely to death. He’s been **so** good to Sophia. But the whole fifth wheel thing is there.”

“Don’t I know it. Especially since I did **not** expect to spend this summer alone.”

“What happened?”

“A new guy.”

“Ouch.”

“Ouch is right. I’m the jokester, the quipster. So I got dumped by my girlfriend of a year for another guy. Like water off the back of a duck, right? Just keep joking, Crash. NOT.”

“Crash—what did Warren say your real name is?”

“Jason. Jay for short.”

“Well, at least I’ve had longer to adjust to this. I was sans romance since before Warren and Soph hooked up. Last November, in fact. Of course, Aaron and I had been together two years.”

“What happened there?”

“I wasn’t ready to surrender my virginity. “

“Aaah.”

“Mind you, we did everything **but**. I thought I satisfied him enough. Sorry, wrong answer.”

“Ally and I did everything but, also. And she wasn’t ready, either. So I didn’t put any pressure on her. Took her two weeks to give it up to the new guy, I understand.”

“Double ouch. Do you still keep tabs on her, or anything?”

“Well, no, but shit gets around. Warren actually said something about it to Sophia when he didn’t know I was listening.”

“How would Warren know that Ally boffed her new guy?”

“Her new guy is one of Warren’s neighbors, one of the crowd he runs with.”

“Triple ouch.”

“And how. I haven’t been to one of his neighborhood bashes all summer—and I always enjoyed them. It’s mostly a good group of people he hangs out with. I even liked Matt before he snagged my girlfriend. But now I don’t go, because I know **they** will be there.”

“Sophie keeps trying to get me to go. It’s not really my type of party, and I don’t really know anyone ‘cept for Soph and War. And then they’ll go get all cozy.....” Jessie sighed. “One of the reasons I held out on Aaron was that I knew what Sophia’s sex life was like. Damn, I did not want that to happen to me. So, then, I lose Aaron because of it—and Sophia ends up with a sex life that’s apparently faaaaaabulous. I try not to get rankled by that. I try. I don’t always succeed.”

“Well, if you had **ever** told me that Warren would lose his virginity before **I** did, I’d have laughed at you. But, fuck it. If Ally was going to dump me that fast and jump in bed with someone else, than she **wasn’t** the one I’d have wanted to lose it to. And, Jess, if he dumped you over it, he wasn’t the one for you, either.”

“I know, I know.” Jess paused, and took a breath. Then she looked out in the water. “Hey, look. **There’s** a swimming technique I hope to master someday. Look out, iceberg, here comes the Titanic.”

Crash laughed. "Hey, check that one out. The one on her back."

"The one with the big jugs?"

"Yeah. Looks like she's playing with them. 'Tee-hee, do these things float? Tee-hee.'"

"Oh, look, and there's our two favorite lovebirds. All wet and happy."

"Sophie's got perky nips."

Jessie laughed. "Do you always look at your best friend's girlfriend's tits?"

"First, I'll look at anybody's tits. Secondly, Sophia has a perfectly admirable set of them."

"Does Warren know about this?"

"The first time I ever met her, we took off, Warren and I, to go to the store. This was after she had that vicious beating, but just before she asked Warren out. When we were alone, Warren asked me what I thought of her." He paused for a minute. "You watch Star Trek Next Generation?"

"Love it. It's my one and only concession to nerdiness."

Crash laughed. "OK. You remember the episode with the house that's the only thing left on the planet, and the guy and his wife who turns out **not** to be his wife?"

"The one where the guy actually was an alien who had killed the whole race that had attacked the planet?"

"That's the one. In that episode, Worf is down on the planet, sitting in a couch, and the 'wife' gives him tea, and then asks him what he thinks. And Worf said, completely deadpan, 'Good tea.....nice house.'"

Jessie cracked up, both at memory of the moment and at Crash's dead-on Worf impression. "I remember it."

"OK. So, when Warren asked me what I thought of Sophia, I went into Worf mode, and intoned, 'Nice girl.....Great tits.'"

Jessie exploded. "What did Warren do?"

"Warren can keep up, you know. He just said, 'That will be all, Lieutenant,' in his best Picard voice."

"Priceless."

"We haven't really gotten going today, but when we get going, it's something to watch."

“What, you and Warren?”

“Oh, yeah. One-liners, sarcasm, impressions, the whole bit. Sophie said that on that first night she met me, she laughed so hard she rebroke her ribs.”

“I’d like to see that.”

“I haven’t felt in the mood. But now I suddenly do, moreso.”

“Is Warren trying to drag you to the party on his street tomorrow night?”

“Yeah. Sophie getting on you?”

“Yeah. Listen, I know it’ll be tough for you, if Ally is there, but.....I’ll go if you go.”

“You got yourself a deal.”

“Really? Great.” Jessie realized something. She **really** liked this guy. She could tease him, and he gave as good as he got. But he wasn’t just a jokemeister—their conversation about the problems with Warren and Sophia proved that. She wondered how far she could take the teasing.

“So,” Jessie asked. “What do you think of mine?”

“What?”

“These,” she pointed to her chest. “Since you notice everybody’s tits, I thought you might have formed an opinion about mine.”

Crash put on a face, pretending to contemplate the issue. He had realized the same thing Jessie had—he liked her, a lot. It hadn’t taken long, had it, he thought. So he looked at her, and said, “Well, purely from a visual inspection, I’d say your tits were perfectly acceptable. But, for a **true** reading, I’d need a more hands-on approach, y’see.”

“But can you handle the claws?”

They just looked at each other and cracked up.

Sophia and Warren came back up the beach from the water, laughing. They looked up, and didn’t see Jessie or Crash, and looked at each other. But the umbrella was up. They looked closer, under the umbrella, and found Jessie and Crash

He was sitting with his legs spread out, and so was she, in between his legs. She was resting her back slightly against his chest. He had a hand around her waist, and was pointing with the other one. And they were laughing.

Crash was saying, “No, no, the other one. Grey swim trunks. I meant the moustache.”

“Oh,” Jesse said, “the one that looks like Hitler with that moustache.”

“Yeah. ‘I am Adolf Hitler and der Nazi Party is taking offa der beach. Ve vill launch der Third Reichhhhhh right here on der beach. Der Shtormtroopers vill round up all den pretty girls vit den large Volksvagens on der chest. Zince I am der impotent shtrudeldink, ve vill giff all den pretty girls to Herr Crash.” Jessie was convulsed with laughter. “Den ve vill march vit der panzers and invade New Hampshire.”

Jessie played along. “Oh, Mein Fuhrer, noone can argue vit your military cheenyuss, but vy would ve vant New Hampshire?”

“Becaussss, dey have den cheap booze, und I can haff much Jaegermeister, zo I can get der shtinking drunk, zo I can forget that Russia kicked my ass!” They were laughing so hard that Jessie fell back into Crash, practically knocking him over. He steadied, and she ended up with her head on his shoulder, both of his arms around her waist, and both of them still laughing.

Sophia and Warren had been standing beside them, unseen, when Sophia finally spoke up. “What is going on?” she asked with a smile.

Jessie just looked up, and, with a gleam in her eye, pointing at Sophia, said, “Mein fuhrer, vhat do you tink about den fine egzample of den Deutschen Fraulien vich ve haff profided for you?”

Crash looked up, and, changing into Worf mode, said, “Nice girl.....great tits.” Leading to more convulsive laughter. Even Sophia and Warren laughed at that.

Crash scrambled out from behind Jesse, and, still in Worf mode, turned to Warren and said, “Permission to leave the bridge to go take a piss, sir.”

“Permission granted, lieutenant,” Warren-as-Picard said with a smile. “Save my spot, meine weinerschnitzel,” Crash called back to Jessie.

Sophia and Warren shook their heads in amazement, and sat down on the blanket. Jessie, who was still trying to stop laughing, shimmied up and out from under the umbrella, so she could see Warren and Sophia. She sputtered, still giggling.

“What, on earth, has gotten into you, She-Devil?” asked Warren.

“Oh my God. I’m laughing so hard my chest hurts.”

“You certainly seem to have hit it off.”

“My God, he’s **fantastic!**” Jessie surprised herself with the vehemence of that. “We even had a very nice serious talk, and then he just went **off** again.”

“You two seemed awfully cozy underneath that umbrella,” Warren commented.

“Oh, yeah,” Jessie regained her usual bite, “and this **wasn’t** a set-up, Prep Boy. Yeah, surrrrrre it wasn’t.”

“Jess, it wasn’t. Really.”

“Well, then, dammit, it **should** have been!” They all laughed at that one. “My oh my, **where** have you been hiding this guy?”

“Jess, I’m just glad you got the old Crash to come out. He’s been in such a funk over this whole Alison thing. It’s nice to see my best friend back.”

“Yeah, he told me all about that. Dumping him for a neighbor of yours? That’s rough.”

“Yeah, it has been. I see them all the time, and I try to be nice, but it’s hard. Matt and Ally are my friends, but Crash is my **best** friend. The whole thing sucked. And, since Matt is a neighborhood cat, they’re at all the neighborhood parties, which means Crash won’t come, which sucks. I miss him at them.”

Jessie smiled slightly, and said, quietly, “He’s going tomorrow night.”

“WHAT? He is?”

Jessie’s smile got a little wider. “And so am I.”

“WHAT? You are?” That was Sophia.

“Yeah. We made a deal. I’ll go if you go. So, we’re going.”

“Unbelievable,” said Warren.

THE GRAPE FETISH (Chapter 24)

“Jessica Reidel? What are you doing here?”

“Claws in, Cheryl,” Warren said. “She’s a friend of mine, and Sophie’s **best** friend.”

“Come on in, Jess,” Mo smiled. “Glad you finally came, Sophia told me she’s been trying for a while.”

“Yeah. I decided this one was a good one to come to.”

“Oh, great,” said Cheryl. “Sophie got any other burnout friends she can bring?”

Jessie looked Cheryl in the eye and said, “Hey, Wheeler, the sun’s still up. How did you get out of your coffin?”

“Now what is that supposed to mean?”

“Jesus, if you need insults explained to you, you’re beyond **any** kind of hope.”

“Oh, I knew what you meant.”

Jessie sighed dramatically. “So you **asked** what I meant just so you could hear the sound of your own voice wafting melodiously through the yard, is that it? “

“What are you talking about?”

Jessie just snorted, and turned to Warren. “Does she **always** need a fucking road map to keep up?” Warren just laughed.

Cheryl said, “Hey, Warren, why is it that all of these lowlife friends of yours feel compelled to insult me?”

“Maybe because you insult them first?”

“Or,” added Jess, “maybe it’s because Warren tends to have friends with half a brain, and, for anyone with half a brain, insulting you is like shooting fish in a barrel.”

“Did you just call me stupid?”

“If I have to explain everything I say, you just answered your own question, didn’t you?”

“I’d rather be stupid than a burnout!”

“That’s because you’re stupid. Listen, I could kill three million brain cells and still be about a gazillion up on you, sweetie.”

Cheryl just sputtered indignantly.

“Y’know, I just can not **stand** all these witty comebacks, Wheeler.”

“I don’t need to give **you** any witty comebacks.”

“Oh, yes you do. I know you; I know what you’re like. You come here and take great satisfaction in being the Queen of All Insults, because you’re used to dealing with folks like Warren and Mo who are too nice to get into it with you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“How wrong am I?” Jessie asked. “Not even a little bit,” Warren said, and Sophia and even Mo concurred.

“I still can’t believe Mo let Sophia bring you,” Cheryl said, changing the subject.

“Well, **somebody** has to supply the witty repartee. It sure as hell ain’t gonna be **you**.”

Cheryl sputtered, and Jessie added, “Oh, look! More witty repartee!”

“She’s such a loser!” Cheryl said to the air.

“Wow. I’m a **loser**. What an original insult! How long did it take you to come up with **that** bon mot, Wheeler—three months?”

Cheryl just sputtered again.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured.”

Warren just laughed. “Cheryl, silence might be the best option. You are **so** out of your league, here, you have no idea.”

“Fine,” Cheryl said with forced haughtiness. “Christine and I are going to sit over on the grass, where it’s more hospitable.”

“Yeah, there are no actual other **humans** over there. When Wheeler looks for hospitable, she looks for a wide, empty space.” Jessica sniggered. Cheryl just turned on her heel and stomped off, Christine in tow.

They settled down after that. Nobody noticed Crash slip in, grab some dip and a coke from the table, and slip in next to Jessie.

“Nice party.....good dip,” Crash Worfed.

“Crash!” Mo yelled. “You came!”

Jessie looked at Crash and smiled, and then turned to Warren, and, in her best Deanna Troi, said, “Captain...I sense a great turbulence of emotion from Lieutenant Worf. It’s very powerful. He is either in the grips of an incredible, overpowering, animalistic lust.... or, he **really** likes that dip.”

“I see, Counselor,” Warren-as-Picard said. “What do you suggest we do about it?”

“Well, Captain,” Jessie said, “I should either jump Mr. Worf’s bones right here on the bridge, or.....I really need to try that dip!”

Crash scooped some dip on a chip, wiggled his finger at Jessie, and she smiled and opened her mouth. Crash popped the chip in. Jessie swallowed, and then went, “ooooooh.....mmmmmm.....ohhhhhh.....wow....that is **really** good dip!”

Warren and Sophia cracked up. Mo just looked bemused and a little questioning. Crash put his arm around Jessie and said, “Madam, you can dip my chip any time.”

“Is that a promise, you sexy hunk of a Klingon, you?”

“Only if you keep those claws out.”

“I need a coke,” Sophia interjected. “You want one, War?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too, Soph?” Jessie asked.

“I’ll grab yours, Jess,” said Mo. “I’ll go with you, Soph.”

When they got out of earshot of the picnic table, Mo asked Sophia, “What is going on **there?**”

Sophia smiled. “We’re not sure. This just started yesterday, when we all went to the beach together. It’s the first time they ever met. By the time the day was over, **something** was sure happening.”

“Wow. Good for Crash.”

“Yeah. It would be great for both of them. Jessie’s had one boyfriend, it lasted two years, and the ending was **not** pretty.”

They made it back to the table. Suddenly, they heard loud yelling from another part of the yard.

“What is that?” asked Warren.

Mo didn’t say anything, but Tina had no compunction. “Alison and Matt. They’ve been going at it for a couple weeks now. Money bet says they break up real soon.” Tina hadn’t quite caught what was going on between Crash and Jessie. “Hey, Crash, maybe it’s a second chance opportunity for you. I do know that one of the things she screamed at him the other day was ‘I never should have broken up with Jay!’”

Jessie froze, and caught her breath. She couldn't believe how hard that hit her. Shit, she had known this guy for a **day**! They obviously had a rapport, but still...she couldn't believe that the thought of Jay going back with Ally had made her practically paralyzed. Oh my, she thought to herself, my feelings are **much** stronger than I realized. I wanted to ease into this. No chance of that, if there's competition from an old flame. A competition that I'd most likely lose, anyway.

And then Crash spoke up. "Naah, Tina. Been there, done that, don't wanna do it again."

Tina, oblivious to all the looks she was getting, pushed the issue: "You mean, if she asked you to go out with her again, you'd turn her down?"

"In a shot," said Crash. "She made her bed, she can lie in it. I,"—and he shot a little look at Jessie—"am moving on in my life."

Jessie relaxed. Tina finally caught a clue, said, "Ohhhhh," and shut up.

Most everyone had drifted to the lawn or the basketball court, but Crash and Jessie were still over by the picnic table, settled in a lounge chair, joking and laughing and feeding each other chip dip, and grapes.

"Who brought the grapes?" Crash asked.

"**I** brought the grapes. I always bring grapes. Y'see, I have had this lifelong search to find a man who let me lie in his lap and feed me grapes. And, lookie here, you're feeding me grapes, and I didn't even have to ask!"

Crash was sitting in the lounge chair properly, with Jessie perched on the end. "Yeah, Jess, but you're not in my lap."

Jess rectified that quickly enough, settling in between his legs, and leaning back on him. One of his arms snaked around her waist. The other one dangled a bunch of grapes in front of her mouth. "I don't have to be told twice," Jess said, as she bit off a grape.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Jessie occasionally biting off a grape. Then she spoke, "This is very, very strange."

"What is?"

"**This**. I'm sitting a guy's lap, cuddling, being fed grapes—a guy I met **yesterday**! Crash, I don't **do** stuff like this. I'm notoriously wary around guys."

"Well, if it helps any, this isn't **my** normal MO, either."

Jessica sighed. "I'm surprising the fuck out of myself, I'll tell you. Jason, I like you. A **lot**. The second day I know you. And I don't quite believe it myself."

Crash just laughed. “Jessie, I like you a lot, too. We had an instant rapport, there’s no denying it. And I don’t believe it any more than you do.”

“And, Jesus Christ, you’re a **Preppie**! After the unmerciful ribbing I’ve given Sophia about Warren, I will **never** hear the end of this.”

Crash put on his best dumb-tough-guy voice and said, “You want I should get a tattoo to hide my essential Preppiness?”

Jessie laughed, “Only if you tattoo something sentimental on your chest.”

“Y’mean, like, ‘Jessica’?”

“I was thinking more on the line of ‘Phasers Set On Stun’.” Crash laughed. “Or, maybe, ‘Mother’”

“Oh, boy,” said Crash. “You obviously haven’t met my mother yet.”

“Oh really? Does that imply that someday I will?”

“Well, when the time is right. Like five years after we’re married, if I can’t hold out longer than that.”

Jessie laughed. “Don’t want her to get Full Metal Jessica too soon?”

“Oh, no, the other way around. My mother is not for the faint of heart.”

“I’m never faint of heart, and how bad can your mother be?”

“I can’t do her justice, since I have to live with her. Ask Warren. Trust me.”

“OK, I will. Hey, buster, you’re neglecting the grapes!”

He fed her another, but said, “Hey, I think I’ve been pretty diligent with the grapes, O Mistress. So what does **I** get out of this?”

“A pretty girl in your lap? The leftover grapes? Phasers set on stun? The rewards are limitless.”

“Ah.”

They heard talking from the grass area, where the rest of the crew was. It became obvious that Matt and Ally were making the rounds, putting on a happy face and pretending that everything was just ducky. As far as Crash knew, she still didn’t know he was here. He was kind of at a loss what to do if she came this way. He was very comfortable sitting with Jess this way, but this was **very** new. Ally would be insanely jealous to see this,

which he found very satisfying, but he was **not** going to use Jessie for that. Then again, they weren't sitting like this to **make** Ally jealous or anything. They just were.

Jessie picked up on what Crash was thinking about. "You think they're coming this way?"

"Dunno."

"She know you're here tonight?"

"I don't think so."

"If what Tina said is true, she's going to get jealous seeing us here like this."

"I don't much care."

"You don't?"

"Well, I'll admit to a small bit of satisfaction, considering it took her less than a week to rub my nose in it. But, really, I don't care. If you want to get up, Jess, that's fine with me—I certainly do **not** want to use you to make her jealous."

"I sat here, and I'm comfortable."

"So am I."

"Then, to hell with her."

"My sentiments exactly. Now shut up and eat your grapes."

Jessica ate a few more, but Crash spoke again. "So, I know we've known each other not at all, but you want to give this a try?"

"What do you mean?"

"You want to go out with me?"

Jessie thought for a minute. "Damn, I finally get asked out by a guy I think I really like, and he turns out to be a damn Preppie."

"Yeah, but a preppie that's handy with the grapes."

Jessie laughed, then sat silent for a minute. "Yeah, Jason, I think I'd like to go out with you." She thought for a minute. "Now what do we do?"

Crash slipped back into Worf mode, and intoned, "I will recite Klingon love poetry, while you hurl heavy objects."

“Rrrroooowwwrrrrr!!” Jessie purred.

“Should we go tell ‘em?”

“Who?”

“I was thinking of Warren and Sophia in particular.”

“I’ll take care of it.” She sat up in the lounge chair. “HEY EVERYBODY, SHUT UP AND LISTEN UP FOR A MINUTE!” She bellowed. Then she waited for the murmuring to die down. “HE ASKED ME OUT. I SAID YES. YOU MAY ALL CHEER NOW.” And then she settled back into Crash’s lap, laughing, as the gang across the yard laughed and cheered at the same time. Then she heard Sophie’s sing-song, “Jessie’s got a Preppie, Jessie’s got a Preppie!”

“Oh Shit,” laughed Jessie. “Now I’ve gone and done it.”

Crash laughed, “Well, Ally knows now.”

“Oh, shit, Jason, I forgot.”

“Who cares? You didn’t use any names so, unless someone else told them, she still doesn’t know it’s me.”

“She’s about to find out. Here she comes.”

“So, who’s over here that I have to congratulate?” Ally walked over, and then she stopped with a start. “Jason?”

“Hi, Ally. This is Jessie.”

“Nice to meet you. Nice to see you, Jay. Congratulations,” and she beat a hasty retreat.

Sophia had grabbed a private corner with Jess, while Crash hung out with Warren and some of the other guys. Matt and Ally had disappeared shortly after Ally had seen Crash.

“So, Jessie,” asked Sophia, “What has gotten **in** to you?”

“Whaddaya mean?” Jess asked innocently.

“We’ve been friends for a long time. You **never** let guys get close. Heck, the boyfriend you **did** have, he followed you around for six months before you deigned to give him the time of day. Now you’re going out with a guy you met **yesterday**?”

“I’m fairly amazed myself. Crash says that he was amazed he asked me so quickly.”

“Yeah, that’s what Warren said—he said that Crash is usually as cautious around girls as you are around guys.”

“I don’t know how to explain it, Soph. It just felt right, is all. I was with him two hours yesterday, and I realized, I really like this guy. Shit, I have been **myself** for two days, and he **still** asked me out.”

Sophia looked flabbergasted. “You turned it down, considerably, around Aaron.”

“I know. And after that whole thing collapsed, and all my painstaking reinvention of my self for the sake of my boyfriend blew up in my face, I vowed to **never** do that for the sake of a guy again. And I haven’t. I was Full Metal Jessica yesterday on the beach.”

“And how did Crash react?”

“He laughed a lot. And threw out a bunch of his own.”

“Wow.”

“Between the two of us, I think we insulted every person on the beach, including you and Warren—but you guys are used to that.”

Sophia just smiled. Jessica went on, “And then we had a serious talk about broken relationships and feeling like fifth wheels, and then we went back to insulting and joking again. It was so.....comfortable.”

“Jessie’s in love with a preppie!”

Jessie hit her on the arm. “You just shut up. Listen, we’re **not** in love. It’s too soon for that. I don’t need to be goo-goo gaa-gaa starry eyed to go out with someone, and neither does Jason. Let’s just say we’re in very serious **like** with each other, and are willing to give it a shot and see what develops.”

“Cool. I’m still amazed it happened this fast, but it’s very cool.”

“Well, I can’t speak for Jason, but I know, for myself, that I **started** with a level of trust that I usually have to build up to.”

“How so?”

“Because he’s Warren’s best friend. I figure Warren knows what he’s like, right? And I know Warren well enough to know that, if he thought his best friend was going to hurt me, he wouldn’t let him get within a mile of me, much less introduce us at a beach. I know yesterday wasn’t a setup, but, confess, Sophie—you guys are thrilled, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Sophia admitted. “And you’re right about Warren—he adores you, you know.”

“I know. I think pretty highly of him, too. Now, I’d never go out with him, mind you. But I always thought if I found a guy who had Warren’s basic decency, intelligence, and attitude on how to treat girls—plus a personality that was a little closer to mine—then I figured I’d really have something.”

“You just described Crash, you know.”

“Now **how** did I know you were going to say that? Now I just gotta find out if he’s as good a kisser as you say Warren is.”

“Sorry, I wouldn’t know personally, my lips are taken.” Sophia quipped, to Jessie’s giggles. “You haven’t kissed him, yet, to seal the deal?”

“No, he was too busy feeding me grapes! What’s mere kissing when you’re lying in a guy’s arms being fed grapes? A girl **must** have her priorities, right?”

“You found a man to feed you grapes.”

“Yeah. That’s what we were doing over here. He asked me out while he was feeding me grapes. And it was his idea—all I had to do was say ‘Grapes! I love grapes!’ and the next thing I know I’m in his arms having them dangled in front of me.”

“Now I know why you agreed to go out with him so fast. You actually found a guy to pass The Grape Test.”

“The grape test, and the Full Metal Jessica test. How could I say no?”

They ended up in the lounge chair again, finishing off the grapes. There was a small knot of people at the picnic table—Warren, Sophia, Tina, Kate, Mo, and Len. Jessie and Crash liked the arrangement—they were off in a corner a bit, but still were able to contribute to the conversation.

“Hey, Soph,” Jessie asked, “Warren ever feed you grapes?”

“I’m not all that partial to grapes. Warren feeds me ice cream.”

“Really?” Jessie smiled.

“Yeah. I sit on his lap and he feeds me ice cream.”

“Then there was the night she fed me whipped cream without using any utensils, but we won’t get into that,” Warren quipped, while Sophie blushed.

“You guys are disgusting,” said Tina. Tina was a bit younger, only 13. Kate, her best friend, was the curious one. “What do you mean, without utensils?” Kate asked.

They all cracked up laughing. “I’m not sure I want to be the one to corrupt you, Kate,” Warren quipped.

Tina whispered something in Kate’s ear, which made Kate say, “ohhhh” and blush, to everyone’s amusement.

“You’d better lay off feeding her the ice cream, anyway, War,” Jessie joked. “You’ll never lift her.”

“Ah, shaddap,” Sophie said.

“Grapes are healthier,” Jessie maintained, biting another one off the outstretched bunch.

“So, have you missed the grapes yet and bitten his hand?” an amused Warren asked.

“I never bite and tell.”

“Oh baby oh baby oh baby,” Crash put in.

“You just start reading that Klingon love poetry, honey, I’ve got the heavy objects all ready to hurl.”

“Oh baby oh baby oh baby.”

The table drifted off to other conversation, and Jessie and Crash drifted into a quiet conversation of their own. Jessie was sitting on his lap, lying sideways against his chest, their arms around each other.

And then, suddenly, Crash leaned down and kissed her.

Which Jessie thoroughly enjoyed.

They broke the kiss, and smiled at each other, and then kissed again. It turned into a bit of making out.

Which Sophie couldn’t let pass up, when she noticed it. She let them enjoy it for a bit, and then shouted something that Jessica shouted at her and Warren all the time: “Hey, get a room!!!”

Jessie threw a grape at her, and went back to kissing Crash.

DEALING WITH SOPHIA'S PAST (Chapter 25)

Three weeks into the school year, Sophia couldn't believe how well things were going. She had all new teachers, except one, and they didn't know Sophia Daniels, Troublemaker, so she got a fresh start—and she was taking advantage of it. She was studying, trying to do well, because dating Warren for 6 months had made her realize something—she wanted a future. Now that it looked like she could **have** one, she wanted one. She had read up on meteorology, and found that she had to do well in math and certain types of science. That made her concentrate on math, and she found out that she really liked it. She was doing well in Chemistry, too. And Warren had truly re-awakened her love of reading, so English was coming along fine.

The big problem was history. It was never her favorite subject to begin with—that had been her one C on her fourth quarter report card last year—and that was also the class where she had the same teacher as last year, Mr. Doherty. She imagined in her mind Mr. Doherty looking at his class lists, seeing the name Sophia Daniels, and banging his head against his desk crying “Not again! Not again!” Since her class last year had been chock-full of her buddies, that was where she had caused the most trouble. But this was a new year, and she was trying to make amends.

It wasn't working. She raised her hand, and Mr. Doherty would just smirk at her. Someone caused trouble, and she got lumped in with the blame. He made sarcastic comments all the time. Sophia understood why, she really did—he must have spent all last year seeing her face in front of him and wanting to kill her. But she **was** trying to change. And he wasn't getting it.

She'd discussed it with Warren, who advised her to talk to the man. Good advice, and she was considering it, but it was difficult.

She hoped today Mr. Doherty might notice, because they had had a quiz the day before, and she felt she had done well on it. If she had, maybe then he might notice that, this year, she **was** trying.

Mr. Doherty waited until close to the end of the class to pass out the quizzes. He went from desk to desk, making a comment on each. Then he came to her. “And, now we have Miss Daniels. I corrected this paper twelve times, because I kept looking for my enormous math error, but it wasn't there. Miss Daniels, you got a 93 on this quiz. Congratulations.”

Sophia was thrilled. She was so proud of herself. That didn't last long.

“So, Miss Daniels, which of your neighbors were you copying from? Both of them? Or did you smuggle crib sheets into the quiz? C'mon, Sophia, confess.” He stopped then, walking away with a smirk on his face, but the damage was done.

Sophia sat there as he passed out the rest of the quizzes, staring down at her desk, saying to herself, “I will **not** cry. I will **not** cry.” She cried far too often lately, she thought. She used to be able to shrug this stuff off. She felt **everything** much more than she used to. It was sometimes annoying—this was one of those times.

The bell rang, and the class flew out—it was the last period of the day—but Sophia didn't trust herself to stand, yet. She sat there, trying to control herself, hoping her continued presence in the classroom would somehow manage to go unnoticed. It didn't.

"Is there a problem, Miss Daniels?" Mr. Doherty asked.

Maybe Warren was right. Maybe this would never be solved until she said something. She was still looking down at her desk, but she controlled herself, and said, "Mr. Doherty, I would like to ask you a favor. I would like you to try to forget that you had me in your class last year."

"But, Miss Daniels, how could I ever do that?" he said with the smirk in his voice that Sophia had come to expect. "I mean, your presence in my classroom last year was **so** unforgettable."

"Forget it, anyway. Please."

He heard something in that plea he did **not** expect. "Miss Daniels, are you **crying**?"

She nodded no, but squeezed her eyes tighter.

"Why on earth are you crying?"

Sophia just pointed at the quiz, still on her desk.

"Oh, I get it," said Mr. Doherty. "All upset that I called you out on your cheating, eh?"

Then, Sophia did something that she didn't often do. She got mad.

"I did **not** CHEAT! I **studied** for this! I worked for this! I sit in this class every day, I do your assignments, I pay attention, I try to contribute, I do **everything** I can think of to try to show you that I am **not** the lost little girl that was in your class last year, and you **refuse** to notice! Then we have a quiz. I knew I did well on it. I figured, **now** you'll notice. And you give it back to me, with that grade, and I get to feel proud of myself for a whole THREE SECONDS before you accuse me of cheating!" Sophia crushed the quiz into a little ball, threw it in the general direction of the wastebasket, and started storming out of the room.

"Sophia, wait." She stopped. Mr. Doherty retrieved the quiz from the floor, smoothed it out, and looked at it. "You did this? All on your own?"

Her back still to him, she nodded.

"Oh, shit. Jesus Christ," he said. Sophia turned back towards him, surprised. "Sophia, I am **sorry**."

“Thank you for saying that.”

“I told myself when I first started teaching, that I’d never give up on a student completely, that kids can change. I’ve gotten jaded because I’ve seen **so** few of them change.”

Sophia grinned slightly. “Well, you’ve got one.”

“It seems so. I really am sorry, Sophia. And, considering where you were last year, you have every right to feel **extremely** proud of this.” He handed over the crumpled quiz. Sophia laughed and tried to smooth it out more. “What happened?”

“Let’s just say that a lot of very, very bad things that were happening to me stopped. And a lot of very, very good things started.”

“They must have been very bad.”

“Yeah, they were.” Sophia said. And, since she had told herself she was going to try to speak out about what happened to her, she told him. “I spent two years being a victim of boyfriend abuse. It was particularly bad from last October until March.”

“Oh, Sophia, now I really **am** sorry. I should have been able to tell,”

“How?”

“I’ll tell you that in a minute. Let’s just say I’m around abused teenagers a lot, especially those that are being abused by a friend or boyfriend. Anyhow, what I wanted to ask was, how did you get out of it?”

“I met someone who said the right things at the right time, and ended up taking a few punches for me from the asshole.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Now he is. Back then he was just a good friend. He kept telling me things, and somehow they got through. And, when I knew I needed to get out of this, and was having trouble finding the courage, he showed me **his**, which made it easier to find mine.”

“And he helped you build your self confidence back up.”

“Bingo.”

“Which made you want to fix parts of your life you had neglected, including do well in school.”

“Well, that, **plus** the fact that I somehow happened to fall in love with a studyaholic genius preppy nerd who’s ranked third in his class—at St. Michael’s, no less. A girl has **got** to keep up, you know.”

Mr. Doherty laughed at that. “Now **that** is something I never would have put even a penny on.”

“You are **not** the only one.”

“So, let me ask you, Sophia—how are you dealing with the ramifications of your abuse? Are you in any therapy?”

“I was, over the summer. There were still some things I needed to work out, and I needed to find out if I was too dependent for my self-confidence on Warren—that’s my boyfriend. I also went with my mother a few times, because we needed help in repairing our relationship.”

“How’d the therapy work for you?”

“It **was** helpful, although a lot of what the guy told me I had figured out on my own. “

“You and your mother?”

“Better than ever.”

“What did he say about Warren?”

“He said I probably am a little over-dependent on him, but Warren came with me a couple of times, and the therapist also said that it was the healthiest relationship he had ever seen between two high school sophomores.”

“That’s fantastic.” Mr. Doherty smiled. “Now, I come to why I asked you all this, and why I am kicking myself for not spotting this last year.”

“Don’t kick yourself, Mr. D. I was **extremely** good at erecting walls. You didn’t notice, because you didn’t give a shit about me last year, and that’s because I made damn good and sure that you **didn’t** give a shit. You weren’t the only one I did that to. How Warren got through my walls is something I will never completely understand.”

“Did Warren have any walls you had to get through?”

“Some. He was a social misfit. He was also **terrified** of girls.” Mr. Doherty laughed at that. “I was completely the aggressor in the beginning. I asked him out. I told him I loved him first. I kissed him first. Heck, I even got physical first.” Mr. Doherty laughed louder. “Listen, socially inept boy genius preppy is a wall, too. Not as bad as mine, for sure, but it was definitely there.”

“And you got through it.”

“Yeah.”

“Sophia, I’m going to ask you if you feel like breaking down some more walls, walls you know a **lot** about.” He had been sitting on his desk, and now he hopped down and walked over to where he was standing. “I am the faculty advisor for a group here at the school. It is the Peer Counseling group. It’s students, like you, advising other students about problems. We take all comers to volunteer—anyone with some empathy and willingness to listen and try to help—but volunteers who have been through something—and have gotten through it—are especially welcome. We would **love** to have someone like you helping, because I can’t tell you how many girls we see that are suffering from abuse at the hands of a boyfriend or friend.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Now, you have to be willing to talk about what happened to you. You have to be open to sharing that. That’s the tough part, for a survivor of abuse. And if you don’t think you can handle that, I **completely** understand. I’m asking you to volunteer to do something that you may find difficult. Now, I know you work after school—that’s fine, we have plenty of volunteers that only come in one or two days. But you will be known to the faculty as a peer counselor, and you might be called out of class in a crisis. You don’t get paid for this. All you get is the undying appreciation of your honored Faculty Advisor”—Sophia laughed at that—“and the satisfaction that you did your best to help some of your peers out of a horrible situation.”

“Does peer counseling work?”

“I’d be lying if I told you it worked all the time. It might not even work **most** of the time. But, yes, we have had enough success stories for me to be proud of the group.”

“Y’know what? If I can get **one** girl out of the kind of hell I was in, that’s enough. I’ll do it.”

BACKSLIDE (Chapter 26)

“I can not **believe** I am here at the library on a Friday afternoon,” said Jessie.

“I know. Pretty depressing, isn’t it?” said Karen Laskovich

“I feel like that preppie boyfriend of mine,” grumbled Jessie.

“So, how **is** Crash?”

“Crash is great. It’s just too bad I won’t get to see him this weekend. He’s got some sort of family thing tomorrow, won’t make it to Nickie’s party.”

“So,” Karen smiled, “after all the shit you’ve given Sophia, how’s it feel to have bagged a preppie of your own?”

“Don’t remind me,” Jessie grimaced. “Luckily, my preppie and Sophia’s preppie are two very different people.”

“How so? They’re best friends.”

“Yes, they are. And there are a lot of similarities on a basic values and attitudes level, but their personalities are very, very different.”

“How are they such good friends, then?”

“I dunno, but they are a **howl** when they get together, I can tell you that. Crash and I double with Warren and Soph, and Crash and Warren keep us in stitches. But, good friends don’t have to have identical personalities. Look at me and Sophia. Despite all the shit she’s been through, she is **far** more open and vulnerable than I am. She’s sweeter. She’s more emotional. The differences between me and Soph are a lot like the differences between Warren and Crash.”

“Ah. I always wanted to ask you, how did you react when Warren and Sophia hooked up?”

“I put on a happy face, not trying to make Soph defensive or anything, but I worried. **Boy** did I worry. Now, remember what had just happened—I was **thrilled** Sophie had found a guy that wasn’t going to hurt her—and I knew instinctively that Warren wasn’t going to hurt her. But I worried. I worried about how the gang was going to react, I worried that it would blow up in Sophia’s face. I just worried, because I couldn’t see them ever working. I mean, my first impression of Warren was that he was a complete dork.”

“You never said anything to Sophia?”

“No. Look, I **knew** this wasn’t Scott Revisited. I warned her about Scott, because I just got vibes from him that he was bad news right from the beginning. My worries about Warren were different. She was very vulnerable. Going out with someone like Warren was a **complete** 180-degree turn for her. I didn’t worry that she was going to get killed, like with Scott, but I worried that he was going to get hurt, emotionally, more so than she ever had. She **really** opened herself up emotionally when she started going out with Warren. It was almost a bit scary.”

“Is that why you gave them shit all the time?”

Jessie smirked, “No, I gave them shit because I give **everybody** shit.” Karen giggled. “If I hadn’t given them shit, Sophie would’ve suspected something. Heck, I **still** give them shit. And I do **not** worry about them anymore.”

“You don’t?”

“Naaah,” Jessie smiled. “The more time I spend with them, the more I realize I’ve got nothing to worry about. That relationship **works**, in every possible way. I never woulda thunk it, but it really, really works. And I realized something else—Warren is one of the most admirable people I have ever had the pleasure to know. And if you repeat that, I’ll kill you—it’ll ruin my rep.”

Karen laughed. “Maybe you at least ought to tell Sophie.”

“Oh, Sophie knows. So does Warren. I don’t have to tell them how I feel about him, and them together. They know.”

“What about you and Crash?”

Jessie sighed. “Now I’ve got a whole new one to worry about.”

“How so? Things not going well?”

“Just the opposite. Except for the fact that he lives too damn far away and I don’t get to see him enough, things are going remarkably well. **Too** well.”

“Too well?”

“I keep waiting for the inevitable explosion. We hardly ever even **argue**—once in a while, but nothing serious. He laughs at all my jokes, I laugh at all his. When we get together, it’s like we never left one another’s side. It’s so comfortable, it amazes me. This has **got** to blow up in my face, sooner or later, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe it doesn’t, Jess. Maybe Crash is **the** guy.”

“I’ve thought of that. Now that is **really** scary. I don’t know if I’m in love yet, but it’s getting there in an awful hurry.”

“Wow.”

“I keep waiting for a fight. I keep waiting for a big blow out, to see how we react to it.”

“You don’t necessarily need that. Sophia and Warren **never** fight.”

“Yeah, I know. And that’s the one thing left that **does** worry me about them. What’s gonna happen if they have a big fight?”

“What do you mean, you can’t go to Nick’s party??” Sophia yelled.

They were in her house, up in her bedroom. “Well, I have this horrible Chemistry exam on Monday. I’m going to be studying most of the weekend. It was either give up the

party, or not come here tonight, and I figured you'd rather have me here for our Friday night tryst," Warren grinned.

Sophia was not happy, "Yeah, **right**. You just wanted to have sex. That was more important than going to a party that's important to me. As long as you get your roll in the hay, right?"

That one hurt. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Sophia. I'll go now, if you'd like."

"Fine. GO! Who needs you?"

Warren left, leaving Sophia in tears.

The next night, Sophia walked into Nick's party, grabbed a beer, and plopped down next to Jessie.

"Yo, Soph? Where's loverboy?"

"He had to **study**. He told me last night. He had enough time to come over my house to have **sex** last night, but not to come to the party. We had a huge fight. I kicked him out."

"What?"

"Yeah. Fuck 'em. If he didn't know how important Nick's parties are to me, than fuck him."

"Soph, did you **tell** him how important Nick's parties are to you?"

"He should know."

"Soph, this is **not** like you, and blowing off something that's important to you, if he knows about it, is **not** like Warren."

"Ah, fuck it." She downed the beer, and reached for another.

"You're pounding that beer pretty hard," Jess commented.

"What are you, my mother? Or Warren?"

"Forget I said anything." Jess snorted, and got up off the seat.

Three hours later, Jessie was watching with increasing dismay. She was talking to Karen about it.

"It's like it's the old Sophia, only **worse**."

“Have you tried to get her to stop?”

“I’ve tried, Nick’s tried, Missy’s tried. She’s completely trashed, and, the way she’s acting around the guys at this party, she’s going to end up getting laid and not even remember it.”

“I know.”

“There’s only **one** person who can get her to stop.” Jessie stood up and went over to the phone. “And I don’t know his number, but I know where to get it.” She dialed a number, and it rang. “Oh, I hope his family thing is over. Please, Crash, be home, pleasepleaseplease...”

“Hello.”

“CRASH! Thank God you’re home.”

Crash just laughed. “Well, she-devil, it’s nice to hear your voice, too.”

Jessie smiled. “Normally, yes, I’d just be happy to hear that sexy voice of yours. But not today. Jason, I’ve got a huge emergency on my hands. I need Warren’s phone number.”

“Sure. 274-9806.”

“Thanks, Jason. I’ll call you tomorrow and tell you what went on. And you can recite more love poetry.”

“You got yourself a date, she-devil. Ciao.”

She hung up and dialed. “Hello.”

“Warren?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“Jessie. I need your help. You know where Nick lives, where the party is, right? I need you go get down here.”

Warren sighed. “Jess, Sophie and I had a huge fight last night. I’m not quite sure I want to come down there. She was **not** particularly nice to me last night, I didn’t deserve it, and I was going to let the weekend go by before I tried to talk to her.”

“Warren, she’s backsliding.”

“What?”

“She’s drunk off her ass, won’t stop drinking, and won’t stop flirting with every guy at the party—including a few that will **not** take no for an answer if she pushes it too far. She’s completely out of her mind. I can’t get her to stop, Nickie can’t get her to stop, Karen can’t.....”

“I’m on my way.”

Jessie hung up the phone. “He’s coming.”

He burst in a few minutes later. Jessie and Karen were waiting for him. They pointed him to a seat, where Sophia was all over Greg, one of the less-savory members of the gang.

Warren picked her up, and spun her around on the couch. “Sophie. Time to go home.”

“Warren? What are you doing here? I thought you had to **study**! I donwanna go home I’m having funnnnn.”

“Hey, what the fuck?” Greg interjected. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Her boyfriend.”

“Yeah, she didn’t seem to care about no **boyfriend** a minute ago.”

“That’s cause she’s drunk. C’mon, Soph, up and at ‘em.”

“But I don’t wanna!”

“You heard the lady,” Greg said with a smirk. “She’d rather stay here with me.”

Jessie and Karen were watching this. “Uh-oh.Greg’s an asshole. This could be a problem.”

“C’mon, baby,” Greg was saying, “You can stay here and have fun with me.”

Warren pulled Sophie away from Greg, and said, “She is drunk. She is out of her mind. She doesn’t know what she’s doing. She’s in no position to consent to anything, which means, if you try anything, it will be called **rape**. . And if you put your hands on her one more time, I will break every bone in your fucking body, do you understand me?”

Greg snarled, and started to get up to approach Warren, but Nick emerged from the crowd just in time.

“Greg. That’s enough.”

“Fuck that! This little pussy threatened me.”

“Good. Now **I’m** threatening you. Sophia is drunk off her ass. She wouldn’t approach you if she knew what she was doing, because she hates your guts.”

Warren had Sophia standing up, barely. “Oh, Shit. Jessie, Karen? I need help with her. Get her out to the kitchen, away from this crowd.” They did, with great difficulty, because Sophia could barely walk.

When they had her sitting, Warren looked at her and said, “There is no way I’m going to be able to walk her home, and I’m not sure I want to be putting a drunk 15 year old in a cab. Anyone here with a car who isn’t drunk?”

Jessie thought for a minute. “John. John Vassar. He’s got a car, and he just got here, so I doubt he’s drunk. He’s not a huge drinker, anyway.”

“Know where he is?”

“Over there, putting the moves on someone,” Karen smirked.

“I hate to interrupt him,” Warren smiled, “but I’m going to have to.”

He approached John, who was deep in conversation with some girl. “John.”

John looked up. “Hey, Wimp-Man!” He still called him that, but it was just a joke, now. “I’d **love** to chat with you a bit, but I’m a little busy right now, pal.”

“John, I’ve got an emergency. Sophia is trashed off her ass, is about to get herself in trouble, and there is **no** way I’m going to be able to walk her home, and I have got to get her out of here.”

“Damn. How did **this** happen?”

“I wasn’t here, I was home studying, and she decided to go nuts, or something.”

“Shit. You need a ride?”

“Yeah. I hate to break you away from this lovely lady here.....”

John’s friend just laughed, as did John. “Go, John. Go help your friends. I think it’s positively admirable. I’ll still be here.”

“Thanks, babe.” John stood up. “Lead the way, Wimp-man.”

“Thanks, John. I appreciate this.”

They got to Sophia’s house, and John helped Warren get her up to her bedroom. She was passed out by this point.

“You all set, Wimp-man?”

“Yeah, John. I’ll take care of her. Thanks for the assist.”

“What are friends for?” John smirked, and left.

Warren looked down at his passed out girlfriend, and sighed. He went into her dresser, and found a pair of pajamas he knew she liked, took her clothes off, and put the pajamas on her. It was like trying to dress a rock, he thought to himself. He checked her breathing and pulse, to make sure this was just drunkenness. Everything seemed OK. He went in her closet, found a blanket, and put it on the big chair. He went to her bookcase, pulled out a book—“Torvill and Dean’s autobiography, I’ve never read that”—and planted himself in the chair, curled up in the blanket. He made a quick call to his mother, explaining the situation, and curled up in the chair, one eye on the book, one eye on Sophia.

Mrs. Kovach arrived home from work shortly after 2am. She was surprised to see Sophie’s door open. She peeked in and saw Sophia, sleeping—and then saw Warren in the chair, reading.

“Warren?”

“Hi, Mrs. K.”

“What’s going on?”

Warren explained the night’s events to Ellen. “Oh, Jesus,” Ellen said. “She really got out of hand?”

“And how.”

“I thought this was over?”

“Aaah, it’s alright if she cuts loose every once in a while. I just wish she had done it with me around.”

“I hope she doesn’t go on a bender like this every time she gets mad at you.”

“Aaah, we’ll work it out. I’m going to stay here, keep an eye on her. I told my mother not to expect me, she knows what’s up.”

“Warren, get in the bed. It’s a double. Plenty of room for you.”

Warren laughed. “I was trying to preserve a bit of decorum.”

“Why bother?” They both laughed. “No, the kids aren’t here. Go get comfortable. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Mrs. Kovach closed the door, and Warren stripped down to his underwear and climbed into bed with Sophia.

“Hrmvwrhsrsf,” Sophia said, as she woke up. “I feel like a truck ran over me.” She suddenly realized that there was someone in the bed with her. She didn’t remember much from last night. She was afraid to look over to see who was in her bed. She flipped over, and looked up to see her boyfriend, a book in his hand, sitting up, smiling at her.

“WARREN? What are you doing here?”

“Good morning sleepyhead. How do you feel?”

“Like landfill.”

Warren chuckled. “Well, I already went downstairs and brewed the pot of tea. That’s good for a hangover.”

“What happened?”

“How much do you remember from last night?”

“Not much,” Sophia admitted.

“I got an emergency call from Jessie about 10:30. You were drunk beyond all belief, completely incoherent, and throwing yourself all over Greg Cunningham.”

“GREG CUNNINGHAM? Oh, God. I **hate** him. What the hell was I doing throwing myself at **him**?”

“Oh, I don’t think you knew who he was, at that point.”

“Oh, Jesus. And you showed up and preserved my honor?” she smirked at him.

“Yes, ma’am,” he saluted. “I told him if he didn’t get his hands off you, I was going to break every bone in his body.” She stared at him, wide-eyed. “Luckily, before he got a chance to call me on it, Nickie grabbed him and spelled out the facts of life to him. I grabbed John Vassar, and he graciously gave us a ride back here, since you were in **no** condition to walk. I put you to bed, settled into the chair until your Mom got home. She gave me permission to make myself comfortable in the bed, here.”

Sophia laughed. “You changed my clothes?”

“Yeah, it’s not like I haven’t seen everything you’ve got. Besides, that shirt you were wearing was covered in beer.”

Sophia laughed, then got very serious. “Oh my God. If you hadn’t shown up.....”

“I did, so don’t worry about it, and give thanks to Jessie for quick thinking.”

“Oh, Warren, I’m so ashamed. Yeah, I was mad at you, but that’s no excuse for how I behaved.”

“I’m sorry, Soph. If I had realized how important that party was to you, I would have made a way to be there.”

“Yeah, it was important, but not **that** important. Not important enough to react the way I did.”

“Next time you want to go on a bender, make sure I’m there, OK?”

“Oh, I think this is going to be the last bender I go on for a long time. Damn, all this interrupted you’re studying, didn’t it?”

“Aah, don’t worry about it. I got a lot in before Jess called. And it turned out to be worth it, interrupting myself.”

“How so?”

“You must have known, in your sleep somehow, that I was here. Because I woke up with your arms around me.”

“Really?” Sophia smiled. “Actually, I had a dream that we were in bed together. I guess it wasn’t entirely a dream. I just wish **I** had woken up that way.”

“Shit, I’m just glad you woke **up**. I’ve been up for two hours!” They laughed.

“It is very nice, waking up with you here, in any case. Warren, I’m so sorry.”

“I know. So am I.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. How ‘bout a good morning kiss?” Sophie giggled, and they shared a long kiss. “Now, get your butt out of that bed. I don’t brew pots of tea for nothing, you know!”

WARREN TO THE RESCUE (Chapter 27)

Well, it **seemed** like a good idea to Sophia, getting out of bed and going downstairs for some tea.

Until she stood up. And the room started spinning. “Uh-oh” she said, as she wobbled in place. And then her stomach made itself known. “Shit, the room is spinning, I can’t stand up, and I am gonna be **sick**.”

Warren was instantly at her side. He threw her arm around his neck, and put his around her back, underneath her shoulders, trying to hold her weight and guide her to the bathroom. “C’mom, Soph, you can make it. I’ll help you. C’mom.”

“Auuugggghhhh” Sophia moaned pitifully. Warren went as fast as he could, as Sophia turned green and clutched her stomach. Into the bathroom they went, and almost made it to the toilet. Almost. The first expulsion of the contents of Sophia’s stomach ended up mostly on Sophia. The rest did make it into the toilet.

When Sophia finally got finished, she slumped onto the floor. “Oh God. I can’t move. I can’t stand up. I can’t even lift my arms. And the room is spinning.” She looked down and saw the vomit on her pajama tops, **down** her pajama tops, in her hair, on her face. “Oh yuck. This is gonna make me hurl again.”

“I don’t think you have anything left in there **to** hurl,” Warren said. He was leaning over the bathtub, running the water. “salright, Soph, I’ll fix you up.” He started taking off her soiled PJs.

“Is there a problem up there?” Sophia’s mother called.

“Yeah, actually, there is, Mrs. K. Can you come up to the bathroom for a minute, please? I need a hand.”

She appeared at the bathroom door. “Oh, Yuck! Sophia!” Sophia looked up, pitifully. Warren had her PJs off by now.

“Uh, could you take care of these messy things, please, Mrs. K?”

“Oh, great, Warren, I’m watching you strip my daughter naked and you want me to wash the clothes for you?” Warren cracked up—even Sophia grinned and said, “Not like I’m in any condition to **enjoy** him stripping me.”

“OK,” Mrs. Kovach took the clothes. “Eew, disgusting. These will go in the wash—immediately, in fact. Anything else you need?”

“I think a cup of that tea I brewed will be helpful.”

“Right.” She looked at Sophia. “Oh, God, Warren, it’s all **over** her.”

“Got that part covered.” He reached over and shut the water off—Mrs. K hadn’t really noticed that the tub was filling. Warren stripped Sophia’s panties off. “OK, into the tub, Pookie.” Mrs. K shook her head, and went downstairs to wash the PJs and get the tea. Warren maneuvered Sophia into the tub very carefully.

“Oh, Warren, I don’t even think I have the strength to wash myself.”

“Then don’t.” Warren grabbed a washcloth and some soap, and started washing Sophia’s face and chest, to get the worst of the stuff off. “Where’s your shampoo?”

“That one,” she pointed.

“Right. Have to dunk your hair, Pookie.” She did so, and Warren took the shampoo and lathered her hair up.

Mrs. Kovach walked back up the stairs with the tea, and appeared at the bathroom door. She watched Warren lovingly wash Sophie’s hair, and then clean up her face and torso.

“”Feelin’ any better?” Warren asked.

“A bit. Warren, you’re too good to me.”

“You **are** too good to her,” Mrs. Kovach smiled, handing over the tea.

“Horsehockey. She’s the ruler of my heart, right?”

That made Sophia remember something. She reached up to her neck. “Shit, Warren, my **pendant!**”

“Relax. It’s on your nightstand. I took it off last night, I was afraid you’d strangle yourself with it in your condition.” He held the teacup up to her lips. “Here, try some of this.”

“You guys need anything else?” Mrs. Kovach asked

“Actually, I think she needs some clothes,” Warren smiled.

“My blue sweatsuit is clean. Bras and panties in my dresser.”

“Got it.”

Warren helped her dry off and then get dressed. He steered her gingerly down the stairs. She was still unsteady, but feeling a lot better. He got her into a kitchen chair.

“Warren, I’m such an asshole,” she said.

“No, you’re not. You got carried away, that’s all. Now, you need to eat something.”

“I don’t know if I could hold anything down.”

“You have to try. Something light—toast, english muffins, something like that.”

“We’ve got English Muffins. I’ve got them, Warren, you sit down.” Mrs. Kovach said.

Warren called his mother. She was worried, but understanding.

Sophia sipped her tea. “Warren, I can’t believe you did this for me.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Why **would** you? I screwed up. I went on a bender, and you take care of me, and clean me up? You didn’t have to do this.”

“Sophia, I love you. And I feel a touch responsible—this fight was partially **my** fault. I walked out on you Friday night—don’t you think I realize you have abandonment issues? I should have been more sensitive.”

“Yeah, but I yelled at you. I know you don’t react well to that.”

“It’s alright.”

“It’s **not** alright. You don’t know what I’m feeling right now. It’s not particularly good.”

“Not going to throw up again, are you?” Warren grinned.

“No,” Sophie grinned back.

“Then what are you talking about, Soph?” Mrs. Kovach interjected, putting the English muffins down in front of Sophia.

Sophia looked up. “I will **never** forget that my boyfriend had to wash my own vomit out of my hair. I will never forget that as long as I live. If he wasn’t so tender and loving about it, it would have been humiliating. First he had to save me from possibly being raped, then he had to tuck me in, then he had to give me a bath because I was unable to do it.”

“I love him for it. I can’t put into words how much I love him for it. It was one of the most generous, unselfish, caring things anyone has ever done for me. And I hope to God he **never, ever** has to do it again.”

Sophia smiled. “At least not because I’ve gone on a bender. If it’s ten years from now and he’s cleaning up morning sickness, that’s a different story.” Everyone laughed. Sophia sobered again. “But this? I get so fucking drunk I get sick and my boyfriend has to clean me up? He did it once, and I will never forget it, because it’s nice to know he **will** do it, but I’m going to make sure that’s the **last** time he has to do it.”

“I didn’t mind, Pookie, really.”

“You didn’t mind cleaning up **vomit**?”

“Might as well get used to it, I **do** want to be a pediatrician, right?” Everyone laughed.
“And, no, I could have done without the vomit. But I will give you a bath **anytime** you want.”

“Ah, that’s just because you like to see me naked.”

“I can do that without the bath, Sex Kitten.” Even Ellen laughed at that. “Nah, washing your hair and cleaning your body for you was very romantic, in a weird co-dependent kind of way.”

Sophia cracked up. “I must admit, when I wasn’t feeling overly needy, I **did** enjoy it. I was alternating between ‘I can’t believe I got so fucked up that I need him to do this for me’ and ‘hey, this is kind of nice, isn’t it?’”

Warren cracked up. “Well, next time there will be no vomit involved.”

“And it will be **mutual**.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Just as long as you don’t involve **me** this time,” Mrs. Kovach interjected wryly.

“Well, Mrs. K, we only involve you if there’s vomit involved.” Warren quipped. Sophie cracked up.

“Oh, **thanks**, Warren.” Mrs. Kovach hit him in the arm.

There was a knock at the door. “Got it,” Ellen said. She walked back in with Peg Kelleher.

“Hi, Mom.” She handed him his bookbag. “Thanks.”

“What’s this?” Sophia asked.

“Oh, I was going out anyway, so Warren asked me to bring his bookbag over.” Peg said.

“Why?” Sophia asked Warren.

“Gotta study, right?”

“Well, yeah, but I thought you’d go home.”

“You want me to?”

“NO!” Ellen and Peg laughed at her—even Sophie got a sheepish grin. “What I mean, is, well.....”

“Listen,” Warren said, “I **do** need to study, but I’ve studied here before, and I’m staying with you today. OK?”

“OK.”

“How are you feeling, Sophia?” asked Peg.

“Like someone who did something very, very stupid,” she said, grimacing. Everyone laughed at that. “But, I feel better.”

“Good. Have to go, Warren, see you at home later.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

They were up in Sophia’s room that afternoon. Warren was studying. Sophia had done some of that, but had finished, so now she was reading a book.. She was sitting in the easy chair, Warren having commandeered her desk.

“Soph, Warren, going to pick up the kids,” Ellen called up. “Be back in a couple hours.”

“Bye, Mom,” Soph called down. She heard the door click, and her mom’s car drive away.

She got out of the chair, and walked over to Warren, who was buried in his chemistry text. She hopped up on the desk, getting his attention. “Does my Snugglebear think he can afford a bit of a study break?”

Warren put the book down. “Yeah, I think my GPA can afford your presence.”

“Good.” She hopped off the desk, pushed the chair back, and kneeled down in front of him. “Snugglebear took very good care of me this morning. Now, I get to take very good care of him.” She unzipped his pants.

“A wonderful idea, but, do you think you’re up to it.”

“I’m fine. More than fine. Did I ever tell you you were the most wonderful guy in the universe?”

“Frequently. But I never get tired of hearing it.”

Sophia laughed. “Uh-huh. I know a few other things you never get tired of, either,” she said with a wicked grin, as she withdrew his member and slipped it into her mouth.

“I must confess, I missed this Friday,” Warren said with a groan.

“Me, too, Studmuffin. You just enjoy yourself, then it will be your turn to take care of me, again.”

“Gladly, Sex Kitten.”

SANTA CLAUS IS COMING TO TOWN (Chapter 28)

It was December 17th. A light snow was falling. Warren had just gotten off the phone with Sophia, and went down to talk to his Mom.

“Hey. Mom? Got a question.”

“Shoot, honey.”

“Would you mind if Sophia came over for Christmas?”

“Not at all, honey, but does her mother mind? Wouldn’t she be more at home with her family?”

“Nah. There isn’t anything with her family. Her brother and sister are going to be with their father, so her mother is going over her aunts and uncles house. She’s invited both places, but Charlie is not her father, so she feels uncomfortable going there; and her aunt and uncle have no kids or anything so it would just be her, her mother, and them. Neither place sounds too Christmas-y. In fact, when I asked her if she wanted to come here if I could get approval, she got all excited. They’re actually doing Christmas at her house on Christmas Eve, so she’d love to come here on Christmas day.”

“Great, then. We’d love to have her. Now, I’m driving you guys to a party tomorrow night, right?”

“Yeah. Jessie and Crash, too—Crash is going to get dropped off here, and he’s staying overnight here after the party.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right.”

“Mrs. K is going to get us on the way home from work, so it will be a very late night.”

“Where’s the party?”

“Over on Wickner Street. John Vassar’s house.”

“Didn’t you used to **hate** John Vassar? Wasn’t he one of the bullies at East?”

“I have encountered a lot of my old tormentors in Sophia’s social circle,” Warren said with a grimace. Peg laughed. “He’s actually OK, and he’s known Sophie since she was practically born, so he’s accepted me because of her. He’s not a bad guy. He’s the one that helped me get her home that night she was plastered, and he willingly stopped hitting on a fabulous looking girl to help me out, so I got to give him some bonus points for that.”

Peg laughed. “You hang around with people who used to bully you?” she said a bit more seriously.

“A few. John. Nick Papadopoulos. Hey, people change. Nick has **really** changed. But, then again, so have I.”

“Nick was the one that helped you with your weightlifting, right?” Warren nodded. “How do you think **you’ve** changed, Warren?”

“I’m a lot more at ease in social situations. I’m more at ease with people than I **ever** have been.”

“Well, you’re dating a social butterfly.” They both laughed.

“Yes, I am. And she has helped me with this immensely. Everybody thinks that I help her out with some of her shit—she helps me out just as much. I’m more at ease in social situations, more comfortable in my own skin, more confident. Thanks to Sophia. Long ago, John Vassar, in a fit of pseudo-cleverness, nicknamed me Wimp-Man. Y’know—Warren, Wimp-Man? Back at East, it used to **bug** me to the point of ridiculousness. He **still** calls me Wimp-Man. But now it’s just a joke. And it’s not just a joke because he’s eased up on me, it’s a joke because I **take** it as a joke. I just stopped being upset by that crap.”

Peg smiled. “Listen, honey. I know, all in all, Sophia is good for you. I really do. As long as you don’t have to give her any more post-hangover baths, eh?” They both laughed at that.

Jessie and Sophia were waiting for Peg to pick them up at Sophia’s house.

“My parents were out last night.” Jessie offered.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Crash came down.” Jessie looked down. “I gave him an early Christmas present.”

“What?”

Jessie blushed, but didn't say anything.

"Jessie, you're blushing! I've never seen you blush." Then light dawned on Sophia.

"JESSIE! You didn't. Did you?"

Jessie just nodded, grinning from ear to ear. "He got **me** for Christmas. All of me."

"Wow. He didn't put any pressure or anything on you, did he?"

"Crash? Come on. Nope, this was mutual. We've fooled around, some, you know, but never did **it**. We were fooling around, and had gotten each other off with our hands, but then it just hit me—I want him. So, I told him—I want you. He actually almost tried to talk me out of it."

"Really?"

"Well, more like just making sure that I **really** wanted it. Boy, did I really want it. He worried about protection—you know my parents put me on the pill when I was with Aaron, not that **that** was necessary—so I reassured him about that. So we did it."

"How was it?"

"Well, Soph, you know the first time hurts. And it did, at first. He was as gentle as could be, but it hurt when he first went in. Then it **stopped** hurting. Oh **boy** did it stop hurting. It was **great**."

"You came?"

"Uh-huh. Like I said, I had gotten him off with my hand, so he lasted long enough. It was fantastic."

"But, today's the big test, you know. How do you feel about it today? Any morning-after regrets?"

"Y'know, I was almost expecting them. And they weren't there. It was fantastic and I feel great about it and I'm glad I did it, and I am **especially** glad I waited for him. He said the same thing, that he was glad Ally had never said yes."

"Jess.....are you in love?"

Jess got a contemplative look, moreso than she usually did. "I think I am. If you **ever** tell anyone I said that, I will deny it and then I will kill you." Sophia just laughed. "But he told me last night. He said that he was falling in love with me. And I told him I was falling in love with him, too."

"Afterwards?"

“Actually, before.”

“WOW. Then it means more.”

“Uh-huh. **Afterwards** he fed me grapes, naked in bed, while he read love poetry.”

Sophia cracked up laughing. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“Nope. I’m telling you, Soph, this is **my** kind of guy.”

Just then Peg beeped her horn, and the girls went out and climbed into the car.

The Vassar's large house was decorated all up in Christmas lights. It was noisy and festive inside. John and Anne threw a Christmas party every year, and made sure it was a bash. There was even a live band, some of John’s friends, playing, and they were quite good.

John opened the door. “Sophia!” He kissed her on the cheek. “Wimp-Man! Merry Christmas.” He shook Warren’s hand. “Glad you could make it. Hi, Jess!” He kissed **her** on the cheek.

“Playing the royal host, eh, John?” Jessie said with a smirk. “Oh, John, this is my boyfriend Jason. Jay, this is John.”

“Nice to meet you,” John shook his hand. “Where’d you find **him**, Jess?”

Jessie laughed. “Through Prep Boy, here,” she pointed at Warren.

“Jason, aka Crash, here, is my best friend. We introduced them over the summer, and sparks flew.” Jessie hit him on the arm.

“Your best friend, Wimp-Man? Goes to school with you?” Warren nodded. John tried to force a grimace, but it was plainly forced. “I’m so terribly sorry, but we have already reached our quota of Preppies at this here party.”

Crash looked at Jess. “Damn, I knew I shoulda got that tattoo.”

John cracked up laughing. “I’m just kidding. Come on in. Hang your coats over there, eats and drinks are in that room, and you can hear where the band is, no doubt. “

They walked in, hung up their coats, and started walking into one of the rooms. Sophia looked up at the doorway. “Ooooooh! Mistletoe!” She stopped, and Warren gave her a big kiss.

They walked through, and Jessie approached the doorway. “Ooooh, mistletoe!” She stopped, and Crash squeezed her ass. “*That* is how you do mistletoe,” Jessie joked. Then she kissed Crash, to general amusement from her friends.

The party was in full swing, and the foursome had gathered in a little knot with some of their friends. They had just come off the dance floor, and Karen was commenting on Sophia and Warren's dance prowess.

"Well, we **are** dancers," Sophia smiled. "This isn't our usual dance surface, mind you, but we do know how to move together."

"Next time we'll have to ask John to lay down a patch of ice, so we can **really** show off," Warren quipped.

"I'd love to see you guys ice dance," Karen smiled.

"You will. Sooner or later, if you want," Sophie told her.

Warren looked over to the band. They were playing a mixture of classic rock and a generous dose of Christmas Rock and Roll tunes. "They're good. I've never played with a band. I wish I had time for it."

That gave Sophia an idea. "Hold my place, Romeo, be right back." She went and found John.

"Well, hello, beautiful. You guys having a good time? I saw you and Wimp-Man cutting quite a rug earlier."

"We're having a blast, John, it's a great party. Listen. I know the band lets people sit in with them at some of these parties."

"Sure. People like to get up, have a little fun, they don't mind. Why, you thinking about getting up and warbling a tune?"

Sophia laughed. "No, it's Warren. He plays guitar, and sings really well. He's been gazing at the band all night. I think he'd be thrilled to sit in."

"Wimp-man, a rock and roller? Wonders never cease. Let me go talk to the band." He walked over, and caught them between songs. Sophia watched him, and he looked up, and pointed at Warren, and waved in a "come here" motion.

Sophia went over and grabbed Warren. "Come with me, dear heart, I've got a surprise for you." She pulled him over to the bandstand. John greeted him. "Hey, Warren, Sophie tells me you're a musician?"

"Yeah. Lead guitar, and I sing."

"Great." One of the band members said. "I'm Joe. We let people sit in from time to time. You know any Christmas rockers?"

Warren smiled. “Lots of ‘em.”

“Great.” Joe took off his Stratocaster and handed it to Warren. “C’mon up. Take **very** good care of my baby.”

“You betcha.”

“Guys, we’re gonna let a guest sit in with us for a tune or two, which will allow me to go get a beer.” Laughter. “Please welcome, Warren Kelleher!”

Dave, the bass player, turned to him and said, “You gonna play a bit? What do you want to play?”

Warren thought for a second, and looked at the rest of the band, and said, “Run Run Rudolph?”

“Yeah! Great choice!” said Ed, the second guitarist/second keyboardist.

“In A?” Warren said. They all nodded agreement. “Start it off, Warren,” Andrea, the keyboardist, said.

Warren hit the opening chords to the Chuck Berry classic with polished aplomb. Then, he stepped to the mic and started bellowing out the words as the band roared behind him.

The room turned towards the bandstand. They pretty much knew Warren, and most of them liked him and accepted him as Sophia’s boyfriend. But they didn’t know **this** Warren. Nobody did. Not even Sophia.

And she was **amazed**. He had played and sang for her many times, but just the two of them and mostly love songs with an acoustic guitar. She had never seen him rock out, ever. Warren was a reserved guy. Sophia knew he was a guy of deep passions, but nobody ever **saw** those passions. She did, more than others, but he rarely let it all hang out, except in bed, or occasionally on the ice.

He certainly was letting it all hang out **now**. His face was flushed and split by a huge grin as he spat out the words to the Chuck Berry classic with a huge, soulful bellow that Sophia didn’t even know he possessed. His fingers flew over the fretboard, as he took the standard Berry solo and made it his own. Sophia couldn’t stop smiling. She was so proud of herself for thinking to arrange this.

The song came to a crashing halt, to the sound of raucous applause from the partygoers. Sophia looked at Warren, and he was **beaming**. He gave her a little wink, which made her blush.

“Damn, what a **voice!**” Mike, the drummer, was saying. “And he can play, too.”

“Thanks.”

“You got a lot of Springsteen in that voice,” Dave said.

Warren smiled. “I **love** Springsteen.”

“You do?” Andrea smiled. “Hey, maybe we can do this song **right** for once, with Warren playing guitar and singing. Joe, get up here!” He ran up. “Grab your sax. Ed, you’re on organ and glock.”

Warren looked around questioning. Andrea looked at him. “Warren, if you like Christmas songs, and you like Springsteen, you’ve **got** to know this one.” And she hit a series of chords on her piano.

Warren immediately grinned in recognition, nodded at Andrea in affirmation, and stepped up to the mic. In his best Springsteen, he bellowed, “You better not shout, you better not cry.....”

This, if anything, was better than Run Run Rudolph. Bruce Springsteen’s version of Santa Claus Is Coming To Town is guaranteed to bring **any** house down, and Warren was doing a note-perfect job of singing it, while the band did the E Street Band proud. Joe took a marvelous sax solo, and Warren sang and played like a man possessed. By the time Warren had bellowed the final “Santa Claus is coming...toooo town,” and Andrea hit the final piano chords, the party was absolutely raucous. Warren stepped off stage to hearty congratulations from the band, thanking them for the gig, and was surrounded by well-wishers as he made his way to Sophia.

“Oh. My. God.” was all Sophia could say.

“Wow, that felt good.”

“Damn,” Crash interjected, “if it felt half as good as it **sounded**, it must have felt pretty damn good indeed.”

“I am **impressed**, Warren.” Jessie agreed.

“Thanks, guys. And thank **you**”—he kissed Sophia on the nose—“for setting that up. I never would have had the chutzpah to ask myself.”

“I know,” Sophia smiled. “But I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that again—next time, **they’ll** be asking **you**.” Warren just laughed.

“Hey, Warren,” hollered Joe from the bandstand, “since you entertained all of us so well, you got a request we could play for you?”

“You guys don’t happen to know Romeo and Juliet by Dire Straits, do you?”

Joe smiled, “As a matter of fact.....” and he hit the opening guitar riff.

“Your dance, m’lady?” Warren said, holding his hand out to Sophia. She took it, and they danced to their song.

FIRST CHRISTMAS (Chapter 29)

“I’m dreaming of a White Christmas.....” Warren was crooning.

“Well **quit** dreaming, because you got one.” Peg laughed, as she pointed out the window at the lightly falling snow. It was Christmas morning, and the Kelleher family was gathered around the tree, opening presents. There were a couple of inches of snow on the ground, and it was still falling. It was a perfect New England Christmas morning.

A car pulled up in front of the house, as Peg was looking out the window. “Here comes your favorite Christmas Present, Warren,” she joked. Warren looked out to see Sophia and her mother getting out of the car. Mrs. Kovach grabbed a bag full of presents, and brought it up to the door. Warren greeted her there.

“Hi, Mrs. K. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too, Warren. Merry Christmas, folks!” she shouted into the room at the rest of the family. “Here.” She handed the presents over, and Warren put them under the tree. “I’ve got to go, with all this snow it’s going to take forever to get to my sister’s. The nutcase is all yours,” she said with a smile, pointing to the sidewalk, where Sophia was twirling around under the snow like a 4-year-old.

“Soph, what **are** you doing?” Warren asked, bemused.

“I **love** snow!” she yelled, giggling. “I especially like it on Christmas.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still in my PJs and I’m **freezing**.”

She ran up on the porch. “Spoilsport,” she grinned at him. “Later you’ll have to get dressed so we can have a snowball fight.” She raced past him into the house, tickling him as she went by. He followed her in.

She had snow in her hair and on her face. She was wearing white earmuffs, and a big poofy white jacket. Her face was flushed from the cold, and she was smiling broadly. “You are gorgeous when you’re cold and snow-covered, you know that?” Warren said.

“Awww. Does that mean you won’t warm me up, Snugglebear?”

“Uh-huh, that’s what the tea and hot chocolate are for,” Jim interjected as he walked past them. “Merry Christmas, Sophia.”

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Kelleher.”

She went in to greet the rest of Warren’s family, as he hung her coat up for her.

Sophia had sat for an hour, cuddled up against Warren, watching the Kellehers open all their presents. She was sipping tea and eating some of Peg’s wonderful Christmas cookies. She was very happy, but a bit envious. She couldn’t ever remember having a family Christmas like this—of course, she had never had a whole **family**, either.

Suddenly, Peg was handing her a gift. “Merry Christmas, Sophia.”

Sophia was surprised. “Oh, Mrs. Kelleher, you didn’t have to get me anything.”

Peg just smiled. “I know. But I wanted to. I know you and Warren have gifts for each other, but Jim and I wanted to get you a little something, so you didn’t feel left out.”

Sophia tore open the wrapping. Inside the box was a pink angora sweater. “Oh, I **love** it! Thank you so much, Mr. and Mrs. Kelleher. It’s beautiful.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d like it.”

“It’s perfect. I don’t own enough sweaters.” She looked down at the short-sleeve blouse she was wearing. “And I should have one **today**. I’m cold! I’m going to go try it on. Hold my place, Snugglebear.” She went upstairs to the bathroom, and emerged a couple minutes later, wearing the sweater. She was wearing blue jeans today, and the blue jeans with the pink sweater were a perfect match.

“Fits?” Peg asked

“Perfectly,” Sophia confirmed.

“That looks **real** good on you, Sophie,” Warren said admiringly. “Nice pick, Mom.”

“Thanks, Warren.” Peg said bemusedly. Sophia sighed happily and settled back in next to Warren, and thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the present-opening.

“OK, Snugglebear, my turn.” Sophia said, as she went into the bag she had brought. “First, I’ve got a couple things for Ryan and Kristin.”

“Really?” Warren’s brother and sister said. “Wow, Sophia, thanks,” Ryan said as he opened up the video game. “Yeah, this is really cool,” Kristin agreed, as she opened up the latest Harry Potter book.

“And this one, Warren, is for your parents.” Warren took the envelope and handed it to his mom.

“Sophia, you **really** didn’t have to do this,” Peg said.

“Didn’t I just say the same thing to you?” Sophia giggled. “I really wanted to give you something, for how wonderfully you’ve treated me this year.”

“We treat you wonderfully because you’re a delightfully wonderful person, Sophia, don’t forget that.” Sophia blushed. Peg opened the envelope. It was a gift certificate to Peg and Jim’s favorite restaurant. “Sophia, this is wonderful. Thank you so much.”

“OK, and now for my Snugglebear.” She handed over a box. “Warren, I thought about this one for a long time, because this present is **not** your normal thing. But it just screamed ‘Warren!’ at me, so I took a shot. I hope you like it.”

Warren tore off the paper and opened up the large box. He withdrew from inside a leather coat. This wasn’t a biker jacket or anything like that; it was a very sharp black leather coat, a bit longer than a leather jacket. It was very classy looking, but it was still leather.

Warren drew his breath in, sharply. It was **perfect**. It’s something he never would have thought to buy himself, but he **loved** it, and coming from Sophia it was perfect.

Warren took it out of the box, and put it on.

“Do you like it?” Sophia asked expectantly.

“**I love** it! It’s fantastic!”

“I can’t believe how good it looks on you, Warren,” Peg said. “It’s very sharp.”

“Oh, I’m so relieved. I wasn’t sure you’d like it.” Sophia grinned wryly. “Heck, I think it’s the only thing in your whole wardrobe that **didn’t** come from L. L. Bean.” Everyone laughed at that.

“That’s what you’re here for, dear, to broaden my horizons,” Warren quipped. Sophie playfully swatted him. “No, my love, it’s **perfect**.” He took the coat off and went into the foyer to hang it up.

“Now, Pookie, your turn.” He placed a small pile of presents in front of Sophia. “This one last, though,” he said, taking one off the pile.

“All for me?”

“Yeah, but trust me, there’s nothing there as extravagant as that leather coat,” Warren smirked.

Sophia opened up the gifts, to find a couple of books she had been wanting, and the two Beatles Anthology CD’s she didn’t yet have. The large box on the bottom contained a

beautiful purple miniskirt and matching blouse. “Warren, I’m surprised. You have good taste in girls’ clothes. I **love** this! In fact, I love everything. Thank you so much.”

“One more. Sorry, guys, I have to give this one in private.” Peg knew what it was, so she just laughed. Warren took Sophia’s hand and led him upstairs to his bedroom. Sophia just looked at him, questioningly. “I couldn’t give you this in front of the family. You’ll know why when you open it.”

“Revealing lingerie?” Sophia joked.

“No, but why didn’t I **think** of that?” Warren laughed. “Here.”

Warren handed over the box he had withdrawn in the beginning. Sophia opened it up, to find another box inside. She opened that up to find **another** box. “Oh, you tricky devil, you,” she said, laughing.

Finally, the **fourth** box opened to reveal a small jewelry box. Sophia withdrew it, opened it up, and gasped.

Inside was a Claddagh ring. Sophia had always wanted a Claddagh ring. This one, however, had an emerald in the middle. “Look on the inside of the band,” Warren said. Sophia did, and inscribed on it was “To my Pookie, love, Snugglesbear.”

Sophia couldn’t speak. She just looked down at the ring, speechless. Warren sat next to her and said quietly, “I was trying to find a way to give you something to show you how I felt. This was perfect.” Sophia started crying. “Want me to put it on?” Warren said. Sophia, unable to speak, just nodded, and held out her hand. Warren slipped the ring on her hand, and she looked at it. Then, crying, she wrapped Warren in such a ferocious bear hug she almost knocked the wind out of him. “I love you, Warren Kelleher, forever and always,” she said through her tears.

“I love you too, Sophia Daniels, forever and always.” He paused and looked at her. “I knew you were going to get all weepy, that’s why I had to do this one in private.” Sophia laughed and cried all at once, and then hugged him again.

They stayed in Warren’s room, kissing and cuddling for a bit, until Ryan and Kristin burst in on them. Laughing, they let themselves be led back downstairs.

“I am **stuffed**,” Sophia said to Warren, after dinner, as they sat up in his room on the computer. “Your mother can **cook**, Snugglesbear.”

“That she can.”

“I’m so happy, Warren. This is the best Christmas ever.” She looked at the ring again. “I still can’t believe you got me this.”

“Ah, well, Pookie, I just wanted you to know how I felt.”

“I already did,” she smiled. “This just makes it a bit more tangible.” She looked down at it. “Didn’t you put it on me backwards, though?”

“No. Claddagh rings are love/friendship rings. They can also be used as engagement rings, though I wasn’t thinking of **that** when I bought it.” Sophia grinned at him. “Now, I fully intend on marrying you someday, but it’s a little early to make it **official**, don’t you think?”

Sophia laughed, but then realized what he said. “You **do**?”

“Yes, I do. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Not even a little bit, husband-of-my-dreams.” She snuggled closer to him.

“Good,” he laughed. “Back to the ring. When claddagh rings are used as love rings, they are worn the way I put it on your finger. See, the point faces **up**—because it’s pointing to your heart.”

“That’s so romantic.”

“Isn’t it. And since we’re both Irish, this was a fitting ring to get.”

“I always wanted one. It’s just perfect. Warren, this has been the best Christmas ever.”

“First of many, if I have any say in it.” They just smiled at each other, enjoying each other’s company.

PING!..went the computer. “So much for **that** moment,” Sophia quipped. “Which one of your SkateHarem managed to find you, dear?”

Warren just laughed. “The very lovely and talented Elizabeth Cushman, that’s who.” He typed, “Merry Christmas, Liz!”

“Merry Christmas, Warren. How you doin’? Sophia with you? Merry Christmas to her, too, if she’s there.”

“Yeah, she is. She says Hi and Merry Christmas back. How’s the stress fracture?”

“Frustrating as all get-out, but I’ve actually started jumping, **finally**. I did my first couple triple toes today.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“It’d be better if nationals wasn’t less than a month away. And if Ashley Ferris hadn’t won the damn Grand Prix final in my absence.”

“I can’t stand her.”

“Ashley? She’s a nice kid, actually. I like her. It’s her **mother** that has the fangs and claws. I get the distinct impression that **Ashley** would sometimes like to muzzle her.”

“Well, that’s good to know, but actually I was talking about her skating.”

“Yeah, well, those triple-triple combinations certainly get the judges’ attention.”

“Yeah, cheated triple-triples that get four inches off the ground.”

“No comment.”

“LOL!”

“Well, I have to be a gracious competitor, don’t I? You got to admit, those tiny jumps sure are consistent and secure. And I’m nowhere **near** any kind of triple triple at this point.”

“It’s OK Liz. You’ll get ‘em.”

“Thanks, Warren. You’ll be rooting for me at Nationals, and I’ll feel it through the TV screen <G>.”

“Now, now, Liz. We’ve discussed this before. I will be rooting for Stephie Eberhardt, as always.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Stephie is your favorite skater—you and every other hormonal heterosexual male in the country.”

“LOL. No, I will be rooting for you, dear, to win Nationals. I just want Stephie to shake her booty and land enough shaky triples to eke her way onto the Olympic team.”

“I have every confidence in her. She’s been skating great in practice.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right, she trains in the same rink as you do.”

“Yes, she does. And it’s always an experience. Don’t get me wrong—since Stephie came here to train, we’ve actually become good friends. I love her. She’s warm, funny, has a great attitude about life. I love hanging out with her. But I could **never** get away with the goofing off she does in practice.”

“She’s not coached by Frank, is she?”

“No. And if I tried to keep up with her ever-rotating roster of boyfriends, I’d give myself a headache.”

“LOL!”

“But I do hope she makes the Olympic team. Sincerely. The Olympics won’t be half as fun if Crazy Stephe isn’t along for the ride.”

“Hee hee. You just make sure you get yourself healthy and make the team yourself, OK? I want to be able to say that I chat on the internet every day with an Olympian.”

“Aye, aye, captain. Got to go. Kisses to you and Sophie.”

“Kisses back, Liz. See ya.”

TV SURPRISES (Chapter 30)

“Good, good,” June, their ice dance coach, was saying. “Excellent.” Sophia and Warren skated over to her. “You’re really getting that sequence down. I think you guys will be ready to test for juniors this spring. Then you can compete as Juniors next fall.”

“You think we’re ready to test?” Sophia asked.

“Just about,” June smiled. “You’ve made amazing progress in five hours a week.”

“Oh, here we go again,” Warren quipped, “The you-should-train-more lecture.”

“Oh, I know you guys have other priorities. It’s just a shame to let such natural talent go to waste.”

“Well, if it helps, June,” Sophia told her, “we’ve been discussing it. We don’t know if we can do anything right now, but we intend to up our schedule significantly over the summer.”

“That is,” Warren added, “if we can afford it.”

“Guys, if you guys pass the junior dance test, I can guarantee that I can get you some help from the USFSA for that.”

“Great!” Warren exclaimed. “We’ll just have to pass that test, then. But, now, we have to go home and watch some **real** skaters on the TV.”

“Oh, yeah, Nationals is on! Have fun, I’m gonna go catch it myself.”

They were showing ice dance and men in the afternoon, ladies in the evening. Pairs had been on the day before. They never showed juniors on TV, but Warren had found out that his friends Andrea and Brett had won the junior pairs' national championship.

In dance, Michelle Marino and Stefan Thomas had won their fourth straight national champion. Warren and Sophia loved them—they were a romantic, classic pair, which was Warren and Sophie's style, as opposed to the overly-theatrical style that had become prevalent in ice dance. Youngsters Sharon Nicholas and Steve Coleman had won the silver, buying into the theatrical side of ice dance.

Next came the men. Ed Voorhees had been the US Champion forever, and was fully expected to defend his national title in an Olympic year, but Warren and Sophia were hoping that their friend, John Garrison, could finish second and make the Olympic team.

"Jack looks good in warm-ups," Sophia commented.

"Yeah, he just nailed a quad."

First up after the warm-ups was Dennis Kurlow, a whimsical and humorous skater who was always a crowd favorite. He fell on his first triple axel attempt, but was fine on everything else, and had Warren and Sophia smiling with his funny facial expressions and hand movements. Plus he had fantabulous footwork.

A couple skaters later, Dennis was still in first place, and it was Ed Voorhees' turn.

He was perfect. Eight triples, a quad, and his usual stylish, flawless presentation.

"He's such a good skater," Sophia commented. "And he always seems like such a good guy in interviews."

"Jack says that's genuine," Warren told her. "I quote, 'Ed Voorhees is the nicest guy in figure skating, and that's a fact.' Everybody in the US figure skating community loves him, because, besides being a great skater, he's so classy."

Jack was last up. Skating to Mozart, he exhibited a style and flair all his own. He landed a beautiful quad—better than Ed's—but two-footed his second triple axel. Still, Jack was known as an inconsistent skater, and he was plainly thrilled with his performance. As were Sophia and Warren.

"Oh, I am so **happy** for him!" Sophia exclaimed. "I think that's the best I've **ever** seen him skate."

"I agree. I doubt he'll beat Ed, not the way Ed skated, but that's got to get him on the podium."

It did. Jack successfully defended his silver medal, Dennis Kurlow was third, with Ed first. All three would represent the USA at the Olympics.

After a trip to the local seafood restaurant for some supper, Warren and Sophia settled in back at Sophia's house for the ladies' long program.

The first skater up was Christine Arsenault, Warren's chat buddy, who was fifth after the short program. She was thrilled to just be in the final group at her first senior nationals, and she skated very very well. Warren was shouting and cheering in the living room the whole time, prompting laughter from Sophia. She popped a triple salchow into a single, and her presentation wasn't quite as good as the top skaters, but overall it was superb. She was thrilled as she left the ice, and thrilled with her marks. And, as she stood up to leave the kiss and cry area, she turned her back to the camera, flipped her skirt in the air for two seconds, turned back around, and shouted, "That was for you, Warren!!!"

Sophia just about died laughing. Warren turned purple. "I can **not** believe she just did that on national TV!"

After the next skater, who Zamboni'ed, they showed a backstage interview with Christine. After happily discussing her skate, the interviewer asked, "So, who's Warren? Your boyfriend?"

Christine turned red, but laughed. "No, he's not. And I'd better not say he is, because I **know** he's watching this with Sophia, his girlfriend. Warren is a very good friend who I chat with regularly on the internet. Last year, when I was trying to learn the lutz, Warren, as encouragement which I very much appreciated, would tell me to get the lutz down because he expected to see my derriere on TV at Nationals."

The interviewer was bemused. "He certainly did."

"I know," said Christine, "and now I'm embarrassed. I apologize, America, it was an impulse. However, it was worth it, because I **know** it made my buddy turn bright purple. Love ya, Warren!" She walked off, leaving the interviewer in stitches.

"She's shameless," Warren said, still blushing.

"Reminds me of Jessie," Sophia commented astutely.

Next up was Warren's favorite, Stephie Eberhardt. She shook her booty and landed enough jumps to pass Christine in the standings.

"Stop drooling, Romeo," Sophia commented dryly.

"Hey, did I give you crap about drooling over Jack Garrison?"

"You got me." Sophia smiled.

Next up was Ashley Ferris, the 14-year-old pint size jumping wonder. And she hit **everything**. Two triple-triple combinations, seven triples in all, and she skated with speed and attack.

“But there is **nothing** in between the jumps, and she’s about as musical as a pork chop,” Sophie said.

“I agree,” said Warren, as he watched the marks come up. “I can see the high technical marks, but 5.8s for **presentation**? That’s insane.”

“Well, they’ve left room for Liz, but not a whole lot of it.”

Elizabeth Cushman was the final skater of the evening. She skated well, but did not have a triple-triple combination, and touched down with her free leg on her triple flip.

“They’ve **gotta** give it to her,” Warren said. “Her presentation mark should be 5 tenths higher than Ashley’s—of course they didn’t leave **room** for that.”

They didn’t give it to her. By a 6-3 split, Ashley Ferris was the new US Champion. Liz finished second, with Stephie Eberhardt third. Christine finished fourth, a placement Warren knew would thrill her.

“Damn,” Sophia said.

“Damn is right. Sometimes this sport drives me up a wall.”

Warren spent much of the next couple of weeks chatting with Liz online, trying to pump her spirits up before the Olympics. It didn’t work. Ashley Ferris became the Olympic champion, with Liz getting the silver. Liz told Warren she was going to stay in for another four years. Ashley grabbed the money and ran for the pros.

It was a more successful Olympics for the American Men, as Ed Voorhees won the silver medal, and Jack Garrison finished an impressive and encouraging sixth. He, too, planned to stay in for the next Olympics.

Dance was completely infuriating. Marino and Thomas were completely breathtaking—and finished sixth. Some typically over-theatrical super-frenetic Russian couple won.

“That ain’t ice dance,” Sophia commented disgustedly.

“Do we **really** want to compete?” Warren joked.

“Sure, but here is reason one to **not** put all of our eggs in the Ice Dance basket. If Ice Dance is becoming doing pompous ridiculous theatrical movements to music that noone with any sense of rhythm can actually **dance** to, we won’t ever **win** anything!”

A GHOST FROM HER PAST (Chapter 31)

It was report card day. Sophia sat in her homeroom, waiting for her second quarter report card. The first quarter had been fantastic, mostly B's with even a couple of A's, the first she had seen in some time. She hoped the second quarter would be even better—she thought she had done well.

Mrs. Curtis finished handing out the report cards, but Sophia still hadn't gotten one. "That's strange," Mrs. Curtis said. "I don't know what happened to yours, Sophia. I'll see if I can find out." Just then, the phone connected to the main office ran. "Yup. OK. I'll send her right down." She hung up the phone. "Sophia, you're wanted in the main office."

Sophia got up to go, her classmates hooting and hollering about "big trouble." Sophia herself didn't know **what** to think. She didn't remember doing anything that would get her into trouble.

"Hi, I'm Sophia Daniels. I was called down here." She said to the secretary.

"Yes, dear. Mr. Carvalho is waiting for you, go right in." Mr. Carvalho, the **principal**? This did not sound good at all. Why did the principal want to see her?

She opened his door. "Mr. Carvalho? I'm Sophia Daniels. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Sophia, I did. Come right in. Have a seat." He pointed to the chair in front of his desk. She sat. "Sophia, I have something that I want to show you." He withdrew a piece of paper from his desk.

She recognized it—it was her report card from second quarter last year. It was mostly D's with a couple of F's thrown in for good measure. All the comments spoke about what a disruptive, unteachable student she was.

"I remember this, unfortunately. Why did you want to show me this, Mr. Carvalho?"

"So you would remember. I wanted to make sure you remembered."

"I can scarcely forget."

"Good. There's a reason for this, Sophia. I've talked to your teachers, so I could make sure there was no monkey business going on. I've also talked to Mr. Doherty, and he talked to me about some of your work with the Peer Counseling group, and he gave me a bit of an idea of what was going on when you were getting **these** kinds of marks. I take it that things in your personal life are better this year?"

“Much,” smiled Sophia, although she was a bit confused.

“Good. Now, I took this little pleasure away from Mrs. Curtis, because, as Principal, I tend to deal with mostly bad stuff, so I hoard the good stuff whenever I can.” He smiled at Sophia, who smiled back, but still was confused. “Don’t worry, dear, I’m getting to the point.” She laughed. “I wanted you to see **this**”—he pointed at the old report card—“this, from just one short year ago, so you could remember. Because I wanted you to truly appreciate the magnitude”—he withdrew another piece of paper—“ of **this**.”

He handed her the paper. It was this year’s report card. She looked at it

A.....A.....A.....A.....A.....A.....A.....A

“Oh my God,” she gasped. She had gotten straight A’s.

“Congratulations, Sophia. This is a turnaround the likes I have rarely seen in 25 years of teaching. You should be **immensely** proud of yourself.”

“Oh my God,” Sophia said. And then she started to cry. “I can’t believe it, I just can’t believe it. Straight A’s? Me? Oh my God,” she said, sniffing. Mr. Carvalho just laughed, and handed over a box of tissues, which Sophia gratefully accepted. She blew her nose, and sniffled, and wiped her eyes.

“You recovered?” Mr. Carvalho asked.

“Yeah,” Sophia smiled at him. Then her smile got wider. “I can not **wait** to show this to my boyfriend!”

“Boyfriend?” Mr. Carvalho asked.

“Yeah. My boyfriend, Warren, is a genius studyaholic Preppie who’s ranked in the top ten in his class at St. Michael’s, no less.”

“Really? Did he inspire you to this turnaround?”

“Yeah, he did, at least partially. He made **me** care just by caring himself.”

“Then, I would say he’s going to be enormously proud of you, also.”

“Yeah, he will be....but that’s not the only reason I can’t wait to show him this report card.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. We’ve been going out for a year, now. He always, as you might imagine, gets astounding grades.”

“If he’s ranked top ten at St. Mike’s, of course.”

“Right. They got their second quarter report cards last week. Warren got his typical, all A’s....but there was one A minus,” Sophia grinned.

Mr. Carvalho smiled. “Oh, you mean.....”

“I got better grades than my genius preppy boyfriend!” Sophia burst out excitedly. “We’ve been going out for a year, and I’ve never even gotten **close**!”

Mr. Carvalho cracked up laughing. “And he’ll never live it down, right?”

“Oh, not really—I know well enough that if I was taking the courses **he** is, I wouldn’t be looking at all A’s. No offense to the school you run, Mr. Carvalho, but St Mike’s is St Mike’s. And he’s in all of the top honors classes you can take over there.” She smiled. “But he is my boyfriend, and he does love me, and he **will** let me get away with gloating, at least for a little while.”

Mr Carvalho laughed again. “Good for him. **Enjoy** this, Sophia. You deserve it. Congratulations, again. And keep it up!”

“I plan to,” she said, leaving the office beaming.

Sophia walked up to her house, still grinning from ear to ear. She looked up, and saw Warren sitting on her porch, waiting for her.

“WARREN!!” She screamed, running up the street and practically tackling him with a bear hug. “Warren, you’ll never believe it!”

Warren giggled. “Boy are **you** in a good mood today!”

“Uh-huh.” She reached into the backpack and withdrew the card. “Look at this!” she exclaimed proudly.

Warren looked. “Wha.....Straight A’s? Sophie, you got straight A’s?”

She nodded her head, beaming.

“Sophie, this is FANTASTIC!” He wrapped her in a bear hug of his own. “I am **so** proud of you!”

She giggled. “I hope you noted the absence of any A-minuses,” she said with an evil grin.

“Yes, I did,” Warren said with a smile of his own. “You, Sophia Daniels, officially got better grades than your preppie boyfriend.” She giggled again. “Enjoy it. You deserve it.”

“Oh, Warren, you are the **best**. C’mon, I wanna show this to my Mom.”

They ran into the house, still giggling, and saw Ellen Kovach standing in the kitchen.

“MOM! MOM! You gotta look at this!”

“Alright, Sophia, what’s the big excitement? Hi, Warren.” She took the report card from Sophia’s hand. “Sophia, these are all A’s!”

“Uh-huh.”

Ellen looked like she was going to cry. She enveloped her daughter in a hug. “Sophia, I am so proud of you I can’t put it into words. This is one of the most fantastic things I have ever seen.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Ellen took a deep breath, and the smile disappeared from her face. “Come on in the kitchen. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

“OK,” Sophia said, puzzled. She walked into the kitchen and saw a man, about her Mom’s age, sitting at the kitchen table. “Mom, you bringing strange men home?” Sophia giggled.

“Not hardly,” Ellen said with a weak attempt at a smile. Sophia looked at the man, questioning, but Warren didn’t. Sophia hadn’t figured it out yet, but Warren took one look at this man and knew **exactly** who he was. The resemblance was unmistakable. “Oh, shit,” he muttered under his breath.

Ellen confirmed his suspicions. “Sophia.....” she took a deep breath.....”this is your father.”

“My.....father?” Sophia managed to squeak out. Brian Daniels looked up at his daughter.

“Hello, Sophia. You certainly have grown into a beautiful young woman.”

“You....are my.....father?”

“Yes, I am.” Brian replied.

Warren had had his hand on Sophia’s shoulder, as reassurance. Suddenly, he felt that shoulder go to **steel**. He almost withdrew his hand, but Sophia grabbed it and put it back.

“How can you be my father? I don’t have a father!”

“Ellen, what did you tell her?” Brian asked.

“She knows she has a father. Sophia, I **never** told you you didn’t have a father.”

“You didn’t have to tell me. I never had a father. I had a **sperm donor**, and an abusive one at that. You don’t get the **right** to be called **father** when you disappear for twelve fucking years!!!”

“Sophia, I....” Brian started.

“Sophia, calm down,” Ellen said at the same time.

“CALM DOWN???? Mother, how could you let this **maggot** into our house, and let him call himself my **father**? So, tell me, “father”, where have you been for twelve years?”

“The time wasn’t right,” Brian offered weakly.

“Oh, no, the time **was** right, ‘father’. You should have been here, oh, about a year and a half ago. You would have seen the results of your wonderful fatherhood. But you weren’t. So where were you, ‘father’? Where were you when I was a complete drunk, just like you? Where were you when I was letting myself get beat up by guys, because of the subconscious memories of **you** beating me, ‘father’? Where were you when I had one foot in the fucking grave? WHERE WERE YOU, WHEN ALL THE DAMAGE **YOU** CAUSED ALMOST DESTROYED MY LIFE, YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE! WHERE WERE YOU?????????”

And with that horrific outburst, Sophia tore up the stairs to her room, crying so badly she was almost screaming.

Warren was standing with his head in his hands, leaning against the wall. “Oh, lovely.”

Ellen was moving towards the stairs. “I’d better go up there.”

“NO!” Warren shouted. “You stay right here, Mrs. K. I will go up. I love you dearly, but bringing him in here was so colosally stupid I can’t believe it. And she’s going to take your head off if you go up there.”

“HEY!” Brian yelled at Warren. “Who are you to talk to Ellen that way?”

“No, he’s right.” Ellen offered.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. K. I know you thought it was going to go better than this. I don’t mean to be a jerk.” He sighed. “I just don’t know if I can handle this, if she backslides because of it.” Ellen nodded agreement. “As for **you**,” he said to Brian. “Who I am, is Sophia’s boyfriend. Who I also am is the guy who helped her stitch herself back together because of the lingering damage that **you** caused. Who I am is the guy who **lived** through that horror that she just told you about when **you** weren’t **here**. Who I am is the person that

loves her more than anything else in the world, who loves her more than life itself, and who **proves** it by **being** here every day, which is more than I can say for you.” And with that he stormed out of the room and up the stairs.

Brian watched him go. “Ellen, how much of this is true?”

“Every word.”

“She was that bad?”

“If not worse.”

“Oh Jesus.”

Warren entered Sophia’s room. “Soph?”

She was on the bed, sobbing convulsively, clutching a pillow, shaking violently. Warren came up behind her on the bed. “Soph?” He touched her shoulder, and she flinched, violently. Oh, Shit, Warren thought, but then Sophia realized who had touched her.

“Warren? Oh, God, Warren! Why did she bring him in here? Why? Why? Why?” she cried pitifully.

Warren turned her towards him, lied down next to her, and wrapped her in his arms. “It’s OK, Soph. Let it out. It’s all right.”

It took quite a long time for her to calm down. Warren stayed with her the whole time, holding her, whispering encouragement in her ear. Finally, the sobbing stopped, her shaking subsided, and she took a deep breath.

“Warren, whatsoever would I do without you?”

“Cuddle one of your teddy bears?” He cracked. Sophia managed to grin at that. “There’s my Pookie.”

“Thank God I’m somebody’s Pookie. Since you’re all I’ve got.”

“I’m not all you got. Sophia, your mother loves you.”

“She does **not** love me if she brought **him** in here!”

“Yes she does. It was a huge error in judgement, but she thought she was doing the right thing.”

Sophia sniffled. “I suppose you’re right. Just don’t tell me the sperm donor down there loves me.”

“I won’t. I have **no** idea what his motives are.”

“Trying to ease his conscience, no doubt.”

“Oh, **that** won’t be easy, after your outburst. And I had a little one of my own.”

“You did?”

“Got to take care of my Pookie, don’t I ?” Warren grinned.

“And I’m always grateful.” Sophia said. “But, don’t worry, Snugglebear. There won’t be any jagged edges this time. I had my outburst, I had my cry, and I had my Romeo comfort me. I am **not** going to let his sudden reappearance awaken all the old demons. I refuse to.”

“Good for you, Juliet.”

“I don’t intend to lose my head over this.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. You **are** a Straight A student, right?” He grinned at her. She grinned right back.

“Warren, you are the light of my life, you know that?”

“Sophia?” A voice came from the door. “Honey, I am **so** sorry. If I had known you were going to react like that...and, dammit, I **should** have known. It was stupid. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Yeah, Mom.” Sophia grinned at her.

“I was hoping letting him in here would **close** some old wounds, not reopen them. It was a stupid hope.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because he’s not the same man that left us 12 years ago.”

“He convinced you of this?”

“I’ve known it for a while. He’s always written. He **does** support you, he has since you were seven or so and he got back on his feet. He encloses notes with the checks. I’ve never written back, but he’s not the same man. He asked to see you, and I thought you might be able to talk some things out.”

“Why hadn’t he wanted to see me before this?”

“Because he knows what he did to you, to us. He is horrified that you were still living the effects from it twelve years later. He figured if he stayed away, that would **go** away.” She smirked. “He was never the best at understanding psychology.”

“So why come back now?”

“He’s wanted to come back for some time. He figured you’d be old enough, now, to not be affected by what he did.”

“He’s wrong.”

“I know. He knows now, too.”

“Is he still here?”

“Yes.”

“Is he waiting for me to come back down?”

“I told him I would try. I also told him there was a snowball’s chance in hell, but I told him I would try. If I couldn’t get you to come back down, he will leave.”

Sophia thought. “Warren, what do you think?”

“Oh, don’t get **me** involved in this!” Sophia and Ellen both laughed.

“Warren, I just want your opinion.” Sophia asked.

Warren sighed. “OK. Yeah, he’s done some serious damage. But, you had your outburst. You told him everything you’ve been wanting to tell him for some time, no doubt. Now, if, and **only** if, you think you can go back down there without breaking down again, you might want to at least think about it. You screamed at him twelve years of abandonment and frustration. Like I said, **if** you can handle it, it might not hurt to listen.”

Sophia thought, and took a big breath, “OK. I’ll do it. Warren, you need to be there with me.”

They went downstairs. Sophia sat down at the table across from him. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Brian looked up at Warren leaning against the wall. “No offense to your boyfriend, but is there anyway we can do this alone?”

“No,” Sophia said with finality. “I’m willing to listen, but Warren stays.”

“OK.” Brian took a deep breath. “Telling you I’m sorry is woefully inadequate. Saying that I wish I could make it up to you is pathetic. But I have no other words. I wish I could

have come back sooner. I wish I could have never left in the first place. I wish I hadn't been an abusive drunk. But I can't take any of that back."

"Why did you come back, now?" Sophia asked him.

"I just wanted to see you. I wanted to see how you turned out. Even if I had **no** part in that, you are still my daughter. Heck, I wanted to see what you **looked** like."

"You just had to look in a mirror for **that**. Except for the gender, of course," Warren interjected from the corner.

"Excuse me?" Brian asked.

"When I walked into this room, I knew immediately who you were, without being told." Warren told him.

"Soph, you might have other issues with the man, but you can certainly thank his genetics for those faaaaabulous good looks of yours." Even Sophia chuckled at that. "The resemblance is unmistakable."

"He's right. Except you got your mom's complexion." Brian got serious again. "I wanted to just see you. It was probably selfish of me, I know. If I had realized you were still dealing with the damage I caused, I never would have come back."

"I've been in AA for a very long time. I don't drink, and I do **not** hit people, especially women and children, anymore. I've been through lots of therapy, besides the AA. I've managed to straighten my life out. I just wish **you** didn't have to pay for it."

"I'm OK. Really," Sophia smiled.

"Good. No thanks to me, but good all the same." Brian took another breath. "When your mother and I got married, and you were born, I was **not** ready for it. Not even a little bit. I tried. I **did** try. And I failed, spectacularly, in every way possible. I am sorry. I wish I could offer you more, I really do. But I can't. It's too late for that."

He slid a piece of paper over to her. "That is my address and phone number. I live on the South Shore, now, down towards Cape Cod. If you want to call, write, or come visit, great. If you don't want to call, write, or come visit, that is your choice. Unless you want to, you will never hear from me again. If you need or want anything from me, all you have to do is ask. I would love to try to get reacquainted with you, but that is **your** decision, and, if you never want to see me again, I will understand, completely." He took another breath. "One other thing. You have a stepmother. You also have two sisters. Briana is almost three. Katrina is just a couple of months."

Sophia looked up, surprised. "I do?"

“Yeah. And, before you ask, my wife knows all about my past, including the abuse and the alcohol. She understands, as I do, that this is my **past**. I’m still paying for it, but I’m trying to not let it eat me up inside. Sophia, don’t let it eat **you** up inside, either. Please.”

:”I won’t.”

“Good. If you would like to meet your stepmother and sisters, without dealing with me, call that number and ask for Michelle. That’s your stepmother’s name. She knows all about you, would love to meet you, and will keep me out of it if that is what you wish.” He took out a picture and handed it to her. “That’s Briana. She’d love to meet you, too.”

“My God, she looks just like me!”

“Yeah, she does. And this is Katrina.” He handed over another picture, of an infant. “I’ve got a second chance. I don’t plan to blow this one. I wish I hadn’t blown the first one.”

He stood up. “Goodbye, Sophia. You know where to find me. I do love you. I never stopped. And it’s OK if you don’t believe that.” With that, he walked out of the house.

Sophia started crying. She looked through the door, sobbing.

“He’s still out there, Soph. He’s sitting in his car. I think he’s trying to compose himself, too.”

“Oh damn,” cried Sophia. “Do I really want to do this?”

“Only you can answer that, Pookie.”

“Can people really change that much?”

Warren pointed to her report card, still sitting on the counter. “Do **you** really have to ask that question?”

Sophia thought for a second, then jumped out of the chair, sprinted towards the door, flung it open, and called, “Dad! Wait!”

When Warren looked out the window, he saw Sophia giving her father a hug.

GETTING CLOSER (Chapter 32)

The rest of their sophomore years passed in a flash. They went to parties, hung out together, Sophia kept her grades up in spectacular fashion. They hung out with Crash and

Jessie, who were getting closer and closer, much to Sophia and Warren's (inward) delight and (outward) amusement. Sophia turned Sweet Sixteen, and eagerly began driver's ed, causing much affectionate grumbling from Warren, who wouldn't be sixteen for a while. They passed their test to compete in Junior Dance, and were working on a free dance to start competing with in the fall.

Sophia talked to her father on the phone, trying to establish some sort of relationship. Then, one Saturday in early July, Sophia accepted an invitation to his house. She insisted Warren come, also, and her father agreed. He offered to come pick them up, but they decided to take the train. They had taken the train into Boston before and loved it, so continuing past Boston and to the South Shore was no problem. Brian picked them up at the train station.

They drove a bit, until they came to a house. It wasn't huge, but it was nice and well kept.

"This is it," smiled Brian. He went to the door, Sophia and Warren following.

Sophia's stepmother, Michelle, was waiting for her. Sophia had talked to her on the phone and had found her to be very nice. "Sophia! I'm so glad I finally get to meet you!" she said, giving Sophia a big hug. "Nice to meet you, too, Warren," she said, shaking his hand, "I've heard a lot about you."

Sophia walked in the house, and looked around. In an adjoining room, she saw half a face and one eye peeking at her—then, when noticed, it disappeared around the corner.

Sophia laughed. "I think somebody is hiding."

Michelle laughed. "Briana? Come on out, honey."

She did—and Sophia gasped. The little three-year-old girl stood in front of her, and, it was almost like looking in a time-warp mirror. She didn't have Sophia's pale complexion—that came from Ellen—but the long, straight black hair; the deep brown eyes, and the button nose—that she had.

"Hi." Briana said shyly. "I'm Briana. I'm your sister." And she politely held out her hand.

Sophia laughed delightedly, approached the child, knelt down, and took the hand. "Hi, Briana. I'm Sophia. I'm your sister, too."

"And there's no mistaking **that**, is there?" Warren chuckled from behind them.

"You ain't kidding," Michelle agreed.

Warren approached the child. "Hi, Briana. I'm Warren." He knelt down and extended his hand. She looked at it hesitantly.

"She's a little wary around strange men," Michelle told him.

“Oh, he’s only strange **some** of the time,” Sophia quipped. Warren stuck his tongue out at her, which made Briana giggle. She decided to take the outstretched hand.

“Hi, Warren. Are you my sister, too?”

Everyone cracked up laughing at that. “No, Briana, I’m a boy. Only girls are sisters. Boys are brothers. But, no, I’m not your brother.”

“Not **yet**,” quipped Sophia, earning a wide-eyed stare from Brian.

Warren just laughed. “Let’s see if she can grasp brother and sister before we throw future-brother-in-law at her, shall we? No, Briana, I’m not your brother. I’m Sophia’s boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Briana asked.

“Future-brother-in-law might have been easier to explain than boyfriend, dear heart,” Sophia teased.

“You just keep quiet over there.” Warren smirked. He turned back to Briana. “I’m Sophia’s very special friend, and when a girl has a very special friend that’s a boy, it’s called a boyfriend.”

“Oh.” Briana chewed on that one for a minute. “Does that mean that Sophia is your girlfriend?”

“You got it. You’re a very smart girl.” Briana beamed at him.

Warren had sat on the couch next to Sophia by this time. Briana insisted on sitting in between them. Neither of them minded. “I have a boyfriend,” the little girl proclaimed.

“Oh, you do?” Warren asked.

“Yeah. Alan. He’s in my school.”

“She goes to preschool in the mornings,” Michelle supplied.

“Alan’s my boyfriend.” Briana thought for a minute. “What do you **do** with a boyfriend?”

Sophia burst out laughing, turning red, almost choking. “Oh, boy,” she managed to blurt out.

Warren smiled bemusedly at her. “Keep your mind out of b-e-d, dear.” Brian and Michelle just looked at each other. Warren turned back towards Briana. “Well, there’s lots of things you can do with a boyfriend. Sophia and I watch TV together. We go to the movies. We ice skate. We go to parties. We hang out with two of our friends, who are

also boyfriend and girlfriend. We play on the computer together. We love to dance together. Lots of things.”

“Oh.” Briana thought about that one for a minute. “Do you kiss?”

Sophia lost it again. Warren just looked at Briana and said, “Sometimes.”

“She watches way too much TV, I think” Michelle said, bemused.

“I don’t kiss my boyfriend. Kissing’s gross,” Briana offered.

“That’s good. You don’t have to kiss, you know.”

“Good.” She got off the couch. “I have to go potty now. Be right back.” And she was off.

Warren just looked at Sophia, and they burst out laughing. As did Michelle and Brian.

“Wow, she’s a trip,” smiled Warren

“Warren, I cannot **believe** how quickly she took to you,” Brian commented. “You are really good with kids.”

“I’ve noticed that, too,” said Sophia. She looked at her father. “Fits right in with his career goals.”

“What are your career goals, Warren?” Brian asked.

Warren just smiled. “Pediatrician.” Brian and Michelle laughed at that.

“Good choice, from what I just saw,” Michelle agreed.

Sophia was still sputtering. “Have you recovered from the question about what to do with a boyfriend, Pookie?”

Sophia burst out laughing again. “I’m horrible. She asked that, and the first thing that popped into my mind was a very vivid picture of last night. What can you do with a boyfriend, indeed. Well, she’ll find out, in 15 years or so.”

Warren noticed Brian staring at them. “Pookie, I think you just told your father something he didn’t know. And probably didn’t **want** to know.”

Sophia blushed, but smiled. “Oops.”

Brian eased up a bit, and smiled slightly. “Hey. Remember, this is the second time I’ve seen you since you were three years old. It’s bad enough that you’re all grown up. Now I have to deal with you being.....uh.....”

Sophia blushed. “I think ‘sexually active’ is the phrase you’re looking for, Dad.”

Brian grimaced. “Just please, please, please tell me you are using every form of protection known to man.”

“Pretty much,” Sophia grinned. “I want seven just like Briana, but not **now**.” Everyone laughed at that.

“For my part, I need to get through med school and learn how to **treat** babies before I start **making** them,” Warren added.

“Does your mother know?” Brian asked.

“Oh, she’s known for a while. I don’t keep it a secret.” Sophia took a deep breath. “You wanted to get to know me, Dad. Well, here comes some things about me you’d probably rather **not** know, but you need to. Warren was not my first. I spent two years having unpleasant sex that was not completely voluntary with guys that beat me.” Michelle gasped, and looked at Brian, who appeared to be close to tears. Sophia smiled. “Now I’m having fantastic sex that is completely voluntary with the most wonderful guy in the world. I can’t hide it. It’s part of who I am. Considering what I went through before Warren, it’s a **glorious** part of who I am.”

“Sophia, I’m so sorry,” Brian said.

“Dad, don’t. It’s over, I’m recovered, and I blamed you for it for **far** too long and I’m not going to do that anymore.”

“I’m partially to blame, though.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. The important part is that **I** no longer blame you. It’s not important. It’s really not.” She got a lopsided grin. “If you can forgive your little baby for having an active sex life, than I certainly can forgive you for having me too young.”

Brian smiled. “Deal.”

Michelle quipped, “Just don’t let Briana in on the joys of sex for a few years, OK?”

“You got it,” Sophia cracked up laughing.

Suddenly, they heard a cry from upstairs. Michelle got up, smiling. “Well, Sophia, I think that’s your **other** sister, wanting to be introduced. I need to change her, so I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Do you have any career goals, Sophia?” Brian asked.

“Yeah. I’m going to study meteorology.”

“Really? That’s fantastic!”

“Yeah, we figure she’ll step out of school and have four hundred job offers,” Warren said. “Lately, everyone wants to hire some gorgeous girl to be their Weather Babe and look sexy while pointing at radar screens, right? Well, they can hire Sophie and get a gorgeous Weather Babe who actually **knows** something about the weather.” Brian burst out laughing.

Michelle came back, a five-month-old in her arms. “I fed her and changed her, so she should be OK.” She handed the infant over to Sophia. “Sophia, meet Katrina.”

Sophia just melted. “Ooooh, **look** at her! Hi, Katrina.” She reached out her finger, and the baby grabbed it in a little fist. “Oh, aren’t you **precious**!” She made goo-goo eyes and little noises at the baby.

“Well, honey,” Michelle said to Brian, “if we ever want a night out, I think I know where we can find a babysitter.”

“You betcha!” Sophia agreed happily. “Two, actually, because I’ll bring Warren to entertain Briana.”

Michelle had made them lunch, and they had regathered in the living room. Warren had Briana on his lap, and was telling her silly knock knock jokes, making her giggle. Sophia was cuddling Katrina. Brian and Michelle were watching this, bemused.

“So, I know you guys are very young, but you seem to have an extremely good relationship,” Michelle offered.

“We do,” Sophia smiled.

“You guys think this is permanent?” Michelle asked.

“Honey, they’re **sixteen**!” Brian said, laughing.

“Actually, I’m only fifteen,” Warren offered.

“Younger man, huh, Soph?” Michelle winked. Sophia just blushed.

“OK, fifteen and sixteen,” Brian amended. “How do they know that it’s going to be permanent?”

“Oh, I was just wondering if they had talked about it.”

“Yeah, we’ve talked about it.” Sophia looked at Warren, and smiled. “Yeah, we’re kind of planning on it being permanent.”

“Yeah, Sophia, and, when I was your age, I thought your mother and I were permanent, too.”

“Yeah, well, we certainly are going to do our damndest to not **force** it into being permanent before its time.”

“Touché.”

“Aw, Dad, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Yeah, you did. But it’s OK,” Brian smiled. “I’m just worried. Look, Sophia, the only thing I’ve left you is a long line of mistakes. So **please** learn from them.”

“I will,” Sophia smiled. “Don’t worry. We know what we’re doing.”

“I remember the relationship **I** thought I was permanent when I was sixteen,” Michelle said. “And it is only by sheer luck that it **didn’t** turn out to be permanent, because we weren’t careful, either.” Michelle looked at Sophia. “But, I’ve got to say, that he and I **never** looked at one another the way you two do.” Warren and Sophia smiled at each other. “There you go again!”

“I must admit, Ellen and I never looked at each other like that, either.”

Mindful of Briana sitting on Warren’s lap, Sophia said, “Mom says that that was s-e-x disguised as love.” She blushed. “Oh, I probably shouldn’t have said that.”

Brian just laughed. “No, that’s exactly what it was.” He looked intently at his daughter and her boyfriend. “You guys don’t have that, do you?”

They gave each other that look again. “No,” said Sophia. “We have love, with a little s-e-x thrown in for fun.” Everyone cracked up at that, except Briana, who pouted and yelled, “Will you all stop **spelling**, please?” to more laughter.

“Michelle, why were you wondering if we had discussed future plans?” Warren asked.

Michelle smiled widely, “Because I was sitting here, watching you two with Briana and Katrina, and I couldn’t help think, ‘If these two kids stay together, they are going to be the greatest parents in the world.’”

“I can see that, myself,” Brian agreed.

“Well,” Sophia began, “one thing we **have** done is have the ‘what do you want out of life’ talk, to make sure we’re on the same page on the basics. And one thing we discovered is that we both love kids and both want a housefull of them.” She looked at Warren.

“Seeing him around kids only reinforces that.”

“Same goes for you, Pookie.”

They looked at each other again. Brian and Michelle also looked at each other, bemused. “HEY! The tape!” Sophia burst out suddenly.

“Right!” agreed Warren.

“What are you guys talking about?” Brian asked.

“There’s a videotape in my bag, Dad. Should be right on top. Since I’m currently pinned down by a sleeping infant, could you grab it and pop it in the VCR?”

“Sure. What’s on it?”

“Oh, just a little something I do with my boyfriend that you don’t know about.”

“Are you sure this tape is appropriate for Briana?” Brian asked.

Sophia burst out laughing. “Of course. We don’t videotape **that**.” She blushed. “Although, I must admit, that sounds like fun.” Even Brian burst out laughing. “Anyway, no, this tape is rated G. What you are about to see will not be officially unveiled until New England Junior Regionals in Marlborough in October, but we taped a sneak preview for you. This is **not** completely finished—there’s a couple of holes in the middle part—but it’s close.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“All will be revealed, Dad,” Sophia giggled. “Hit play.”

The tape was of an ice rink. Sophia and Warren were skating around, holding hands, and approached the center of the rink. They took their starting poses, and the music started.

Seeing themselves as Fred-and-Ginger style ice dancers, they had chosen a collection of big band music for their first competitive ice dance. It started out with Pennsylvania 6-5000, into Moonlight Serenade for the slow section, and ending with Opus One. They were definitely junior-level dancers, but the dance was snappy and entertaining, and this had been a particularly good run-through. They were young and inexperienced, but the tape left no doubt that they had talent and skill. And that they had a complete **ball** dancing with one another.

Brian and Michelle looked on with an increasing mixture of amazement and delight. The Opus One ending section was chock full of quick, difficult footwork, most of it in closed position, and Sophia and Warren handled it with aplomb.

They hit their ending pose, and Warren, cracking up, said into the camera, “Well, there it is, the next great ice dance team. Move over, Bourne and Kraatz!” Sophia playfully punched him in the ribs, and then the tape switched off.

Briana started clapping. “Yay!”

Brian laughed. “I totally agree. You guys are **good!**”

“Well, we’ll see how good when we start competing,” Sophia demurred.

“It looked damn good to me, I’ll tell you that.” Brian asserted.

“If only you were a judge,” Warren quipped, to general laughter. “It really doesn’t matter. We do this for fun. We don’t train enough to be serious about it. We just want to compete because we think that will be fun, too, win or lose.”

“You can tell you guys are having fun.” Michelle said.

“New England Regionals, in Marlborough, in October, you said?” Brian asked.

“Yeah. Third weekend in October, I have the dates at home.”

Brian smiled at his daughter. “I’ll be there.”

Sophia smiled back. “I’d like that.”

CHANGES FOR MOM (Chapter 33)

It was an afternoon in early September. Sophia was home, not in work this day, and was chatting with her mother.

“So, you’re a junior, now,” Ellen said. “How’s school going?”

“Great. Great classes this year.”

“Skating going good? Getting ready for Regionals?”

“Yeah. Oh, that reminds me. Dad wants to come.”

“Do you want him to?”

“Yeah.” Sophia looked at her mother. “But only if **you** don’t mind.”

“If you want him there, honey, than I don’t mind. **You** are the one competing, not me.”

Sophia thought for a minute. “Does it bother you, Mom? That he’s back in my life?”

“A little. But not **that** much, or I wouldn’t have brought him in the house in the first place. Listen, Sophia, I have horrific memories of our years together. Those just won’t go away. However, I give him all the credit in the world for turning his life around. Some men like him **never** do that. At least he realized what he had become, and got help.”

“He told me that’s why he left.”

“Yeah, and I do understand that. Leaving **was** the right thing to do, for all of us. I do wish he had come back, to **you**, sooner than he did.”

“I do, too. But he’s here, now. And he’s trying, he really is.”

“I know. Which is why I am determined to not let it bother me. He is **your** father. Anything he and I ever had between us is dead and buried, except that he gave me **you** and I am eternally grateful for that.” Sophia smiled. “But other than that, he’s nothing to me. But he is **your** father, and always will be. And if you want a relationship with him, then you should have one.”

“Thanks, Mom.” She looked at her mother with a critical eye. “Are you working tonight?”

“No.”

“Why you dressed up, then?”

“I have a date. Don’t worry, the kids are with their father.”

“Mom, you have a DATE?”

“Uh-huh,” Ellen grinned. “His name is Dan. I met him at the hotel, last week. His brother and sister in law were staying there, and he was taking them around and stuff, so he’d show up every day. We started talking one day, and he ended up waiting for them down in the lobby, chatting with me, every morning. The last day he was there, he asked me out.”

“That’s great, Mom.”

The first date between Ellen and Dan was a smashing success; it turned into a lot more of them. They were going out most nights that Ellen didn’t have to work—which put babysitting duties on Sophia more than she would have liked, but she really didn’t mind. They had had a lovely date on a rare Friday night off for Ellen, and were heading back to Ellen’s house. Ellen wanted to introduce him to Sophia.

At this particular moment, Sophia had forgotten that:

In fact, she was in bed, on her back, her legs up resting on Warren's shoulders, while Warren slipped in and out of her.

"Ohhhhh....OOOOOO.....Ah...ah.....ayiiiiiii.....oooooh.....
OhWarrenWarrendon'tstopdon'tstopdont'stopharderharderharder.....OOOOOOOO.....
OhmygodAYIIIIIIIIII!!!!.....
AH!AH!AH!AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAYYYYYYYYYYYYYIIIIIIIIII
IIIIIIIIII!!!!!!!"

She spasmed, her legs pounding Warren's shoulders, which brought Warren off.

He quietly slipped out of her, and cuddled up to her while they both recovered. Sophia was panting and flushed, and altogether ravishing, like she always was after sex.

"I always think the same thing after we're done." Warren laughed.

"What's that?"

"That it is a pity that this is the **last** thing I see, after I'm done, because the way you look after you've been made love to is the biggest turn on I've ever seen."

Sophia just laughed. "So you sustain yourself because you know you're going to see **this** when you're done?"

"Yup. I file it in my memory for later viewing."

"Hmm. Maybe we **should** do that whole videotape thing." She got a glance at the clock, and sat upright in a hurry. "SHIT! We have to get dressed!"

"Why, Sex Kitten?"

"My Mom's not working tonight, and she's planning on bringing her new boyfriend home to meet me, and they're expected at 10:30."

"What's it now?"

"10:15."

"Shit." Warren reached around and found his clothes. Sophia was standing in front of him, bent over, grabbing her panties.

Warren laughed. "Soph, you'd better go in the bathroom and clean up. It's running down your legs.":

She looked down. "SHIT!" she said, but laughed.

“Damn, he has to show up **now**? Watching you naked and flushed with cum running down your legs is even **more** of a turn on.”

“Get dressed, you goof.” Sophia said, and ran into the bathroom.

They actually still hadn’t shown up at 11:00. “Damn, we would have had time for another,” Warren said playfully. Sophia just hit him. They were curled up on the couch, had made some popcorn, and were watching a movie.

Her mother finally walked in. “Soph? You here?”

“In the living room, Mom.” Ellen walked in to see Sophia and Warren curled up on the couch together. Sophia looked up and saw her mom and the guy with her, and sat up, smiling.

“Dan, this is my daughter Sophia. Sophie, this is Dan.”

“Nice to meet you, Sophia. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Me, too,” said Sophia, shaking his hand. “This is my boyfriend, Warren.” They shook hands, also.

“Movie?” Ellen asked.

“Yup,” Sophia said. “Another selection from Warren’s collection.”

“Which one?”

“Bull Durham.”

“Oh, that is a **classic**. One of my favorites,” Dan said.

“Mine, too,” said Warren. “Both of ours, actually.”

“Yup. I love it,” Sophia concurred.

“It’s got two of her favorite things in the world in it,” Warren quipped.

“Kevin Costner and Tim Robbins?” Dan asked, smiling.

“Well, there **is** that,” Sophia giggled. “But, no, I was thinking of sex and baseball. How can you go wrong with a flick that’s about sex and baseball?”

Dan looked at her, shocked. “I **warned** you about her,” Ellen commented bemusedly. “She is **not** your garden variety sixteen year old girl.”

“You weren’t kidding,” Dan agreed. “I mean, I was shocked. Meeting me for the first time, and she tells me she likes sex and baseball. Heck, I don’t think I’ve **ever** met a sixteen year old girl that was into **baseball**,” he finished with a wide grin.

Sophia cracked up laughing. “Mom, I like him already.”

“It’s also got a guy named ‘Crash’ in it. Gotta love a movie with a guy named Crash.” Warren offered.

Sophia giggled, and turned to Dan, “Crash is his best friend’s nickname.”

“Dan, you want a drink?” Ellen called from the kitchen.

“Something soft would be fine.”

Ellen came out with a couple cokes. “Mind if we join you?”

“If you guys wanna be alone, I’m sure we can go play on the computer, or something,” Sophia offered.

“No,” Ellen laughed. “That’s fine. We wanted to spend some time with my favorite daughter and her favorite boyfriend.” They all laughed. “Besides, I like this movie, too.”

They watched the movie and chatted a while afterwards. As it had gotten quite late, Dan offered Warren a ride home, which he accepted.

Ellen and Sophia shared a cup of hot chocolate. “So, what did you think?”

“I like him, Mom. He seems really nice.”

“He is. He has a 13 year old daughter who he has custody of—apparently his ex-wife is unstable.”

“Aah. Have you met her.”

“Once. She seems sweet and nice. Nothing like you.” Ellen laughed.

“Oh, thanks, Mom. I can be sweet and nice.....sometimes.”

“Yeah, the first thing you say to my new boyfriend is that you like sex and baseball.” Ellen smirked.

“Oh, yeah, I know—he’s all scandalized that I like baseball.”

“You stop it. No, Sophie, I’m just teasing you. You were fine. I think he likes you, too.”

“So, Mom, how serious is this?”

“I don’t know. We like each other, we have a good time together, and we’ll see what happens.”

“Cool. I figured **something** was going on, what with you entering the Daughter Approval Stage so quickly,” Sophia smirked.

“Well, at least you liked him, unlike the last boyfriend I brought home.”

“Well, aside from the fact that I was in the I Hate Everything About My Mother mood at that point, that last guy **was** a slimeball.”

“I must admit, you **were** right about him.”

“I like Dan, though.”

“Good.”

SECTIONALS AND REGIONALS (Chapter 34)

They were a little nervous. They didn’t expect to be, but they were.

It was, after all, their very first competition. For all their blather about not taking it seriously, they did want to skate well. Placements really **weren’t** all that important. They thought they’d like to make it to sectionals, which would take a top 4 finish out of the 7 teams competing. Outside of that, though, they skated for fun. Even so, they wanted to skate clean and skate well.

All of their family members would attend the free dance, but they couldn’t make it to all the stages. Sophia’s mom made it out to compulsories, and Warren’s dad was able to attend the Original Dance. They were very happy with second place finishes in both stages.

“I told you guys you were good,” June, their coach, was telling them.

“Yeah, but good isn’t always enough in ice dance,” Warren replied.

“True, but that’s less so in juniors. Most of these couples are new, or new to juniors, so there isn’t quite the same pecking order.”

“Yeah, but we’re **totally** new. I’m really surprised we are where we are,” Sophia said.

“Well, be proud of yourselves. You’ve earned it. And the free dance is your strength, so anything can happen.”

The free dance was on a Saturday morning. Brian and Michelle Daniels walked into the rink and found a good seat—Michelle wasn't sure she would be able to come, but her parents were watching Briana and Katrina. She was glad, she wanted to come. She had grown very fond of Sophia, and was glad that Brian had reunited with her. It was kind of weird to have a 16-year-old stepdaughter—Michelle herself was only 29, seven years younger than Brian—but she also found that kind of neat, too. They had had some very nice talks when Sophia called, and she had been to visit a few times, now..

Brian, for his part, was nervous. **Very** nervous. He was sweating, and felt like he wanted to pace, but there really wasn't any room for that.

"You OK?" Michelle asked him.

"I can **not** believe how nervous I am!"

The couple behind them laughed. Brian turned around. The woman said, "You must have a child skating."

Brian couldn't help but smile. "My daughter."

The woman looked at him very closely, but wasn't sure. "Your daughter?"

"Yeah. And we've just reunited after a very long estrangement. I know this is very important to her, and I'm very glad she asked me to come, after the problems we've had. But, boy, am I nervous."

"Long estrangement?" Then the woman smiled. "I **thought** I saw a family resemblance. You've **got** to be Sophia Daniels' father."

Brian blinked, startled. "Yes, I am. You know Sophia?"

The woman cracked up laughing, and her husband said, "Oh, yes, we know Sophia, very well. I'm Jim Kelleher, and this is Peg."

Brian smiled broadly. "Warren's parents!"

"Nice to meet you," Jim shook his hand, as did Peg. Brian introduced them both to Michelle.

"I've got to tell you both, I've very rarely met a young man who's impressed me more than your son," Brian told them.

"Thank you very much," Peg said.

“I agree, He’s a wonderful kid,” Michelle added. “I’ve got a three year old who is **terrified** of any male not named Daddy—she’s even a little scared of her grandfather—and Warren had her eating out of his hand within twenty seconds.”

“Our son, the future pediatrician. He adores kids,” Jim agreed.

The final group, the top four teams after the OD, were about ready to come out for the warm-up. Ellen had arrived, with Dan, and had sat with them. Brian had even offered to move, but Ellen laughed and told him to stay. They had a nice, pleasant chat about how nervous they were.

Warren and Sophia found skating and competing **fun**, and didn’t try to hide it. There were three dance teams on the ice putting their “game faces” on, and one team just plain having a ball. They were all smiles. They waved at their parents. The tried the footwork sequence they were having the most trouble with, did it perfectly, and were all grins.

They were third in the order. The team that was first after the OD skated first in the order, and skated well, but they weren’t unbeatable. The team in third fell. Then came Warren and Sophia.

The curse of theatricality in ice dance had spread to the Junior ranks. Most of the couples that had skated before them were over-theatrical—in music choices, costuming, movements, facial expressions, all of it. June had joked that the girl in the first place team had spent the entire free dance looking constipated and waving her arms about like she was signaling with flags.

So, when Warren and Sophia came out—to anyone in the crowd without a rooting interest, they were a definite breath of fresh air. Warren was actually wearing a tux, and Sophia had a long blue dress on, her hair up in a bun. Their music was the classic Big Band mix that they had played for Brian and Michelle, their dance holds and steps were plainly ballroom-derived, and—best of all—they danced the whole dance with huge grins on their faces. They made solid, loving eye contact with each other, something almost unheard of in ice dance, but it was affectionate and charming. They looked like what they were—two people madly in love with each other, dancing, not a care in the world. It was sweet and romantic. The middle section—the part to Moonlight Serenade—especially, and then they danced up a storm to the Opus One ending, handling the tricky footwork with no problem.

The crowd ate it up with a spoon. When they hit their closing pose, the small crowd made enough noise to fill a huge arena. Warren and Sophia took their bows, grinning at the applause like little kids on Christmas morning, and scooped up all the flowers—and the teddy bear from Brian—that were thrown on the ice.

Junior competitions at Regionals were closed judging. There were no scores or standings read or displayed in the arena. Nobody would know the placements until shortly after the end of the competition, when they would be posted. Warren and Sophia—and June—

knew they had won the crowd, big time, but they also knew that winning the crowd was **not** the same as winning the judges. And their dance was so different from the prevailing theatrical style that all bets were off.

It took almost a half hour for the results to be posted. The wait was interminable, as Warren and Sophia, with all their parents, hung around the area where the results were posted. Finally, they saw a competition official appear with a piece of paper, which she hung up. A knot of people quickly grew around her, and Sophia dove into the crowd—Warren was further away, so Sophia pushed her way through the crowd and got to the posted results first.

“Oh my God, Warren, we WON!!!!!!!!!!”

The top four finishers from Regionals went on to compete at Eastern Sectionals, along with the similar finishers from two other regions. This year, the Eastern Sectionals were in New Jersey.

The top four finishers from Sectionals would make it to the National Championships. Sophia and Warren didn’t expect to make it **there**, not in their first try. Sectionals was their goal, and, having met that goal, Sectionals was just a vacation. They skated, they had a blast. They figured this was it. They didn’t think they had a chance at top four—and certainly didn’t think they had **any** chance to **win** Sectionals.

In fact, they **still** didn’t believe it, as they stood on the top step of the podium with the Junior Sectionals Gold Medals in Ice Dance around their neck.

When Warren got home the next day, he quickly ran to his computer. He opened his-email program, and entered in the addresses for Elizabeth Cushman, Jack Garrison, Christine Arsenault, and Andrea Wallach, his four best internet skating friends. They were all competing internationally this fall so had byes to Nationals. He sent this note to all of them:

“Hello, guys. It looks like that Sophia and I will finally be able to meet all of you in person, after all this time of emails, IM’s, and phone calls. We will be able to meet, in Chicago, IL, during the week of January 8th—because this E-mail is coming to you from one half of the Eastern Sectionals Junior Ice Dance GOLD MEDALISTS. SEE YOU AT NATIONALS, BABY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

His screen lit up with 4 excited IM’s within ten minutes.

Sophia handled the mailing list. One of the stalwarts on the mailing list was Penny Loring, a knowledgeable Skatefan from Texas known for being a die-hard Liz Cushman

fan. She was also one of Warren and Sophia's favorite people on the list. Penny had sent out a post.

“Hey, I was just thinking, as I read the results from New Jersey. Is the Warren and Sophia that post here the same Warren and Sophia that just won Junior Dance at Easterns?”

Sophia quoted Penny’s post, and replied.

“Well, Penny, don’t jump to conclusions. There’s got to be **tons** of ice dance teams with people named Warren and Sophia, right?

So.....who’s going to CHICAGO?

Sophia Daniels,
Champion, Eastern Sectionals Junior Ice Dance <G>”

Both of their e-mail boxes were very full, very quickly

SITTING IN THE BACK SEAT OF MY CAR (Chapter 35)

Warren was sitting in his first-period class, listening to the announcements over the loudspeaker

“Mr. O’Brien will be having his annual Christmas Carol excursion on December 18th.”

“I think I’ll go,” Warren said to Crash. “I went as a freshman, but didn’t go last year. I think you can bring guests, I’ll check with Mr. O. I’ll drag Sophia with me.”

Crash grinned. “I’m not quite sure Christmas Caroling is Jessie’s thing.”

Warren grinned back. “I’m quite sure it’s **not**.”

The loudspeaker was still going. “Oh, and I have one more announcement. The administration would like to congratulate Junior class member Warren Kelleher.” The class turned and looked at him. “Warren, along with his partner Sophia Daniels, competed at the Eastern Sectionals Figure Skating Championship this past week, and Warren and Sophia won first place in the Junior Ice Dance division. This will allow them to compete in the national championships in January. Congratulations to Warren.”

Everyone just stared at him. “Warren,” his English teacher, Mr. Garelli, said, “I didn’t know you were an ice skater.”

“Very few people did,” Warren said, chagrined. “Until **now**.”

“That confirms it,” Peter Dennis, one of the nastier kids in the class said, “You’re gay. I knew it. If you’re a figure skater, you must be gay.”

“Well, considering the lovely lady that I skate with is my **girlfriend**, and has been for almost two years—not hardly!”

“Oh, yeah, like **you** have a girlfriend,” Peter smirked. A couple other kids echoed the sentiment.

Warren just smiled, and didn’t say anything. But Crash did. “Oh, yeah, guys, he’s got a girlfriend, all right. In fact, he and Sophia introduced **me** to **my** girlfriend. He and Soph had been going out for a long time.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Peter declared.

“Oh, believe me, Pete, you don’t **wanna** see it. If you do, you’ll eat your shorts.” Pete just looked at him. Crash continued, “I’m telling you, as an impartial observer, Sophia is a first-class grade A **babe**.”

“Yeah, riiiiiiigggghht.”

“OK, I think that’s enough about Warren’s lovelife,” Mr. Garelli interjected, to general laughter. “Can we get back to Hawthorne now?”

A bunch of kids were outside at the end of the day, waiting for busses and rides and such. Warren and Crash were among them, as was Peter Dennis.

“Oh, wow—look at that!” Dave Ingalls, another classmate, exclaimed. “What a gorgeous babe.”

“You got that right,” Sean McHugh agreed. “How did a beauty like **that** get here at our wonderful all-male school?”

“Looks like she’s looking for someone,” Dave said.

“Well, of course she is. She’s looking for **me**.” Peter smirked. “Watch, boys, and learn—the well-known Dennis charm is about to work its magic.”

Just then, Warren looked at the girl who had caused all the commotion. “Hey, it’s Sophia. HEY, SOPHIE! OVER HERE!”

Peter Dennis stopped dead in his tracks.

“Warren? **There** you are!” Sophia ran up and gave Warren a big kiss, to the dumbstruck awe of the knot of guys gathered around. “Hi, Crash!” Crash waved to her.

“Well, hello, Pookie,” Warren said, surprised. “What on **earth** are you doing here?”

Sophia smiled, and withdrew a small piece of plastic from her pocket book. “Surprise!”

“You got your license? I didn’t even know you had the test scheduled!”

“That’s cause I wanted to surprise you. I am officially a licensed driving babe. C’mon, the car’s down in the lot.” They walked off hand in hand. “See ya, Crash,” they both said.

Peter Dennis had to pick his jaw up off the ground. “That.... **gorgeous** specimen is **Warren Kelleher’s GIRLFRIEND?**”

“And his ice skating partner.” Crash confirmed. “Told you.”

“Oh my fucking head.”

Sophia and Warren drove around for a while, and then got some supper. They both called their parents, and then did some more driving. It was wonderful, to be able to drive around, have freedom to go wherever.

Suddenly, Sophia turned down a dirt road.

“Where we going, Pookie?” Warren asked.

“Trust me, Snugglebear. I know a spot.”

They drove down the road for a while, and then it came to an end in a knot of woods. Sophia pulled into a spot, hidden from the road. It was completely secluded.

Sophia turned the car off. “Into the back seat, Studmuffin.”

Warren just laughed. “You turned the car off. Won’t it get cold in here in a while? It’s pretty cold out.”

“That’s half the fun. See if we can heat each other up before the temperature drops.” Sophia giggled. She climbed into the backseat. “I’ve been wanting to do this for a long time. Beds might be more comfortable, but back seats of cars are more **exciting**.”

Warren giggled, and, not thinking he could jump over, got out of the door and came in into the back seat. “Are you excited, Sex Kitten?”

She just nodded.

Warren unzipped her coat, and slipped his hand up under her sweater. “How excited **are** you, Sex Kitten?”

“oooooooooh, very” she moaned, as he undid her bra and grasped her breasts firmly.

“I wonder how more excited you can get,” Warren teased, as he undid the button on her pants, and pulled them down. His fingers made contact with her pussy. She was **soaking** wet. “My God, Pookie, you **are** excited.”

“I’ve been thinking about this the whole time we’ve been driving around. OOOOOOoooooOOOOHHHH!” she moaned as Warren’s fingers entered her. He lifted her shirt up with his free hand, and started sucking on a breast.

“OohhhhhhhhWARREN!” she gasped, as she grabbed his head and held it against her breast while he nibbled and tongued her. “Oh, baby, I think you’re excited too, you’re **aggressive** tonight.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

An hour later, Sophia was completely out of her mind. He had fingered, and then tongued, her to more orgasms than she could count. At one point she had steered him into a 69, and she blew him an orgasm so strong that cum had leaked out onto her chin, neck, and tits.. She knew that they were in a very secluded place, but just the **thought** that they **might** get caught had apparently pushed them both over the edge. Restrained, gentle Warren was more aggressive than she had **ever** seen him, and, tonight, it was just what she wanted. For her part, she was on **fire**. They had been in a car with no heat in 30 degree weather for an hour, and neither of them had even noticed.

As Warren’s magnificent tongue brought her to yet another orgasm, Sophia exploded. “WarrenWarrenWarren I want you. I want you in me **now**. Warren, fuck me! Fuck me now! I need your big cock in me and I need it now! WARREN, FUCK ME! PLEASE! FUCK ME!”

Warren was, himself, on fire, and hearing Sophia talk like this—she usually moaned and screamed, but not these words—turned him on more than ever. He climbed up and got himself into position, as Sophia kept up begging.

“Warren, oh, please, put it in me. Fuck me, I want you to fuck me, pound it in me, please Warren, your Pookie needs a good fucking, oh God, fuck me now…….”....and Warren, who usually was slow and deliberate, **rammed** into Sophia with one brutal stroke.

“Warren fuckmefuckme now now
fuckmeAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIYYYYYYYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!
!!!!!!”

Sophia was so turned on that on his first, brutal, pounding stroke, she came so hard she almost fell off the car seat. Warren stopped as he bottomed out, trying not to get thrown off his bouncing, spasming girlfriend.

She came down a bit, but she was still on fire. Her voice was a low growl. “Oh Warren, fuck me now, fuck me, POUND ME. POUND IT INTO ME! Oh, God, Don’t STOP. Oh, Pookie needs a fucking, Warren, HARDER! HARDER! oOooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhh FUCK ME! Ah! Ah! Ah! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!

Oh God Im’ CUMMMMIINNNNNNGGGGGGGG!!!!!!” She came down off of **that** orgasm, but she still wasn’t done. And neither was Warren.

“OhGodOhGodOhGodMORE! FUCK ME, WARREN. HARDER! FASTER! Ooo ooo ooo oooo MORE! POUND THAT BIG FUCKER OF YOURS INTO ME, WARREN! HARDER! FUCK ME TILL IT HURTS! OH IT HURTS! HARDER! HARDER! FUCK ME HARD, WARREN, FUCK ME TILL I SCREAM!!!!!!”

Warren was pounding into her more viciously than he **ever** had before, at her coaxing, but the ceaseless pounding plus her dirty talk combined meant he wasn’t going to be able to hold out forever. He knew she was close again. He wanted to get here there before he went. Hmmm. Maybe if she was working on him, he should work on her.

“Cum for me, Sophia,” he growled into her ear. “I want to see you cum again, Pookie. I want you to cum all over my cock. I want that gorgeous pussy of yours to feel it, Pookie, feel my cock pounding into you. Cum for me. I want it to hurt so good, I want you to cum all over me, I want to fuck you so deep that you cum so hard you pass out. Do you like this, Pookie? Do you like Warren’s big cock pounding into you like this? Cum for me, now, Sophia, I want to see you cum.”

And that’s all it took. They both came. And it was **explosive**.

A few minutes later, Sophia realized where she was. They were in a tangle, half on the seat, half on the floor, arms and legs and body parts everywhere.

“Oh my God I think I passed out,” Sophia said in amazement.

“And I don’t think you were the only one,” Warren concurred.

“Oh, Warren. When you started whispering that you wanted to see me cum, I totally lost it. You **never** talk like that.”

“ME? I’m not the one that said ‘Fuck me till it hurts’.”

“Did I **say** that?”

“Oh, and a lot of other things. I have **never** seen you like this.”

“And I’ve never see you like this.” She got a wry grin on her face. “Oh, dear heart, I am going to **feel** this tomorrow.”

Warren blushed a little. “I couldn’t control myself. You **were** egging me on, to a degree that I couldn’t believe.”

“That was certainly as intense as it’s ever been. Hey, if I told you to fuck me till it hurts, I can’t blame you for following my instructions, can I?”

“I never knew you liked it rough.”

“I never **did**. And, you are always so gentle—and I loved it that way—it never occurred to me to try it rougher, with you. I suppose I had to lose control like **this** for that to happen. But, believe me, dear heart, it was **worth** it. I have never cum like that in my life. I’m still not recovered.”

Warren looked concerned. “But it hurts?”

“A little,” Sophia smiled at him. “You were **brutal**. No, dear heart, don’t look like that—I begged for it, remember. I wanted you to pound the shit out of me, I **needed** you to. Like I said, it was worth it. But, yeah, I think I’m going to feel this one for a few days.”

Warren slid down until his face was just about between her legs. “Kiss it better?” he joked.

Sophia just smiled at him, “Oh, Warren, I don’t think I could **take** that right now.”

“Trust me, Pookie,” he said, and put his face down between her legs.

“Warren, you just **came** in there!”

“I don’t mind,” he said, and dove right in.

All the white-hot intensity was gone. Gentle Warren was back, and even **more** gentle than usual. There was no speed, no force—just his tongue gently massaging her overworked pussy. Instead of the white-hot passion she had felt earlier, his ministrations just made her feel tingly all over. And, when she came again, after a half hour, it wasn’t an explosion—it was a gentle thing, like being washed over by warm water.

“Oh, dear heart, that was magnificent,” she said, sobbing a little.

“Still hurt?”

“No. No, you kissed it all better, my love. It’s still gonna hurt tomorrow, mind you,”—they both laughed—“but, tonight, I am in heaven.”

“You’re right, Pookie. Back seats are fun, aren’t they?”

“Uh, huh.” Sophia sat for a minute. “Warren, I want you again.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I don’t think you could take it.”

“So, we’ll do something different, then.”

“What are you talking about?”

Sophia took a deep breath. “Warren, I want you to backdoor me.”

Warren just looked at her. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” she was blushing a little bit. “I’ve always wanted to try it.” She smiled at him. “Haven’t you?”

“With an ass like **yours**? Of course I have. But it supposedly hurts.”

“Only at first. **Now** I will allow you to be gentle.” They both laughed. Sophia reached into her pocketbook, and pulled out a tube of Vaseline. “Here. I usually don’t need this, since you make me so wet”—they both giggled—“but this time, I think you will.” She hunched down on the seat, face down, and raised her ass in the air. “Warren, I couldn’t give you my virginity, but I dearly want to give you my anal virginity.”

Warren lubed his member, and stuck his finger a bit way in her ass and lubed that up, prompting her to moan softly. Then he lined up the tip of his cock with her asshole, and pushed.

“AaaaaarrrrrRROOWWW!”

“Hurts? Soph, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“It’s gonna hurt at first. Get it over with. Go slow, but PUSH.”

Warren pushed, got a few inches in, and heard Sophia cry out.

“Sophie....”

“This is the night to play rough, isn’t it? Warren, just **keep going**,” Sophia cried out through her tears.

He kept going, and gave thanks that he had already come twice, because, if he hadn’t, he knew he wouldn’t last in her tight hole very long. Sophia, for her part, was moaning in pain.

“That’s it, Sex Kitten. All the way in. You took it all.”

“Oh boy DID I. OK, just rest there for a minute and let me get used to it.”

“Still hurts?”

“Some, but it’s going away. Boy I feel FULL though, it’s very strange.”

Warren sat there for a minute, fully buried in her ass, hands on her hips. He looked at her, all hunched over in front of him, face buried in the seat, and got an idea. “You know, this just won’t do.”

“What?”

“Trust me, Pookie. Put your left leg down, off the seat, let your foot hit the floor.”

“OK,” she said quizzically, but did so. It made him slip a bit deeper. Then he slipped his hands around her waist and cupped her breasts.

“Sophia, I’m going to raise you up.” He lifted, and her face and chest came off the seat, and Warren raised her in a vertical position. Her back was against his chest, his cock still buried to the hilt in her ass. He started massaging her breasts, and then started kissing and licking her neck.

“Oooooooooohhhhhhhh,” she moaned. “Warren, you’re a genius. Will this work?”

“Still hurt?”

“No, not really. In fact it feels good, you up in there like this.”

“Good, then let’s find out if it works.” He nibbled on her neck while his hands worked her breasts over, and he slowly slid almost all the way out of her ass, and then slipped back in.

“Oooooooooohhhhhhhhhh. Oh yeah. Ohhhhhhhhhhhh. Oh my God. OOOOOOOOOHHHHHHHHH” she started moaning, as Warren gently started to plow in and out of her ass, all the while keeping his attention on her neck, face, and tits. They got into a steady rhythm, her ass thrusting back to meet his cock.

“Oh my God. I think I’m going to cum again, and nothing’s even touching my pussy!”

“Really?”

“Oh, man, this feels **fantastic**. Ooooh. Oooooooooohhhh.
OhmygodOhmygodOhmyGodOOOOOOHHHH. OOOOOOOHHHHHHH.
AAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIYYYYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” And with that, Sophia came, for the first time in her life without vaginal stimulation. It was incredible. And the spasms shooting from her pussy into her asshole clamped down on Warren’s dick, and made him explode into her bowels.

She didn't collapse, much to her surprise. She didn't **want** to. Warren, having gone completely soft after the exertions of the evening, slipped out of her rear end, but they stayed in the same position—kneeling, with Sophia's back to Warren's front, his hands on her breasts, her hands on top of his hands, his face in her neck. They stayed that way for many minutes, as they both caught their breath.

“Oh my heavens,” Sophia said, finally. “That is the best sex we have **ever** had, and that is saying a **lot**.”

“So, how’d you like getting backdoored, Pookie?” Warren said with a grin.

“I heard it would hurt quite a bit, but then be good. I didn’t think it would be **that** good. That ain’t the **last** time you’ll be sticking my ass, I can promise you that.”

“I hold you to that promise.” They both laughed. Warren looked around. “Boy, what a mess.”

Sophia just laughed and reached under the seat. “I came prepared,” she said as she withdrew a few towels from the seat. She took one and tried to clean up the seat, and Warren took another one to clean up **Sophia**, much to her delight. She took the third one and threw it over into the front seat. “I think I’ll need to put that one under me, because my ass is leaking,” she laughed. Warren grabbed his clothes and started getting dressed. Sophia put her bra on, and her shirt. She looked at her panties, which were soaked, and looked at herself, still leaking out of her pussy and ass, and said, smiling, “Why bother?” She threw the panties at Warren, who, much to her bemusement, slipped them into his pants pocket, and slipped her skirt over her bare ass.

“I hope my mother isn’t waiting up for me,” Sophia said after they had driven for a few minutes.

“Think she’d notice something?” Warren teased her.

“Oh, NO, dear heart. Why would she notice anything? I’m sure I’ll be walking bowlegged, cum is dripping down my leg, and I’m most likely going to walk in the house bareassed covered by a short skirt, because somehow I doubt I’m getting those panties back.”

“You’re right. I’m keeping those as a memento.”

“That’s very romantic, in a lusty animalistic kind of way.” They both laughed. “Of course, my mother knows we’re doing it, and probably figured that we’re doing it **now**, but I can do without her little comments sometimes.”

Warren just laughed. “Do you know how much I love you?”

“Easy to say, after great sex.” Sophie teased

“True. Which is why I try to say it more often than that.”

Sophia got a serious look on her face. “I always love you. I know you always love me. But I worry about how you feel about sex.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, I would be deliriously happy if I **never** had sex for the rest of my life with anyone other than Warren Kelleher. But I don’t think you could feel the same way, no matter how much you love me.”

“WHAT? What **are** you talking about?”

Sophia got serious. “Look, Warren. **I** know how good the sex is, because I have some basis of comparison. But how do you know? I’m the only one you’ve ever had. How do you know that there isn’t someone you’d enjoy it more with?”

“That’s crazy. Have I complained?”

“No, but..... Warren, I think you should find someone else to have sex with. I can wait, I can allow you to find out for sure. I can do that. If you don’t explore, you’ll never find out for sure. I want you to find out.”

Warren got silent for a minute. Then he said, in a very tight voice, “Sophie, pull the car over at the first opportunity.” She did so, finding a deserted parking lot in front of a closed store.

“Sophia,” Warren started, “I must have done something very, very wrong.”

“WHAT? No, of course not.”

“Yes, I have. Look, I’m not as vocal during sex as you are. I’m just not. It’s not my nature to be so. I’m restrained by nature. I keep my passions under wraps to a degree. I thought I had showed them to you well enough, but it is clear to me now that I was wrong.”

“Warren, no, I didn’t mean.....”

“Sophia, shut up and listen to me.” She looked at him, startled. “I want you to listen to what I’m saying. I want you to remember it for all time. If I could find someone better in bed than you, it would not matter. Because, I would be **dead** of the largest heart attack in recorded medical history.” Sophia giggled a bit at that. “Shit, you made me **pass out** tonight. I don’t think I could take more than that.”

“I haven’t made this clear enough. You are **fantastic** in bed. I don’t need any basis of comparison. You’re inventive, you’re passionate, you’re willing to try new things. And I **love** you. What else do I need?”

“Look, I’m probably telling you something I probably shouldn’t, but guess what—guys compare notes.” Sophia just looked at him. “I might not have any **direct** basis for comparison, but I’ve got some notes from the field. Look, I know you’re probably not

thrilled that I sometimes talk about what we do with my friends. But, you know what? My friends have girlfriends, that they have sex with, and they tell me about that.”

“Do you know what I hear? Oh, all she wants is the old missionary position, she won’t try anything new. Oh, she won’t go down on me, or she doesn’t let me go down on **her**. Oh, she’s a cold fish, no reaction at all, I don’t know if she even enjoys it. Oh, I suggested this and she said I was a pervert. And on and on and on.”

“And they ask about you. And I might tell them a little. And I tell them the truth, I’m not exaggerating, and they look at me in undisguised **awe**. If I told them about tonight—which I don’t think I’ll do, because I’m not quite sure I could put it into words—they would beat me up with baseball bats trying to extract your phone number.” Sophia laughed.

“I have absolutely **no** complaints about our sex life. None, none, none. And I only have **one** other friend that I’ve talked to that can say that.”

“And **his** name, as you might have guessed, is Crash. Apparently Jess is something special, too.” Sophia cracked up laughing at that.

Sophia looked at him, and asked, “So, what’s so special about me, then? Girls trade notes about **guys**, not other girls. Think of tonight. What would you tell them about tonight that would make them so envious?”

Warren thought. “Let’s see. In **one** night—you told me to fuck you till it hurts and you had multiple orgasms doing it, we had mutual oral sex, anal sex at **your** instigation and said you want to do it again, I lost track of how many times you came overall, you had one orgasm while I was backdooring you with **no** hands or other objects on your pussy, you screamed a couple of times loud enough to wake the dead, and we both passed out. Any **one** of these occurrences is rare enough to make my friends’ jaws drop. All of them? In one night? If I told this tale, and you walked the halls of St. Mike’s, you would be worshipped as the sex goddess of all time.” Sophia giggled a little.

“We have the most passionate, most exciting, most stimulating, most joyous sex life that I could ever, in my wildest dreams, imagine. I don’t need anyone else. I don’t **want** anyone else, forever and ever, amen, thank you very much. You are my heart, my soul, my life, and you completely spin my head around in every possible way **every** time we have sex. You are **it**, Sophia Daniels, and, if I have my way, you will be it until the day I die. End of discussion.”

Sophia leaned over in the seat, grabbed his face, and lovingly kissed him. She broke the kiss after a few long minutes, and said, “I love you so much. Thank you for saying what you did. I worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I am completely fulfilled.” They smiled at each other. “And you have cum on your chin.” Sophia exploded in laughter.

NATIONALS (Chapter 36)

They did, in fact, go Christmas Caroling, and had a ball. They also took a nice long drive in Sophia's car to look at all the Christmas lights. Sophia's Dad had invited her down for Christmas, but she wanted to go to Warren's again, so they went to her Dad's house for Christmas Eve.

Warren's parents and Sophia's mom got together to buy them each cell phones, with the first year all paid up as long as they stayed within their plan, and under a special "family plan" offer that allowed Warren and Sophia to talk to each other (and Peg, Jim, and Ellen, who got cell phones for themselves at the same time) with unlimited minutes. It was a great present. Warren got Sophia a pair of diamond and emerald earrings, among a few other things, and Sophia got Warren a couple of sharp outfits, along with books and CDs. She promised him something else, but said it would have to wait for his birthday, which was in January.

And, suddenly, it **was** January, a couple days before Warren's sixteenth birthday, and they found themselves on a plane to Chicago. Jim, unfortunately, couldn't come, nor could Brian or any of the kids—their making it to Nationals had been so unexpected—but Ellen and Peg got the requisite time off from work, and flew out with them. Peg and Warren had gotten a hotel room, and Ellen and Sophia an adjoining one. Bowing to the inevitable, **those** arrangements were quickly changed. Peg offered to switch rooms with Sophia. Sophia and Warren happily agreed. "This is their thing, they're in a hotel, we both know they're sleeping together, they are both nervous and would be more comfortable with each other. Let them," Peg said to Ellen, who agreed.

On January 8th, Warren and Sophia were preparing to step onto the practice ice at Nationals for the first time. Their compulsories and Original Dance were to be held in a smaller satellite rink, but the free dance—and **this** practice, which was a free dance practice—were held in the big main rink. Sophia and Warren were in the second group to practice, and were a bit intimidated while waiting.

They took the ice, trying to shake off the nerves. Unbeknownst to them, a bit of commotion had arisen with the other couples on the ice. They had noticed, unlike Sophia and Warren, some distinguished guests in the audience.

"What the heck are Elizabeth Cushman and Jack Garrison doing watching a junior ice dance practice?" Kim Burlington asked her partner, George Lahey.

"Yeah, and that's Christine Arsenault with them," added Shawna Vickers. Her partner, Evan Podgar said, "Hey, their obviously here to check out the Future of American Ice Dance—you and I or Kim and George over there." All four broke up laughing.

"It's just kind of strange to see them **here**," Kim said. "By the way, who are those two, she in the black dress and he in the sweatsuit?"

“That’s Sophia Daniels and Warren Kelleher. They won Eastern Sectionals, and it’s their first year ever competing,” Evan said.

“Impressive,” said Shawna, “Any good?”

“From what I’ve heard, they’re **very** good,” said Evan. “Very much crowd pleasers. But they’re different. Classical ballroom dance influence—their free is all Big Band music—good technique, and a very different style of presentation.”

“How so?” asked George.

“They focus on each other. They try to draw the audience in, rather than go out and get them. From what I heard, from a buddy of mine who was at Easterns, is that it’s very different but very effective.”

Suddenly, the three singles skaters stood up and yelled, “GO SOPHIA AND WARREN!!!” Sophia and Warren looked up, and saw Liz, Jack, and Christine waving at them.

“Hey, look, Soph!” Warren pointed up. Sophia and Warren skated over to the boards, and the threesome came down to greet them.

“Finally get to meet you, Dance Hunk,” Christine said, giving Warren a big hug and kiss over the boards. Even Sophia laughed.

“Nice of you guys to come out for some support. We’re terrified,” Sophia confided, laughing.

“Don’t be,” Liz counseled. “This is just a practice. Just loosen up.”

“And we’re glad to be here,” added Jack. “Can’t wait to see you guys practice that free dance.”

The four ice dancers across the ice saw all this, and were amazed. These two nobodies, brushing shoulders with some of the greats of American figure skating? How did **this** happen?

After making plans to meet the threesome after the practice, Sophia and Warren skated by, and Shawna made sure to eavesdrop.

“It’s finally great to meet them in person, after so many internet chats,” Warren said.

“Yeah, I think Christine enjoyed it, too,” Sophia said with a gleam in her eye.

“You just shut up, Pookie.” Then they skated out of Shawna’s hearing. She reported what she heard to her partner and the other team.

“Pookie?” Kim exclaimed. “She called him **Pookie**?? How so terribly precious.”

“Look at them,” Shawna commented at Sophia and Warren working on some steps.
“They skate **really** close together.”

“Bah. Let’s see how close they skate together after this”, Kim said.

Kim was a consummate game player, and she did a bit of footwork, heading **right** towards Sophia and Warren. She timed it to end in a near-collision. And it did, sort of, but Sophia and Warren, used to skating during group lessons and public skating, neatly sidestepped the (seemingly) oblivious Kim. Sophia looked back, concerned, and said “Sorry!” thinking the near-accident had been their fault.

Kim just grumbled, and skated over to Shawna. “Shit. Didn’t even dent their composure.”

“Look at them. Have you ever seen anyone at a practice session at a major competition so **happy**?”

“Happy to be here, no doubt.” George interjected.

One couple was already running through their free, as all the other couples stayed on the ice, as was traditional. Sophia and Warren huddled into a corner, though, not wanting to disrupt the skaters’ that were practicing. Kim and George ran through their free, followed by Shawna and Evan. Both were good, Soph and Warren agreed, but had gone for the overly theatrical type program.

Sophia and Warren were next. The other four decided not to intimidate this time—even Kim—but huddled near the boards, because they wanted to watch these couple of unknowns.

As Soph and Warren took their opening positions, Christine yelled out, “Shake that **butt**, Warren!” Warren just barely managed to stop laughing as the music started.

“They are **good**,” Evan said appreciatively. “Great edges, great knees. Their unison is superb. They skate close together. They’ve got talent, no denying it.”

“Yeah, but their program is so **ancient** feeling. Look, they’re just dancing around,” Shawna said.

“Yeah, but look at the program itself. It’s very well put together. Look at the speed, and the footwork. It’s very well constructed. God, they can get speed from almost **nothing**.”

“I still don’t like it. Besides which, she’s **fat**.”

“You don’t have to like it. I think the judges will, though. And she is by no means fat. She’s just not anorexic. Unlike **some** people,” Evan said, looking over at Kim Burlington. Even Shawna giggled a bit at that.

Back in the locker room, Sophia was changing out of her practice dress. Kim decided to play the kill her with kindness game, to pump her for information—and to play with her a little bit.

“Hello, I’m Kim Burlington.”

“Hi, Sophia Daniels.”

“You and your partner are very good. That free dance is very well done.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Who’s your choreographer?” Kim asked.

“Don’t have one,” Sophia laughed. “This is a budget operation. We choreograph ourselves. Warren does most of the ‘big picture’ stuff—Warren is my partner, Warren Kelleher—I fill in most of the blanks, and June, our coach, smoothes out the rough edges.”

Kim was trying not to show that her jaw was hitting the floor. “I’m impressed. That’s a hell of a program.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course,” Kim twisted the knife in, “you’d probably be better off with a choreographer. They’d be able to construct a program that was more cutting-edge for you.”

Sophia just laughed. “No, this is our style.”

“The judges frown on such an anachronistic style.”

“Well, then, fuck the judges,” Sophia laughed. She had by now figured out that Kim was trying to play games, and Sophia wasn’t going to fall for it. “We skate to what we like to skate to, and fuck the judges. We **dance**, that’s what we’re trying to do. Old swing music hits the bill perfectly.”

Kim tried another tack. “That partner of yours, Warren you said?”

“Yeah, Warren Kelleher.”

“He’s a hottie, isn’t he?”

Sophia saw that one coming, but played along. “Yes, he certainly is.”

“Is he gay?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“Hmmm. Maybe I should come up to his room tonight, think he’d like that, Sophia?”

“Well, you can come up and ask him. Sure, why not?”

“Wow, Sophia,” Kim said mock-innocently. “You certainly have a cavalier attitude about one of the *competition* bagging your partner right before Nationals.”

Sophia just laughed. “Oh, you misunderstand me. I said you could **try**. I didn’t say you’d get anywhere.”

“Oh, you seem so sure I won’t. I haven’t had a guy complain yet.”

“Good for you. Neither have I. And the list of non-complainers includes my current boyfriend. Who also happens to be my ice dance partner.” Sophia twisted the knife further. “You see, if you come up to Warren’s room, you will also be coming up to **my** room. We’ve been sleeping together for two years. So, come on up, Kim. If you time your visit **just** right, you might be able to watch Warren fuck me until I scream. Just so you can see what you **won’t** be getting any of.” Kim just gaped at her, open-mouthed.

Sophia walked away with a jaunty, “You have yourself a nice day now.” Once she got out of the locker room, it took her quite a while to stop laughing.

They had a wonderful lunch with Liz, Christine, and Jack. They also met some of the internet skatefans they had chatted with for so long. Liz and Christine would go on to finish one-two in senior ladies, and Jack won his first senior national championship in Mens.

They finished third in the compulsories, and were thrilled. The morning of the OD, Sophia woke up and gave Warren his birthday present. It was a gold chain with a gold pendant on it, sort of like the one Warren had given Sophia on her fifteenth birthday. This one, however, was round, and had carved into the gold a silhouette of a couple, dancing. Sophia had had carved into the back, “Dance with me forever, Love Pookie.” Warren put it right on, and prepared to go dance with Sophia, on the ice. They finished third again in the OD, and were again thrilled. Vickers and Podgar were leading, with Burlington and Lacey second.

To their stunned disbelief, they won the free dance. They were too far behind to win the whole competition—Vickers and Podgar did—but a silver medal at your first Junior Nationals was a coup. And standing on the podium getting that silver medal was a complete trip—especially while watching a sour Kim Burlington get a bronze.

A few days after they got home, they were watching the Senior free dance on television. “Good ol’ week and a half tape delay,” quipped Warren.

The usual figure skating play-by-play man, Tom Garret, was on the screen with ice dance analyst (and former US Dance champ) Sandra Willis. “Before we get to the senior free dance,” Tom was saying, “we want to show you one of the highlights of the **junior** free dance.”

“This couple did not win the junior national championship,” Sandra said, “but won the free dance, ending up with the silver medal. However, this free dance was one of the most delightful I have seen in a long time. They are superb dancers, with great technique and near-perfect presentation, and they also skate with an unbridled joy that makes me remember why I love this sport. They clearly love skating, and they clearly love skating with one another. They may be the future of American Ice Dance, and their names are Sophia Daniels and Warren Kelleher.”

Sophia and Warren just looked at each other. “They’re showing **us**? On TV?” Warren gaped in disbelief.

“Thank **God** you’ve got a videotape in,” Sophia pointed out. “But, you’re right. The future of American Ice Dance? Two part-time scrubs like **us**?” They both laughed.

They watched themselves skate. They had taped practices and all, for critical viewing, but had never seen themselves skate in a competition. It was kind of a revelation.

When it was over, Warren was still amazed. “You know, it **felt** good, while we were skating it, but I didn’t realize **how** good it was until I saw it.”

“Did you see our faces?” Sophia asked him. “I didn’t realize I smiled that much.” Sophia thought for a minute. “Warren, I know we’re only part time skaters, and I realize why, and I agree with it. But I hope we never give it up entirely. I always felt it to be exhilarating. Now I know why. We look like the two happiest people in the world when we ice dance together.”

“Yeah. I’m so glad they showed this. Glad I got it on tape, too. Something to show our kids someday, that’s for sure. ”

WARREN LENDS A HAND (Chapter 37)

Warren and Sophia were at Sophia’s house. They had been babysitting, so they weren’t fooling around—just sitting on the sofa, watching TV, chatting.

“Pookie, I think there’s something we should start thinking about,” Warren started.

“What?”

“College.”

“I’ve already started, a little. Just trying to find out schools with a good meteorology program that I think I could get into.”

“Yeah, I’ve done that for pre-med. But that’s not the big question.”

“What is?”

“Are we going to try to go together?”

Sophia thought for a minute. “Well, I always assumed we’d go **close**, if not to the same school. To tell you the truth, I figured we’d both go in Boston someplace. But now, I’m not so sure I want to do that.”

“I’ve been thinking about maybe going out of state myself. I guess the question is, do we want to do this **together**? Decide where we’re going to go and if we’re going to stay local or not together, as a unit? Or do we want to keep it completely separate, and if we end up a thousand miles away from each other, so be it?”

Sophia smiled at him. “I’ll be honest, Warren—when I hear about a school with a good meteorology program, I make sure I check out their pre-med, too.” Warren just laughed. “I would like to stay together, yes. I think our relationship would survive a separation, but I’m not sure my mental health would.”

Warren laughed again. “Neither would mine. And our ice dance career would surely be toast. I’d much rather go together, myself.”

“Well, now I’m glad you brought this up, because you need to think about this, Dear Heart. If you decide you want to go to the same school, you are restricting your choices for my sake. A lot more schools have good pre-med than meteorology. Plus, there are schools that you can get into that I won’t. I know you’ve talked about Princeton—I could **never** get into Princeton, and I’m not even sure if they have a meteorology department.”

“You might not be able to get in Ivy League, Sophia, but with your grades you’ll be able to get into a very good school. I don’t need to go to Princeton”

“But if that’s your first choice.....”

“Not if you’re not going to be there, it’s not. Look. Let’s do it this way. Let’s **try** to look together. Let’s investigate it with the idea that we’re looking for a school for both of us. If we don’t find one, **then** we readjust our plans. “

“OK. That sounds fair.”

“You have three things going for you. First, you have a drastic grade improvement. Second, you have a very attractive extra curricular activity. Third, you have a boyfriend that’s being actively recruited.”

“You **are**?”

“Oh, yeah. With my grades, and where I go to school? You betcha. Letters, promises of scholarships, the whole deal.”

“How does that help **me**?”

“I tell them we’re a package deal. You can’t get me unless you take my ice dance partner.”

Sophia giggled, but then got sober. “I appreciate the thought, but I’d hate to get into a school on your back, if you know what I mean.”

“I can see your point, but admissions to College are so arbitrary anyhow. I know a kid who’s planning on going to Harvard. And he **will** get in. And, he’s nowhere near the student that I am, and I’m not sure I could get into Harvard. He will, however, because his father’s an alumnus who gives boatloads of money to the place. So, if he can use the ‘son of rich Almunus’ loophole, you can use the ‘girlfriend/skating partner of favored recruit’ loophole.”

Sophia cracked up. “OK, I see your point. However, we use that as a **last** resort. I try to get in on my own, first.”

“Deal.”

“Quite honestly, I’m not sure I’d want to go to an Ivy League school. I’d rather deal with a more diverse student body, actually.”

“That’s a good point.”

Sophia was walking into the Peer Counseling office. She stopped in to say hi to Mr. Doherty, and then to Mrs. Kincaid, the Biology teacher who was the other faculty advisor for the group. Mrs. Kincaid was talking to Doctor Gwen Sorensen, the psychiatrist who helped them out with some of the thornier problems.

“Hiya, Mrs. Kincaid, Gwen. How you all doin’ today?”

“Hello, Sophia,” Mrs. Kincaid smiled. “Gwen was just telling me of a problem she had.”

“Shrinks have problems?” Sophia teased. Gwen laughed. Gwen and Sophia were very fond of one another, but that didn’t mean that Sophia would ever stop teasing her about her profession.

“This, actually, is a shrink problem.” Gwen smiled at her. “One of the things that I like to do with my abuse groups—like the one you run, Soph—is to have a guy talk to them. A guy who has had to, shall we say, pick up the pieces that an abuser has left. Someone who’s helped an abused girl get better. Brother, boyfriend, good friend, anyone who has been close to a girl who has been abused.”

“I have had a couple guys that have helped me the past couple of years, but they are both away at college, neither is close by, and they won’t be able to help us out. That group that you work with, Sophia, the one with Meggan and Caroline and them—they could **really** use this. They need to hear from a guy like this. And I haven’t been able to find one.”

Sophia smiled at the doctor. “Gwen, that is a problem easily solved. This sounds like a job for SuperWarren.”

“Huh?” Gwen asked.

“Warren. My boyfriend.”

“He has this kind of experience?”

Sophia looked down. “OK. Gwen, I’ve never told you this, because I haven’t wanted you to pull the whole shrink thing on me.” Sophia took a deep breath. “Gwen, you’ve always said that I was one of the best boyfriend abuse peer counselors you’ve ever seen. Why do you think that is?”

Gwen looked at Sophia—and then her eyes widened. “You **are** kidding. How long ago?”

“Ended about two years ago. Started about two years before that, more than one guy, but the last one was the worst.”

“How bad?”

Sophia reached into her pocketbook, and withdrew **that** picture. She handed it to Gwen. “Oh, about that bad.”

Gwen gasped. “Oh my sweet Jesus.” She blinked, and handed the picture back to Sophia. “Sophia, you are one of the most put-together young ladies I have ever met. Recovery to the degree that you seem to have is very, very rare. I hate to do the shrink thing”—Sophia just giggled—“but did you have therapy?”

“A little, but a few months after it ended, and I was well on the road to recovery by then.”

“What happened?”

Sophia smiled. “What happened? Warren Kelleher, champion piece-picker-upper, that’s what happened. And the pieces **I** was in were so jagged that he sliced his hands up more than once. And the dear heart never flinched. “

“Did he see this? Was he there?”

“He was there at the end of it. This—the really bad stuff, with this particular guy—started in October of my freshman year. I met Warren in January, at work—he’s a Junior too, but goes to St. Mike’s—and we became friends pretty quickly. Things deteriorated to the degree that you saw in the picture shortly after that. Warren lived through it all. Not only that, the asshole beat **Warren** up.”

“Because he was your friend.”

“Right. Anyhow, that’s what made me realize a lot of things. Because I knew that **Warren** did not deserve to be beaten up. And if he didn’t, why did **I**? Anyhow, I dumped Scott, we got the police involved, he’s in jail right now, and a week later I asked Warren to go out with me. And he’s been there ever since.”

“Call him. ASAP.”

“Right.” Sophia whipped out her cell phone, and hit a speed dial. “He ain’t picking up. There’s a dead spot or two at St Mike’s.” She waited for the beep. “Snugglebear, it’s Pookie. Call me when you get this. Love you.”

Gwen was amused. “Snugglebear? Pookie?” Sophia just laughed.

Then her phone rang. “Hi, Snugglebear, that was quick.”

“I was in the can, taking a piss. What’s up?”

“I got a proposition for you.....”

Gwen Sorensen stood in front of seven young ladies—the six members of the abuse support group, and their peer counselor, Sophia.

“Ladies, I want to introduce you to a friend of mine. He’s going to talk to you today, to tell you about the other side of abuse—the side of the people who care about girls like you. He’s been through it, and he’s going to talk to you about it. Please welcome Warren Kelleher.”

Warren stepped to the front of the group and took a seat. He was nervous—public speaking was not his favorite activity by any means—but he knew what he wanted to say.

“Good afternoon ladies. I want to talk to you about what I know about abuse. I know a lot about it, even though I’ve never been abused, nor have I ever been an abuser. You do not

have to be abused to live through it. You have friends and loved ones who are living through it. Trust me on that one.”

“Two years ago this January, I got a job. It was at the Dunkin’ Donuts downtown, you all know where that is. Since half of Oceanview High sneaks out of school to grab a coffee there, you’ve probably all **been** there.” They all giggled at that. “I was fourteen, it was my first job, they hired me to do maintenance.”

“My first day there, I met this girl. I was immediately fascinated by her. For one thing, she was gorgeous, and I was your typical hormonal teenaged male, right? But, there was more to it than that.”

“Now, we came from different worlds. She was a party girl, drank a lot, did drugs, had an older boyfriend, and was flunking out of school. In short, her life was a mess—at the time, I didn’t know why. I figured she just liked to party and all. We all know kids like that. Now, myself, I am the quintessential St Michael’s Preppy, OK?” All the girls giggled. “Straight A student. Virgin with a capital V. Didn’t smoke, didn’t drink, got along with his parents, even. The word ‘Nerd’ has been thrown my way more than once, and I can’t disagree with it.”

“Despite that, we became friends rather quickly. This girl—let’s give her a name. We’ll call her Kitten, which is short for Sex Kitten, which is one of the things she calls herself”—the room erupted in laughter, Sophia trying not to be too obvious—“anyhow, we’ll call her Kitten. Despite Kitten’s far different lifestyle from my own, we became good friends. Despite her horrible grades, she was smart, sharp as a tack. We had very similar senses of humor. We had some interests in common. She lived on my way home, so I used to walk with her to her house. We were just friends, mind you—she had a boyfriend, and I figured she was way out of the league of a Prep Nerd like myself, anyhow.”

“One day, she came into work and avoided me a bit. I finally discovered why—she was sporting a shiner like you wouldn’t believe. I guessed—rightly, as it turns out—that her boyfriend had done it. She finally admitted that to me. We talked on the way home that night.”

“Now, you have to understand, that I have **no** experience with abuse, or didn’t up until that day. It was always something kind of beyond my ken. I never understood **why** it happened. If someone is hitting you, you **leave**, right? Now, I didn’t **say** anything like this to Kitten, not **that** way, anyway. She gave me her phone number, and we started adding phone conversations to our walks home and work talks.”

“What I found out—that you all probably know—is that Kitten’s self esteem was practically non-existent. Now, I found out later on why this happened—and in Kitten it was a lot of reasons piled one on top of another—so, now, I can see how it happened. But, at the time, I just didn’t get it. I don’t make friends easily. I’m fairly reticent. However, I also consider myself a good judge of character. I looked at Kitten, and did **not** see what she saw when she looked in the mirror. She was knocking herself, constantly.

And the abuse she was taking, besides doing bodily damage, was tearing apart what little self-esteem she had left. And I felt **so** helpless.”

“She thought she was nothing. Less than nothing. She hated herself. Meanwhile, **I** was hopelessly in love with her, by that point.” The group laughed at that, and Warren smiled. But then he got serious. “I was hopelessly in love with a girl that hated herself, and I couldn’t convince her to **not** hate herself. And I’d want to take her by the shoulders and yell at her, ‘Goddammit, I **don’t** fall in love with worthless people!’ But I didn’t. What I **did** do was cry myself to sleep more nights than I care to talk about.”

“I tried, as gently but persistently as I could, to let her know that she wasn’t worthless, to let her know that people **did** care about her. I just tried to be there, as much as I could, without being **too** overbearing. It eventually worked, but I’m getting ahead of myself. But, you have to know, it was tearing me up inside.”

“Somehow, I got through to her. Now, I didn’t completely get through until she had taken a **severe** beating bad enough to put her in the hospital, **and** the asshole found out about her friendship with me and took it out on **me** twice. That’s what finally made Kitten snap, seeing the asshole beating the living shit out of me so he wouldn’t go after her again. That’s what finally made her realize this. He beat me up on the way home one day, and came into the store the next day and did it again. Between those two things, Kitten saw the damage he had done to me, got all upset, said, ‘Warren, you didn’t deserve this. This whole mess isn’t your fault.’ She was right, I told her, but I also told her that I had been telling **her** the same thing for two months. That, combined with seeing him tearing into me a couple hours later, finally made her believe it.”

“She gives me credit for saving her life, which is bullshit. However, **I did** try to convince her that her life was **worth** saving, and I also showed her the alternatives. She has admitted now that there were **other** people trying to do the same things, but I was the one that got through. Which might be luck, or it might be just that I’m good”—everyone laughed at that—“or it might be other things. But it worked.”

“However, the moral to this story is this—there is **someone** in your life that is trying to show you that your life is worth saving. There is **someone** that is trying to show you the alternatives. And that someone sees the bruises, he sees the cuts, he sees the lack of self esteem, he sees the dead look in your eyes that I saw on most of you when I walked in and that I saw on Kitten for two months—and it is **tearing him up** inside. I don’t know who it is—might be a friend, might be a family member. But there **is** someone, I almost guarantee it. And you need to figure out who it is, and you need to **listen**. How many of you have had someone close to you say something like ‘I don’t know why you keep putting yourself down?’ or ‘I can’t understand why you don’t think your smart, or beautiful, or worthy, or whatever?’ Any of you have that happen?” Every hand shot up. “Here’s my advice. **Listen**. And encourage that person to **keep talking**. And, if you have to—ask for help. Because that person who is telling you those things wants to help far, far more than you know. And he or she doesn’t know how, and it’s **killing** him. Trust me.”

Warren let that one sink in for a while. Then Caroline, one of the girls in the group, asked him, “Warren, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“What happened to Kitten?”

“Looking for a happy ending, are we?” Warren smiled. Caroline smiled and nodded agreement, as did the rest of the girls. Warren smiled bigger. “Well, lucky for you, I’ve got one.”

“After Kitten finally decided that she didn’t want to be abused anymore, and dumped the asshole—who is now in jail, may he rot there—after that, Kitten decided something else. She decided that she had had it with guys who beat her down instead of lifting her up. And she found the guy who had been lifting her up. Of course, he had been there for a while, but she finally noticed.”

“She asked me out a week later.” All the girls joined Warren’s big grin. “And it’s a good thing, because Preppy Nerd Boy me would have agonized about it for a year and then lost her. Luckily, she saved me from my preppiedom by making the first move. When you consider that she was beaten down and abused, it was an **incredibly** courageous thing to do. Although, I think by then she had figured out that she wasn’t taking any kind of risk, that there was **no** way I was going to turn her down. I was completely gone by that time.” Everyone laughed at that.

“I still am. We celebrated our two-year anniversary a couple of weeks ago. She’s also drug free, hardly drinks, quit smoking, and is a straight-A student. We’re discussing what colleges to attend, because we plan on going together. And, sometime after that, I’m going to marry her.” The girls were grinning widely at this point.

“Happy endings are possible, ladies, but you have to **work** at them. Kitten did this **herself**, I was just there for her. You need to find someone willing to be there for you, too. And you have to open your ears, and your mind, and, most importantly, your heart.”

Another girl in the group, Meggan, asked, “Does Kitten go to school here?”

“Yup.”

“I wonder if I know her.”

Warren grinned. “Oh, you know her, all right. I called her Kitten in my little story, but more often than not, I call her Pookie. She calls me Snugglebear.” Everyone laughed. Warren got out of his chair, and walked over to where Sophia was sitting. “That’s all for me, ladies. I hope it helped.” Then he looked down at Sophia. “See you later, Pookie,” and bent over and kissed her. The girls grinned in amazement as Warren walked out of the room.

Meggan just looked at Sophia. “Warren is **your** boyfriend? You’re Kitten?”

“Yeah. And that’s the moral of the story, isn’t it? I finally listened to someone who was trying to tell me he truly, truly loved me, for all the **right** reasons. And it worked.”

“Wow,” was all Meggan could say, and the other girls nodded agreement.

NAIL THE BASTARD TO THE WALL (Chapter 38)

“Can I talk to you?” Sophia was eating lunch with Jessie; and Meggan, from her peer-counseling group, had approached her at their table.

“Sure. Jess, this is Meggan. She’s from my group.”

“Hiya, Meggan, nice to meet you. You want I should leave?” Meggan looked at Sophia.

“Jess will leave if you want, Meg, but she knows what I do down in Peer Counseling, lived through my nightmare with me, and knows how to keep a secret.”

“OK. Then I don’t want her to leave. I feel bad enough interrupting your lunch anyhow.” Sophia and Jessie just waved that off. “I need your help, Soph. I think I’ve got a Warren.” Meggan smiled a little bit.

Sophie smiled back. “Tell me more.”

“His name is Josh. We take the bus every day. He’s a junior.” Meggan herself was a sophomore. “We usually sit with each other. He just moved to Oceanview this year, so I was like the first person he got to know, because we’re the first two stops on the bus route in the morning, and the last two off in the evening. It was natural that we started talking. So now we talk every day on the bus.”

“Do you mind telling me his last name? If you want to keep that a secret, I don’t mind. I was wondering if I knew him.”

“Blumberg. Josh Blumberg.”

“Really?” Sophia exclaimed. “I actually know Josh well. One of my best friends, Karen Laskovich, is Josh’s cousin. When Josh first moved into town, Karen got him in with our crowd. I see him at parties all the time. He’s a good kid, I like him a lot. One of the things I really like about him is the way he handles himself at parties. He’s not much of a drinker and I’ve never seen him take a drug, but he can go to a party and have a good time—and he’s nice but firm about turning down chemicals, so everyone respects his choice. In that way, he’s **exactly** like Warren.”

“That’s good information, Sophia, I forget that you know everybody.” Sophia giggled. Meggan went on, “Anyhow, there have been some days that I’ve gone to school after—

you know—had happened the previous night. He **knows** something's wrong. He tries to get me to tell him. He's not mean or anything about it, and he's only persistent to a point, but he's figured out that something's wrong with me."

Jessie was listening to the conversation, but wasn't sure what, exactly, Meggan was talking about.

"He's done the old self-esteem-boost thing that Warren told us about—in fact, it hit me while Warren was talking about that that Josh does exactly the same thing."

"I want to tell him. I want to tell him what's happening to me. But I don't think I can get the words out, and I don't know if I want to lay this on him."

Sophia took a deep breath. "First of all, don't drop it on him on the bus. Do what I did—give him your phone number and ask him to call. Tell him you need a friend to talk to. He'll call, I can almost guarantee it. Secondly, you need to lay this on someone. He's almost begging you to. Third, if you don't think you can get the words out, practice."

"What do you mean?"

"Tell Jessie, here. I can tell by her eyes darting back and forth that she's trying to figure out what's going on. Jessie knows I do peer counseling but I don't discuss specifics, because it is **your** choice who to tell. However, she's a great listener, her word is worth its weight in gold, and her confidence is solid."

"All true, and I'm cute, too." Jessie quipped, getting a laugh out of Meggan. "Listen, Meggan, do **not** feel compelled to tell me. But if you want to practice, I'm willing."

Meggan took a deep breath, and looked at Jessie. "My boyfriend rapes me at knifepoint." Jessie visibly paled. "And then tells me if I leave him or tell anyone he will cut me into little pieces."

"You got the words out. That's a start. I remember when it took you 45 minutes to say those words to me." Sophia glanced at Jessie. "Jessie, are you alright?"

Jessie said, in a tone of barely restrained murderous fury, "If I ever find out who your boyfriend is, Meggan, I will bring a bigger knife, cut his balls and dick off, and stuff them down his fucking throat until he chokes to death on them." Meggan's eyes just got wide. "You say the word, Meg, and I'll have a posse on this guy's ass so quick he won't know what hit him. Soph, you think Crash, Warren, and Nicky would have a good time bouncing this scumbag off of a few walls? I do." Jessie took a deep breath.

Meggan's eyes just got even wider. "You can't do that. He'll find out it came from me, and he'll kill me."

Jessie exhaled. "I know, Meg, I know. I don't know who he is, anyway. And I know if I were to act too rashly, you could be in danger. I've been through this, with Sophie." She shook her head. "But, I can't help but want to do to him exactly what I said."

Meggan calmed down. "I know. I do, too. I'm just afraid I'm going to end up dead at his hands. I worry about it all the time. I don't know how long I can live with that worry." She sighed. "I think of suicide more and more lately."

Jessie looked at her. "Maybe you need to be suicidal." Meggan just stared at her. Sophia gasped. Jessie just went on. "Get to the point where you're going to do it. Get **right** to that point where you don't care if you live or die. And, right when you get to that point—go after **him**. You'd have nothing to lose, right?"

Meggan looked at her. "She makes good points in a very roundabout kind of way, doesn't she?"

"Always" Sophia agreed.

It happened again that night. The next morning, Josh noticed, but Meggan parried his queries as usual. She sat in class all day, barely aware of where she was. This one was **brutal**—he decided, after he was done with her pussy, he was going to rape her ass. She could barely sit down.

She was in agony all day. She had almost become numb to it, but having her anal virginity raped brought home again how brutal, degrading, and painful this all was.

She decided, it was either take a chance, or kill herself. She took a chance. When she saw Josh on the bus heading home, she waited until they were the only two people left on the bus. She slipped a piece of paper in his hands as she got off the bus. It said, "349-8712. Josh, that's my phone number. I need to talk to a friend tonight. Please call. Love, Meggan."

He called, shortly after eight o' clock. After they said hi, Meggan told him, "You know there's something wrong with me, right?"

"Yeah, Meg, but I don't know what. Some days you walk onto that bus and it's like the night of the living dead. Today was particularly bad. But you won't tell me what it is."

"I decided I want to tell you. I **need** to tell you. I need help. I'm in counseling, but that's not the same." She hesitated a minute. "Josh, how do you feel about me?"

"I like you, a whole lot. I mean a **lot**. I care about you more than you know. If you hadn't told me you had a boyfriend, I would have asked you out long ago."

“My suspicions are confirmed,” Meggan said. Josh just laughed. Meggan got serious. “I want to tell you about me. I want to tell you. However, I don’t know if I can dump this one on you. It’s bad.”

“If you need to tell me, than you need to tell me.”

“OK” She took a deep breath. “My boyfriend has been raping me at knifepoint for six months. Last night, he added a new twist—he raped my ass. And he told me he would kill me if I ever left, or if I ever told anyone.”

Dead silence at the other end of the phone.

“Josh?”

Another moment of silence. “Meggan, what’s your address?”

“45 Curran St. Why?”

“Will your parents get upset if you have a visitor at this time of night?”

“My parents don’t give a fuck what happens to me, Josh. That’s another long story, but, let’s just say that they had me because ‘everybody has kids’, and they just go on their merry way. They’re actually not here, they’re shopping or something..”

“Good. I’m coming over.” And he abruptly hung up the phone.

Meggan didn’t know what to think. She had, at least, gotten the courage to tell him. And now he’s coming over? She’ll have to look him in the face? After what she told him? Oh, boy.....

Before she knew it, there was a knock on the door, and she opened it to find him. And before she knew it, she was in his arms, crying.

He steered her to the couch. After she had calmed down, Josh asked her, “Who knows?”

“I have a peer counselor at school, and I talk to the psychiatrist there. Other than them, just you. You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to tell you, because I knew you were a real friend.”

Josh took a deep breath. “I have a car, Meg. You need to go to the police.”

“NO!”

“You need to.”

“Josh, he’ll **kill** me!”

“He’s going to, anyway, if this keeps up.” Meggan looked at him, startled. “You know I’m right. Either that, or you’ll kill yourself.”

Meggan looked at him. “You’re right.”

“This can’t go on forever. He’s killing you, as it is, bit by bit. I can’t watch that happen, Meg. I care too much about you. I need to take you to the police.”

Meggan sat, and thought about it. Just then, her parents walked in the door.

“Hi, Meg,” her father said.

Her mother just looked at Josh. “So, who’s this? I thought your boyfriend was that reprobate from Salem? Sleeping around, Meg?”

Josh was shocked. He had his arm around Meg, and he felt her shoulder tighten. He squeezed it, for reassurance. Meg was saying, “This is Josh. He’s a friend, from school.” She took a deep breath. “And Curtis isn’t my boyfriend, not the way any normal person would define it.”

“Oh, yeah?” Her mother asked. “You certainly spend enough time with him. If he isn’t your boyfriend, what is he?”

Josh rubbed Meggan’s back, and took her hand in his and squeezed. He said to her, softly, “You have to start here, Meg.”

“I know.” She turned to her parents. “Curtis isn’t my boyfriend. I thought he was at first, but he’s not. He’s my abuser. And my own personal serial rapist. He’s been raping me at knifepoint for six months.”

Her parents went ghost-white. “What?” her father managed to get out.

“Yup. And he threatens to kill me regularly.” She shifted in her seat, and groaned, pain radiating out from her battered rear end. “Last night, he decided to add anal rape to the festivities. I’m in a considerable amount of pain right now.” Her parents were in shock.

“Meg, why didn’t you **tell** us?” her father asked.

“I’ve had a hard time telling anyone. Because I feel dirty, and because he threatens to kill me if I tell. The only people I ever told were my Peer Counselor and the psychiatrist at school. Josh has been a good friend to me all year, and I finally decided to tell him, tonight. As for **you** guys, you don’t give a shit about me anyhow, so why should I tell you?”

“MEGGAN!” her father spat out.

“Oh, you don’t **say** it, but Mom does. Why did I ever have a kid, you’re more trouble than you’re worth, blah blah blah. I’ve always thought I was an accident, that you guys regretted not aborting.”

Meg’s mother was looking at the floor, not saying anything. Her father looked at his wife, and then at Meggan. “You **were** an accident, Meg, I’m not going to lie to you about that. And we hadn’t ever planned on having children. But **I**, for one, never regretting having you.”

“I have,” her mother said. “But I tried to hide it from you, Meg. Obviously I wasn’t successful.”

“No, you weren’t. I’ve felt resented and unwanted since I was seven. And I have been in my own private little hell for six months, and nobody notices, because nobody pays attention to Meggan. Well, Josh did. He didn’t know what was wrong, but he knew **something** was wrong.”

Meggan’s mother was crying by now. “Meggan, I’m **so** sorry. I tried to be a good mother, I really did. I’m sorry I failed.” She looked up at Meggan. “I **do** love you, you know. I just hate being your mother--*anybody’s* mother. I thought I could do it, that’s why we ended up having you instead of aborting you. I was wrong.”

“I **never** knew any of this,” her father said.

“That’s because all **you** care about is your work,” her mother said.

“Hey, my work is important. My work pays for all these lovely things we have.”

Meggan spoke up. “I, for one, would have traded all of these lovely things for a little attention. A hug once in a while, you know?” She took a deep breath. “Anyhow, that’s neither here nor there. Although I blame you for not making me feel loved enough to tell you what was happening to me, I do **not** blame you for what’s happening. That’s not your fault, and it’s not my fault. It’s Curtis’s fault. He sweet-talked me for two months, then, when I wasn’t ready to surrender my virginity to him, his true self surfaced. And he took it. I was being raped before I even knew what was happening. And the threats started from day one, so I was immediately terrified.”

“Josh has convinced me to go to the police. It might not work. They might say they don’t have enough to prosecute. They might end up letting him go. And he may end up killing me.” Her father gasped. “But, you know what? I can’t live like this anymore, no matter what happens. And instead of killing myself, which I have seriously been considering, I’m going to at least **try** to go after the cause of all this, which is **him**.”

Her parents wanted to take her to the police, but she refused. Josh took her. After hearing her story, the police called in a doctor to examine her. Afterwards, the cops gathered with

the doctor. Meggan, and Josh (who Meggan insisted stay with her), wanted to hear what the doctor had to say.

“OK,” he started. “Meggan, you have vaginal bruises. Bad ones. Some old, some newer.” He turned to the cops. “What I will say on the stand about them is this: yes, you can get those if you happen to like rough sex. However, very rarely **that** bad, and that kind of bruising usually only comes from systematic rape.” The doctor took a deep breath. “Her rectum is ripped to shreds. She shows **every** sign of being anally raped within the last 48 hours. No doubt in my mind about it. Meggan, you need to go to the hospital. You’re bleeding out of your rectum, still.”

“No doubt about the anal rape?”

“None.”

“Call Salem police, get their cooperation, and nail the scumbag,” he said to another officer.

Meggan insisted on waiting to see what happened, assuring the doctor she would go to the hospital later. The cops needed her to identify him, anyway.

They brought him in an hour later. “Meg?” one of the officers asked.

She looked up. “That’s him,” was all she said.

Curtis looked up, and saw her there, and exploded. “YOU BITCH! I TOLD YOU! YOU FUCKING BITCH!” The officer at the desk hit the record button on his tape recorder almost immediately. Curtis was still bellowing. “When I get out of here, I will KILL YOU, you BITCH! I will take that knife that you know so well, and cut you into a million fucking PIECES! You think you got it bad now I will shove a hot poker up your cunt, you SLUT! I WILL KILL YOU FOR THIS!”

The sergeant asked the arresting officers, “Was he Mirandized?”

“Of course.”

He looked at the desk officer. “You get that on tape?”

“Hit record right after he started.”

“And everyone heard it, right?” They all nodded.

Meggan was crying, while Josh tried to calm her down by massaging her shoulders. “Oh, God, I’m dead, he’s going to kill me, I’m dead, I’m dead....”

“Meggan.” The officer got her attention. “Meggan, we taped that.”

“Huh?”

“Got it on tape. And he had been read his rights, so it’s useable. He just did a very very stupid thing. He gave us a glorious piece of evidence. We’re going to need you to testify when we get to court, but that tape, and the doctor, will help a lot. I’m going to call the prosecutor, and recommend that the scumbag get denied bail. And when the judge hears that tape, I think he’ll go along with it.”

“OK. Let me know when the bail hearing is.”

“You’d go?”

“Yeah.”

“That would help. Judge sees you sitting there, that can only help. But now, go to the hospital.”

A cop took her and Josh to the hospital, and made sure she got taken care of. Afterwards, Josh drove her home from the police station. She had a long talk with her parents, which helped a lot.

The bail hearing was two days later. Meggan sat and watched Curtis’s lawyer do all the lawyer doublespeak, trying to get bail set at a reasonable amount. The Sergeant brought the tape, and Curtis’s lawyer tried to object. The judge told him, “If he had been Mirandized, than this is useable. What do you think ‘anything you say can and will be held against you’ **means**, counselor?”

The tape was played. Even the judge paled. After it was played, he turned to the prosecutor. “Mr. Billings, is the alleged victim in the courtroom?”

“Yes, she is.” He turned. “Stand up, Meggan.”

The judge gasped. This little, tiny girl was the victim? “What’s your name, sweetheart?” he asked.

“Meggan Carruthers.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

Oh my God, the judge thought to himself. What he said was, “What do you think will happen if I let Mr. Mickens out on bail?”

Meggan said, so matter-of-factly that it made the judge’s heart break, “I’ll be dead, sir.”

“You’re convinced of that?”

“That’s why it took me six months to tell anyone about it. If he finds me, he’ll kill me. I’ve known that since the first time he did it.”

“Why did you change your mind, and come forward?”

“Because I can’t live like this anymore. I’d **rather** be dead. If this had gone on much longer, I would have killed myself, anyway.” The judge was shocked—Meggan’s tone of voice sounded like she had been discussing a TV show. “I don’t want to die, but I don’t want to be raped anymore. Before I killed myself, I decided, with the help of a friend, that I had to at least **try** this. If he gets out, I’m dead. But if he doesn’t get out, maybe I can have a real life.”

The judge looked at Curtis, and his lawyer. “Bail denied. Lock him up.”

Meggan arrived home from school the next day. Her mother smiled at her, and said, “Perfect timing. Phone’s for you.”

She took it. “Hello?”

“Meggan? This is John Billings, from the prosecutor’s office.”

“Hello, Mr. Billings. What can I do for you?”

“No, it’s what I can do for **you**. Did you see the coverage of your case in the TV and the newspapers?”

“Yeah, it was kind of embarrassing. It was a topic of conversation at school.”

“I can understand why that would be uncomfortable. But it worked.”:

“Worked?”

“Two more girls stepped forward, Meggan. You weren’t the only one. We’ve got this guy **nailed**.”

“Oh my God.”

DANCING AND DATING (Chapter 39)

“Hey, Sophia, I forgot to tell you,” Warren began.

“What, honey?”

They were curled up in bed. They had finished their lovemaking, and were just cuddling. Jessie and Crash, desperate for an empty house, were downstairs on the couch, so Warren and Sophia were still upstairs, giving them privacy.

“Murray Stevens called me.”

“Murray Stevens?”

“He’s with the USFSA. He’s a judge; in fact, he was on the panel at Nationals. He also does work with the ISU, specifically with the Grand Prix series.”

“Oh. Why did he call?”

“He wants us to do the Junior Grand Prix series next year. I have to call him back tomorrow, I told him I’d talk to you. We’d be entered in two competitions, between September and November. If we get enough points, the Series Final is in December, in Toronto. And there’s prize money.”

“Did you tell him we plan to test up to seniors?”

“Doesn’t make a difference. ISU Junior is different than USFSA Junior. Internationally, you can compete as a junior if you’ve never medaled at Senior Worlds, and if you’re under a certain age—nineteen, I think. We can do the Junior Grand Prix and still compete as Seniors at Nationals.”

Sophie smiled at him. “Let’s do it!”

“Now, we need to be sure. We’ll have to travel, and it could be as far away as China or Ukraine, at the beginning of our senior year.”

“We can do it. We’re good, remember?”

Warren cracked up. “OK. We’ll do it!”

They lay silent for a minute, then heard loud moaning coming from downstairs. They both cracked up laughing.

“Poor Jess—and Crash—it’s been over a month. They can never get a place to do it. All that pent-up horniness.” Sophia giggled.

“They should have asked us to use the downstairs before this,” Warren said.

“That’s what I told Jess. She felt she was imposing. I told her if she wouldn’t be too embarrassed by the screams coming from upstairs, they weren’t imposing at all.” They both laughed.

“Crash has the test for his license next week. He can’t wait. I told him about **our** first experience in the back seat of a car.” Sophia laughed, and hit him with a pillow.

Meggan was sitting on her couch, watching TV. Josh was behind her on the couch, his arms around her waist. They had gotten closer and closer over the past couple months, since she had finally gone to the police. Josh took it slow, but he got more and more fond of her every day. They spent time at each other’s houses, they went on dates, but there wasn’t anything formal. Josh wanted to fix that.

“Meggan, I was wondering.....” he said softly into her ear.

“Yeeeeeeessss?” She drawled, and giggled.

“Well, I was wondering.....well.....if you would go out with me.”

Meggan stiffened in Josh’s arms. She didn’t say anything. And Josh held his breath.

He looked at her. She was a small girl, with dainty little hands and feet. She was built fairly small, too, but definitely had all the curves in all the right places. She was blonde, with green eyes, and a small splatter of freckles across the bridge of her nose. She had her long hair in a ponytail. Her hands had been on top of his, around her waist, but she dropped them to her side. And she sighed.

“Josh, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Josh was a little stunned. He had been nervous about asking her, but, they had gotten so close, he really didn’t think she’d say no. Waitaminnit, the voice in his head said, remember what this girl has been **through**. Be patient.

“Funny, I think it’s a **very** good idea. Best one I’ve had in a long time.” Josh quipped. Meggan giggled softly, which was the desired response. “So, why don’t you think so?” he asked her.

“Because I don’t know how much of a girlfriend I can be right now.”

“Do you like me?”

“WHAT? Of course. Josh, I **love** you---“ she stopped short, realizing what she just said. “Oops,” she giggled, blushing. “I think I just let a very big cat out of the bag.”

“Good. You said it first. I love you, too, Meggan.” Meggan giggled, and snuggled deeper into Josh’s arms. “So, if we love each other, **what** is the problem?”

Meggan let out a long sigh. “If I were selfish, I’d say yes, Josh. I do love you. But I don’t know if I can drag you into this mess I call a life.”

“You aren’t. I’m dragging myself. I asked **you**, remember? And, don’t you think I know what I’m getting into?”

She thought for a moment. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course.”

“Are you a virgin?”

“No. I had a girlfriend at my old school last year. We took each other’s virginity. Repeatedly.” Even Meggan laughed at that.

“What happened?”

“Well, we liked having sex together, but it became increasingly apparent that that was the **only** thing we liked doing together. If we weren’t having sex, we were fighting. I finally broke it off at the beginning of the summer. Good thing, actually, because it was shortly after that that I found out we were moving. I would have hated pining over a lost love 60 miles away.”

“So, you’ve had a relationship that included sex.”

“Yes.”

“Josh, I don’t know whether or not I can do that.”

“Did I ask you to go to bed with me? I asked you to go **out** with me, Meg.”

“Yeah, but can you have a relationship without.....”

“Meg. Look at me.” She twisted herself around on the couch. “I want to go out with you because I love you. Now, if I told you that I didn’t think you were as sexy as all get-out, I’d be lying.” Meggan giggled. “But I can **wait**, and I don’t mind, and I will **never ever** force you to do something you don’t want to do.”

“I know that.”

“Meg, have you ever had a real boyfriend?”

“No.”

“OK. Remember what Doctor Sorensen keeps telling you. You’ve never had sex—you’ve been raped. It’s **not** the same thing. Remember when you told me what she said about it?”

“Yeah. We talked about being turned on, and I told her that I don’t think I ever have been. And she said I would, eventually.”

“Right.”

“And she said that when I figured out that I was getting turned on, that a lot of my fears about sex would take care of themselves.”

“Right. Meg, when you figure out that you’re getting turned on, **I** want to be there, OK?” She laughed. “And if it takes until I’m 45, it takes until I’m 45.” She just stared at him.

“I guess, one of the things that bothers me, is why I’m not turned on **now**. I mean, I love you, right? I’m lying in your arms, right?”

“Well, how **do** you feel?”

“Safe. Secure. Warm. I don’t think that’s the equivalent of turned on, though.” They both laughed.

“Meg, you ever been kissed? **Really**, properly, kissed?”

“No,” she said, weakly. He leaned over, and kissed her, long but soft. She hesitated at first, then threw herself into the kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He broke the kiss. “So, **now** how do you feel?”

She giggled. “All tingly, and slightly lightheaded.”

“There you go. I **do** turn you on, see? At least a little bit.”

“OK, so I think it’s more than a little bit.” Meggan giggled.

“I’m willing to go slow. I could **really** turn you on right now, if I wanted to, but I’m willing to go slow. Meg, take a chance. I’m willing to.”

Meggan thought, and smiled. “OK, Josh, I will go out with you. You’re right, if you can take a chance, so can I.” She looked up at him. “Just as long as you keep kissing me!”

“Happy to oblige,” Josh said, and leaned in again.

He broke the kiss, and Meggan looked up at him. “Oh, that reminds me,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Since we’re now going out, will you go to the junior prom with me?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

“Josh asked me to go out with him last night,” Meggan told Sophia. They were sitting in the peer counseling office, eating lunch.

Sophia smiled at her. “What did you say?”

“After much coaxing, I said yes. I said no, at first. He talked me into it.”

“Talked you into it? You didn’t want to?” Sophia asked suspiciously.

“Oh, **yeah**, did I want to. I worry about him. I said no at first for his sake. He’s gotten himself involved with one fucked up life. He convinced me it was worth a shot, though. It was kind of hard to deny, after I told him I loved him.”

“What?” Sophia cracked up.

“Well, when I first turned him down, he said ‘Don’t you like me?’ and I kind of blurted out, ‘Are you kidding, I love you!’”

“Oops.”

Meggan blushed a little. “It was OK. He told me he loved me, too.”

“Great.”

“Yeah. He loves me, I love him, and we’re going out. Now I just get to be **terrified**.”

“Oh, no you don’t, Meg. He knows about you, remember? He’ll go slow. I know he will.”

“I do, too. I’m not scared of **him**, Sophia, I’m scared of **me**. What if slow means nonexistent? What if I can’t respond at all? What if I end up a quivering pile of terror at anything? I just don’t know.”

“Well, what have you done so far?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Held hands? Kissed? Cuddled?”

“Oh, that, yeah. We cuddle. We hold hands, but if he holds my hand or puts his arm around me if **anyone** else is in the room, I get a bit panicked.”

“Because the asshole raped you in front of an audience?”

“Yeah.”

“Does Josh know about that?” Meg nodded yes. “Does he know you panic a bit at contact in public?” Meg nodded again. “What does he do?”

Meg giggled. “He just squeezes my hand tighter. Every time he does it, it gets easier.”

“You see? Now, how about kissing, have you kissed?”

“First time last night.”

“How’d you react to that?”

“That was interesting. We were talking about getting turned on, and how I don’t think I ever have been, and how I don’t know if I can. So he asked me if I had ever been properly kissed. I said no, so he did it.”

“What happened?”

Meg smiled. “I do believe I got turned on. It was very, very nice.” She sighed a little.

Sophia laughed. “Remember what Gwen tells you. You’re an innocent. That was your first real kiss, and you reacted **exactly** how someone getting their first real kiss from their first real boyfriend should react. “

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. Meg, we’re more normal than we sometimes give ourselves credit for. We both went through hell—you more than me—and we both have the scars to prove it, but your reactions to Josh’s kiss were **normal**.”

“What does it feel like to you when Warren kisses you?”

“Well, that’s different.”

“Why is it different?”

“Because we’ve been going out a while, now, and he was **not** my first.”

“I thought you said Warren was the only guy who made you feel that way.”

Sophia smiled, “He is. Well, the first time we kissed, **I** kissed **him**.” Meggan giggled.

“Now, when we kiss, it’s warm and safe—and it **is** a bit of a turn on—but it’s more of an appetizer, a promise of things to come.”

Sophia looked at her friend and smiled. “You have to understand something, Meg—I’m a complete nymphomaniac.” Meggan cracked up laughing. “Kissing is nice in itself, but when Warren kisses me, it mainly serves to wake up my ‘Fuck me, Warren!’ voice.” Meggan was laughing so hard she almost started choking.

Meggan and Josh decided a nice way to pass a Saturday afternoon would be to do some ice skating. They arrived at the rink, but found they were early for the group skating. They rented skates, and went into the rink just to see what was going on in there.

They saw a couple, on the ice, dancing. They were doing the same bit of steps over and over again, obviously working on something.

“What’s that?” the guy asked.

“This here?” the girl demonstrated something. As she turned towards Meggan, she recognized them.

“That’s Warren and Sophia!”

“So it is,” agreed Josh.

Sophia was saying, “No, when I do this, you reach around across my body. We change the hold **here**,” she demonstrated. They did a couple more steps.

“Ah. OK. Got it.”

“Music?” Sophia asked, and, on Warren’s nod of consent, skated over to the boombox and hit play.

The sounds of Frank Sinatra filled the rink. Warren and Sophia danced around the ice to “How Little It Matters” and “I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” the two Sinatra songs that were their new free dance. The dance wasn’t completely done—there were still some holes in the choreography—but it was getting there. They ran through it once, doing what they had and skating through the rest.

“Wow, they’re **really** good,” Meggan commented.

“They were second in the country in the Junior division of Ice Dance back in January.” Josh told her.

“Really? Wow,”

The dance finished, and Josh and Meggan started applauding. Sophia and Warren looked up in surprise.

“Josh! Meggan! What are you guys doing here?” Sophia called. They skated over to where Josh and Meggan were.

“We came to skate a little. Nice Saturday afternoon date. Now I don’t want to get my clumsy self on the ice!” Meg said.

“Ah, we’re competitive ice dancers. Don’t be intimidated by us.” Warren grinned.

“Yeah, Josh told me.”

“Can you guys do that on the floor, too?” Josh asked.

“To a point,” Sophia smiled. “We take ballroom, to help with **this**. So, we can cut a pretty impressive rug. However, ice is our preferred dance surface.” They all laughed at that.

“Still, you all will be pretty impressive at the prom, no doubt.” Meg opined.

“The problem with **that** is the prom will probably be chock-a-block of all that whacka-whacka-whacka boom boom boom stuff that passes for music nowadays. I doubt a junior prom nowadays will have a whole lot of Sinatra in it,” Warren observed wryly. “Shit, I might be deprived of even the Beatles.”

“One of the weird things about both of us—and there are **many** weird things about both of us—is that our CD collection contains lots of stuff that is older than we are. Heck, lots of mine are older than my **mother**.” Sophia offered, to laughter.

“Speaking of the prom,” Sophia remembered, “You guys got a table? We’ve got an opening at ours.”

“No, we don’t. I’m gonna get the tickets on Monday. Who’s at yours?” Josh asked.

“Your cousin Karen, for one, and her boyfriend,” Josh laughed. “Me and Snugglebear, here, of course, and my best friend Jessie and her boyfriend Jason, who also happens to be Warren’s best friend.”

Meggan and Josh smiled at each other. “Sounds great.”

“Table ten, then,” Sophia told them. “We’d love to have you. Oh! And we’re also having a post-prom party in the hotel afterwards. We’re all renting rooms, and we’re going to have a party in one central room—probably ours—and then you’ll have a room to go sleep it off in.”

“I don’t know about that,” Meggan said nervously.

“Oh, shit, I forgot who I was talking to. I’m sorry, Meg, didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“That’s OK.” Meg smiled. “We’ll think about it.”

“The rooms **are** doubles.” Warren pointed out.

“OK,” said Josh. “We’ll let you know.”

After they got done skating, Josh was driving Meg home.

“Josh?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you want to?”

“Did I want to what?”

“Go to the party after the prom. Get a room together.”

“Only if **you** want to.”

“We could be sharing a room. And I might not want to do anything.”

“That’s OK.”

“You sure?”

“Willing to wait, remember?”

She smiled at him. “Let’s do it, then.”

MORE DANCING, AND OTHER THINGS (Chapter 40)

Meg and Josh, and Karen and her boyfriend Bill, were already at the prom when the foursome showed up.

“Two weeks, two proms,” Crash quipped as he sat down.

“Our Junior prom at St. Mike’s was last week,” Warren filled in.

Introductions were made for those that didn’t know each other, and they all started chatting happily. The dinner started being served, just as the DJ said he was going to play some “dinner music.”

The sounds of Benny Goodman filled the ballroom.

“Dinner music?” Warren exclaimed. “That ain’t no dinner music, that’s **dancing** music!”

Sophia looked at him. “Eat fast, dear, before they start playing the techno.” Sophia and Warren started wolfing down their food.

“What **are** you doing?” Jessie asked.

“Eating fast,” Sophia said between mouthfuls. “We need to dance. This is **our** music.”

“This old stuff?” Jessie laughed.

“If you were an ice dancer that took ballroom on the side, you’d understand,” Warren supplied. Just then, the strains of “Moonlight Serenade” started up. Sophia and Warren looked at their half-finished plates, then at each other, and said, simultaneously, “Fuck it!” and got up, to the amusement of their friends.

“We can always grab a burger,” Sophia said into Warren’s ear as they started dancing.

They were, of course, the only people on the dance floor—and they were stunning. Warren, of course, had a tux on, and Sophia was wearing a stunning lavender spaghetti-strap dress, her long black hair piled high on her head. The most stunning part, however, was watching them dance. They glided effortlessly on the dance floor, moving as one, as they always did while dancing on or off the ice. And when they danced, they danced with **passion**. Sophia once told Jessie that she considered dancing “the most erotic thing you can do with your clothes on, and the best foreplay ever invented,” and every time she and Warren danced, they proved it. They were alone on the dance floor, under the amazed gaze of 400 of Sophia’s classmates and dates, and they might have well been alone. Their dancing was not vulgar, or overtly suggestive. It was sensuous, passionate, and totally hot. It was the way they moved, the way they looked at each other, the way a hand touched a shoulder. Meggan, watching them, dropped her fork to the plate with a loud “clank” and muttered, “Oh my God. That’s one of the most fantastic things I’ve ever seen.”

The music changed to Tommy Dorsey’s “Opus One.” “Wow,” laughed Warren, “they gonna play **all** our free dance music?” Sophia just laughed, and they proved that dancing fast and uptempo did not have to mean it was any less passionate.

They danced, while everyone ate. They asked the DJ if he had any Sinatra, and he played a few for them. They danced to all the big band music the DJ played during dinner. They bounced all around the dance floor to one of their favorites, Glenn Miller’s “Little Brown Jug.” And when they sensed that the music was about to change, and they left the floor after one last rousing dance to “In The Mood,” they were stunned—they were being applauded.

Their six friends at their table, in fact, were standing and whooping. They got back to the table with embarrassed smiles on their faces. As they had expected, the waiters had taken their plates, but that was all right. Food you could get any time. Dancing like **that** was a rare opportunity.

“That was a treat. A real treat. Thank you for letting us all see that,” Josh said.

“I’ve known for a long time how into each other you guys are, but I never **really** knew, until just now,” Karen commented.

“Ah, we’re dancers. That’s what we do,” Sophia demurred.

“Yeah, **fantastic** dancers who are so much in love with each other that they need a fire extinguisher for the dance floor right about now,” Meggan quipped.

“I see now what you mean about dancing being erotic,” Jess added. Crash, beside her, said, “Shit, I know from erotic, but I **don’t** think I could ever dance that well, Jessie.”

The rest of the prom was perfect. The other six took their turn at dancing, and Warren and Sophia snuggled and held court at the table, but danced to every reasonably acceptable slow song.

The king and queen and all that were named. Nobody at their table won, but nobody cared, except for Warren who grumbled, “that queen can’t hold a candle to Sophia,” resulting in amusement all around the table. And not winning a silly prom queen was way offset by what Mr. Carvalho said after he had handed out the awards.

“And I’d like to offer special thanks and appreciation to Sophia Daniels and her date, Warren Kelleher, for giving up most of their mealtime to treat us to an absolute ballroom dancing **clinic** the likes I’ve never seen. It was amazing. Thank you guys, for sharing it with us.” The room erupted in applause.

The prom wound down, and the party moved upstairs, to Warren and Sophia’s room.

There was a fairly large crowd at first, but it quickly dwindled to the eight at the table. They were all cuddled in various spots around the room, but still engaging in conversation with one another.

Meggan was sitting on Josh’s lap, flopped in a big easy chair. They had been chatting with everyone, but, after a while, the conversations got more private, and they were mostly cuddling and whispering with one another.

Meggan was wearing a peach dress, all frilly, and had her hair in a French braid. Josh couldn’t believe this gorgeous creature was there with him, sitting in his lap, flopped back against him, his arms around her waist. They cuddled and kissed a bit. Getting in a mood, Josh took a chance. He let his right hand slowly work its way up, until it settled lightly on Meg’s left breast.

And Meg gasped. And **jumped**.

Knowing her past, and assuming that her reaction was out of fear, Josh quickly dropped his hand. But Meg was **not** reacting out of fear. Even though she was in a room with other people, she didn't care. She wasn't scared. She jumped because it felt like Josh's hand was plugged into an electrical socket. And, when he dropped his hand, Meggan reacted out of pure instinct, and pure desire to feel it again—she grabbed his hand and lifted it back onto her breast. And, to make her reaction completely clear, squeezed his hand against her breast and sighed contentedly.

Josh, unbeknownst to Meg—his head was behind hers—opened his eyes very wide when she re-attached the hand. “Wow,” he thought to himself. For quite a few minutes, he gently massaged her breast, occasionally rubbing the nipple through her dress and bra, and watched in amazement as her breathing got more and more ragged.

And then something he **never** expected happened. Meggan turned to him, a big smile on her face, and said, “Let's go back to our room.”

When they got there, before they barely got in the door, Meggan wrapped her arms around Josh and gave him the longest, hottest kiss they had ever shared. She broke the kiss, looked up at her boyfriend, and said, “I know what being turned on is, now. Oh **boy** do I.” Josh just laughed. Meggan broke their embrace, and went and sat down on one of the beds.

“Josh, I'm going to ask you something that I have no right to ask you, because it might end up being very unfair to you.”

“What, darling?”

“I want you to try.” She blushed furiously. “And I don't know **what** I want you to try. But I want you to try **something**. And I'm asking this knowing—and you need to know—that I might start screaming ‘stop! Stop! Stop!’ at any time. I don't know if I will. But I can't guarantee that I won't. And that's a lot to ask of you. But I'm so turned on right now that I'm less scared than I've ever been. I just don't know if it will come back.”

“Little one, you need but ask. Anything. What do you want me to do?”

“Well, what would you do, right about now? Just pretend I'm normal.” They both giggled.

“Oh, you are way more than merely normal, love,” Josh said. He sat down next to her, and started unbuttoning her dress. When he had it undone, he helped her wiggle out of it. She was sitting in the bed in bra and panties, and she was amazed, but not scared. And quickly she was without a bra, too.

His hands went to her breasts. Then his mouth went to her breasts, and how **that** felt was previously beyond her comprehension. She felt her face flush as he nibbled on her right breast, his hands still working on her left. Her breath came out in ragged gasps, and she closed her eyes.

Suddenly, she realized Josh was trying to get her panties off. She raised her hips to allow them to slip off, and as they pulled away from her pussy with a slurp, she realized how **wet** she was. Amazing, she thought to herself. He's playing with my tits and making me wet. I almost **do** feel normal.

Well, almost. Josh had started running a finger up and down her pussy lips, bringing shuddering gasps from Meggan. But, when he delicately probed with a finger at her entrance, she flinched.

He noticed. "Want me to stop here?" he asked.

"I dunno," she said, full of conflicting emotions, very turned on but very scared. "It feels so good, and you've been so gentle but...y'know....going in....." she blushed and gulped.

"You're afraid of penetration." She nodded. "You were doing fine until I started to do that." She nodded again. "But you are turned on beyond belief, aren't you?" She nodded again, blushing with a crooked smile.

"Fine," he said. "There are other ways to go about this." She looked at him quizzically, as he put her breast back in her mouth, nibbling on the nipple, producing another satisfied groan from her. Then he started moving down, licking the underside of her breast, kissing down her stomach, tickling her bellybutton with his tongue (which produced a giggle), and then moving beyond that. Abruptly, Meggan realized where he was headed.

"Josh? Uh, what are you doing?"

"Just trust me, Meg." He moved a centimeter closer.

"Uh, Josh? Do people actually **do** that? I thought that was just in nasty books. Y'know, dirty. Perverted."

Josh stopped his descent momentarily, realizing he had a bit of a problem here. "No, Meg, people actually do it. It's not dirty or perverted. A lot of people even **like** it."

She blushed furiously, and said "I mean....can you.....you **like** doing.....have you done this before?"

"Yes, I have done this before, and yes I like doing it. Very much so. And I would dearly love to do it to you."

Meg blushed. "Did **she**.....will **I**....." She trailed off.

"Like it? Oh yes she did. Will you? Wait and see," he said with a grin.

He went back down and buried his face between her legs. She flushed, and clenched up a little bit, but decided to trust him. He licked the inside of her thigh with a long stroke,

causing her to laugh, which also made her relax. Then, he moved up, and gently nudged her pussy lips with his tongue.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMM...” she let out, with a little smile, as his tongue worked its way up and down. She moaned softly, as he gently probed her pussy with his tongue. Dirty? Perverted? Who cares, if it made her feel like **this**?

He sensed her relax, and heard her soft moans—and on the next upstroke, made sure his tongue made direct contact with her clit.

“AAAH!” she squealed, with a gasp, and tensed up, her eyes flying wide open. He slid his tongue down her lips again, and then came back up, right onto her waiting clit.

“OOOOHHHH!!!!” She gripped the sheets, practically tearing them. Josh shortened his strokes, so contact with her clit was more and more frequent. As he sensed that she was getting used to the contact, he zeroed in on it, and licked and nibbled on her clit.

She had raised her back up off the bed, being jerked up by the sensations. Her arms were behind her, holding her up, and her head was tilted back. Her breasts were pointed upward, heaving, and flushed as her breath came out it strangled little wails.

“YIII! OOOH! UNNGGGG! AAAYII! OOOH! NNNGGGG!! Oh Fuck, what are you **doing** to me??”

Josh stopped for a minute and looked up at her. "You want I should stop?"

“ONLY IF YOU WANT TO FUCKING **DIE!**” He just laughed and went back to his ministrations.

It didn't take much longer. She flopped back onto the bed, and brought her legs around behind his head, grinding her pussy into his face. "UUUUUUNNNNNGGGGGG! AAAAAHHHHH! UNNGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG! UNNNNNNGGGGGGWWOOOOOAYIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!"

It was explosive. Her whole body clenched and spasmed. Josh got a very satisfying tongue-bath from her juices. She lie on the bed, gasping and panting, her whole body still spasming. Josh stopped and let her come down from it.

Oh my, she thought to herself in wonder. So **that's** what an orgasm feels like. That's what real sex feels like. She thought she could never could feel that good. And, all she could think about was that she wanted **more**.

Josh seemed to read her mind. After her breathing returned to semi-normal, he started again. “Oh FUUUUUUUUUCCCCCCCCCKKKKKK” she groaned, as his tongue started working its magic. She started to build up again. All her thoughts were concentrated on her pussy, which was on fire. And, she felt Josh’s fingers probe at her entrance again. He stopped, giving her the chance to stop him again. She felt it, but was so turned on that she didn’t

stop him. So, he took a chance, while she was on a high, to slip through one of her mental barriers. She let him. In fact, she welcomed it, without completely realizing it.

“Meg?”

“HMMMMMMMM?”

“Meg, do you know what’s happening?”

“Yeah, I feel goooooooooood.” She giggled.

“Meg, I have two fingers in you.”

Her eyes flew open, and she raised herself up to look down. He had momentarily taken his face away, and she could see his hand moving back and forth, his two fingers penetrating into her drenched pussy. She gasped, and stared for a minute, and then flopped back down on the bed. “I was right. It feels goooooooooood.” Josh just laughed, and lowered his tongue back down onto her waiting clit. The second one was just as explosive, and Josh felt the satisfying clamping of her spasming pussy on his fingers.

He waited until she came down, but didn’t withdraw his fingers. His shirt had come off earlier, but now he reached with his free hand, and slid his pants off. He was now as naked as she was. He climbed up next to her, watching her afterglow, all the while with his fingers buried in her pussy. She hummed, very satisfied, and ran her fingers through his hair. He started moving his hand in and out again, and the little moans started up again.

“You’re going to ruin me, you know,” she whispered. “For the rest of my life, I’m going to compare every night to **this**.”

“Good. That was my intention.” She giggled back at him. “You want to keep going?”

“What?”

“Finish what we started.”

“I think you did that. Twice already.” She giggled.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He was sitting up, still working his fingers in and out, and he pulled her with his free hand into a sitting position, also. “Meg, I want to make love to you,” he whispered in her ear.

“Thasnot fair, asking me that while your fingers are driving me wild.”

“If you say no, then we won’t.”

“Part of me wants to so bad I can taste it. And part of me is terrified.”

“What is the scary part, Meg? Protection? I have condoms.”

"No, that's not it. I'm on the pill." She looked at him. His fingers were still in her, but he had stopped moving them. "I'm afraid it will hurt. It always has."

“That was rape.”

“I know, but.....I just think of pain, I can't help it.” She looked like she was going to cry.

“I know you can't. Listen, though. Do my fingers hurt?” He started moving them in and out again.

“Oh, no they don't.”

“My dick isn't all that much bigger than two fingers. If it hurts, you tell me, and I stop. But I don't think it will, because I love you and I plan to be gentle, and you're sopping wet.”

She laughed at that and, just then, she realized he was naked. She reached down, and took it in her hands. He jumped a little. She giggled. “Well, you've been touching me for an hour, now. It feels nice in my hand.”

“Oh, it **definitely** feels nice in your hand.” They both giggled. “Come here.” He withdrew his hand momentarily, and she dropped his cock, but kept staring at it. She thought she'd be repulsed or terrified. She wasn't, much to her delight. She wanted it, because she wanted **him**.

He maneuvered them around on the bed so that they were facing each other. He definitely did **not** want to do this missionary. He wanted to be more gentle, and more equal. He lifted her legs, and slipped his legs underneath them. He spread her legs, and bent them at the knee, his legs under her knees. Then, he moved a little closer, but started by putting his fingers back in.

“HMMMMMMMM,” she groaned contentedly. He moved them in and out a bit and then moved right up to her, there was barely enough room for his hand. “Slip my fingers out, slip the other thing in. That's all there is to it.”

“Like this? I don't have to lie down?” She gasped.

“Like this. You don't have to lie down. This way is gentle, and I don't want to dominate you. But, I'm not forcing you to do anything. You can still say no.”

She clenched her eyes shut, and whispered, “yes.” He withdrew his fingers, and grabbed his cock, and aimed the head at her slit. She was tight, even with all the abuse she had

suffered, but she **was** sopping wet, so he slid in rather easily. Three pushes, and he was buried to the hilt.

Meg had tensed up, closing her eyes, waiting for the flash of pain. “Meg.” Josh said, grabbing her shoulders. “Meg. I’m in. All the way.” She looked down, and gasped. He was in. And it didn’t hurt.

He put his hands on her hips, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. In that position, there wasn’t a whole lot of room to maneuver, but it was enough. He started sliding in and out, gently, using his hands on her hips to assist him.

Her head was on his shoulder, and she gasped and moaned, as she lightly kissed his neck. It was so gentle, so loving, so beautiful, so **right**. And, inside, she felt a wall come crumbling down.

“Oh my God we’re doing it and it feels **so** good and I love you so much and it doesn’t hurt and oh my god oh my god it’s so beautiful oh my god.....” and then there were just sobs.

He kept gently moving in and out. Then, as her sobs subsided and her groans got deeper, he asked, “Want to cum again?” She smiled and nodded. “I need to pick up the pace, and I can’t do it like this, OK?”

“OK.”

“Lie back.” She did, and he went with her, stroking gently the whole time. She was on her back, him buried in her, and she instinctively lifted her legs around his hips.

“Meg, thank you,” he whispered in her ear.

“Shouldn’t that be the other way around?” she giggled.

“No.”

“Why are **you** thanking **me**?”

“For trusting me this much. It’s the greatest compliment I will ever receive. Ready?” She nodded, smiling and weeping, and Josh picked up the pace. And it **still** didn’t hurt. The orgasm was mutual, and earth-shattering.

They were naked, cuddling, a half hour after they had finished.

“How do you feel?” Josh asked quietly.

“Fantastic. Completely fantastic. I feel **normal**. I had sex with my boyfriend, and it was **great**. I don’t hurt. I don’t feel dirty. I feel completely satisfied, and completely in love, and it’s the best I’ve ever felt.”

“Good.” He kissed her.

“How do **you** feel?” she asked.

“Better than fantastic,” he teased. “Completely alive. Very much in love. And a little overwhelmed.”

“Overwhelmed?” She questioned.

“A little. I wasn’t kidding when I thanked you. The amount of trust you showed in me tonight is astounding. And a little overwhelming.”

“You earned it. Don’t think for a second that you didn’t. And it wasn’t easy, either. I don’t trust hardly anybody, and I don’t trust easily. I trust you so completely that even **I** can’t believe it.”

“Then, my love, I will have to make good and damn sure I never betray that trust.”

“You won’t,” she smiled at him. “I have every confidence in you.”

He looked around, at the other, untouched bed—the one that was supposed to be his. “I take it we’re not going to use that other bed, now?” he teased.

“Are you kidding me? I want you **right here**, all night.”

“Did you bring bedclothes?”

“Yeah, but who needs ‘em? You?”

“Yeah, but only for decorum’s sake, because I usually sleep in the nude anyhow.”

“Oh Goody,” she teased “I’m thinking I might want to put my panties on, however.” She retrieved them from the floor. “Or, maybe not.” They were sopping wet. She started to toss them back on the floor. Josh grabbed her arm, and slipped the panties out of her hand.

“Oh, no you don’t. Those are now mine.”

She giggled. “What?”

“A souvenir, of the greatest night of my life.” She giggled, and reached around him to the floor on the other side of the bed. “Fine. Turnabout is fair play.” She grabbed his jockey shorts. “OK, so why are **these** wet?”

He blushed a little. "I came, in my pants, while I was eating you out." She looked at him, amazed. "Without even touching myself. I was so turned on just watching you. First time **that** ever happened, I can guarantee you that."

"Just from watching me? Wow." She grabbed the jockey shorts, and spread the wetness around in them, like a child playing with a new toy. Then she looked up at him, beaming. "You have another pair?"

"Yes."

"Good. These are mine, then. And I do have another pair of panties, so you can keep those."

"What are you going to do if your witch of a mother finds those?"

"I'll just tell her I've taken up cross-dressing." She laughed, as Josh looked on, amazed. Then **he** cracked up laughing.

"I need to take my braid out." Meg said. "It's hard to sleep in."

"Let me," Josh said. She sat up on the bed, and told him how to take it out. He did so and brushed out her hair gently with his fingers. "Ooooh, this is so romantic," she said. When he was done, they lied back on the bed.

He reached up, and turned off the light. They kissed, and then snuggled into the covers, in spoon position, his arms wrapped around her. They were asleep in minutes.

Josh woke up, the next morning, slightly disoriented. This wasn't his room. Oh, OK, I'm a hotel room. Prom night. Meggan. OK, I know where I am now, he was thinking. Then he realized that there was something **very** good happening to his dick.

He looked down, and, to his amazement, saw the top of Meggan's head. Her blond hair was askew all over his leg and stomach, as she bobbed up and down with slow strokes and long licks. He was shocked.

"MEG?"

She disengaged and looked up at him. "Hi there, gorgeous. Like your wake-up call?" she teased.

"It was totally unexpected, I can tell you that!"

"Well, when I woke up, this **thing** was prodding me in the ass. I hadn't gotten a good look at it last night, so I pulled down the covers and examined it up close. And my mouth started watering. So....." she giggled.

“What happened to the girl I took to the prom? You know, the most inhibited girl in the universe?”

“She’s dead. You killed her last night. Believe me, it was a mercy killing.”

“OK, so what do I have in her place?” Josh teased.

“Same girl. Just less inhibited. And a whole hell of a lot hornier. Now, you lie back and enjoy this, because **I** plan to.”

So he did. He knew this was her first time, but it was wonderful. In fact, it was **his** first time—his previous girlfriend never wanted to do this.

He felt it building. “Meg, you’d better stop. I’m almost there.”

She just flicked her eyes at him, and kept on going. “Meg, you’re gonna get a mouthful in seconds.” She kept going. And she got a mouthful. She tried to swallow it all, but it started running down her chin and onto Josh. She sat up, and it ran down her neck onto her breasts.

“Not bad. Salty,” she proclaimed. Josh was amazed. She climbed up beside him on the bed, cum dripping on her lips, and teased, “Dare you to kiss me!” And he did, passionately, and it was her turn to be amazed.

“My turn,” Josh said, and proceeded to start kissing her breasts, and then move down.

“Oh, Goody!” she exclaimed.

He brought her to a rousing orgasm with his tongue, and then he introduced her to the female superior position, which she thoroughly enjoyed. And he looked at her, in the throes of orgasm, sitting on top of him, straddling him, eyes closed, face flushed, mouth opened and gasping—and realized, that he wanted to look at this for a very long time.

When they finally made it down to breakfast, their friends had just got there. Everybody noticed a difference in Meg and Josh. They were glowing, Meg couldn’t stop giggling, and it looked like they couldn’t keep their hands or eyes off one another. When Meg got up to refill her coffee, Sophia decided to refill her own.

“All right, spill the beans, Meg.” Sophia demanded. “What happened.”

“Well, **it** happened.”

“Really? Are you OK?”

“Oh, Soph, I am a whole lot better than OK. It was fantastic.”

“You enjoyed it? Really?”

“Enjoyed it? I died and went to heaven. As my peer counselor, you will be glad to know that my fears of sex are gone, gone, gone. Flushed away in the rush of more orgasms than I care to count. Last night, **and** this morning. “

Sophia cracked up laughing. “Nothing like waking up to that, is there?”

“Nope!”

A LITTLE EXPERIMENT (Chapter 41)

School was out, it was the fourth of July weekend, and Warren, Sophia, Jessie, and Crash were headed up to Maine. Crash’s uncle had a place up there, and, since he was not going to be using it for these two weeks, the foursome rented it. It was a cabin, on a lake, and they were looking forward to it. Convincing Jessie’s parents and Crash’s mother took some doing, but they managed.

It was big, for a cabin. There was a large room occupying the whole front half, which was a combination living room/dining room. Behind that, to the right, there was the kitchen. To the left, the one large bedroom. The bathroom was tucked in off the kitchen.

“One bedroom?” Sophia asked.

“Hmm. Uncle Dave said it slept four, which it does, but I didn’t realize there was only one bedroom.”

“There’s a divider screen, though,” Jessie pointed out.

“Hope it’s soundproof,” Warren quipped, earning a shove from Sophia.

“Aaah, fuck it,” Sophia said. “We’re all friends here, right?” She smiled.

They settled in, and then went out and bought some groceries and filled the fridge and cupboard. Warren and Jessie were the most enthusiastic about cooking, so they picked out a lot of the groceries. “Guess we get clean-up duty after the gourmands here wreck the kitchen with their culinary delights,” Crash said to Sophia.

They had arrived on a Saturday, and were staying until a week from Sunday—over two weeks. Saturday night, the first night, the bedroom arrangements were a bit awkward—Warren and Sophia stayed on the couch until the sounds from the bedroom died down, and then went in. Sunday night, Jessie and Crash walked in on them in mid-boink, but Warren just waved them in and they went to sleep as Warren and Sophia finished up. Monday night, they all just ended up in there, in their separate beds, doing whatever.

Tuesday was a beautiful day, and Crash and Warren decided to take Crash's uncle's small boat out into the lake and do some fishing. Sophia and Jessie slept late, padded around the house a bit, and ended up on one of the two couches in the living room, sipping coffee, and chatting.

"I love this. I'm so relaxed." Sophia said.

"Yeah, you weren't relaxed last **night**," Jessie quipped. "You gave me such a headache I had to reach for the Advil, for chrissake. Are you **always** that loud?"

"Usually," she smiled. "Gets Warren going, you know."

"I'll bet. You guys really do seem to have a great sex life. Almost as good as Jason and I."

Sophia laughed. Then she got a little somber. "I hope it's good enough."

"What are you talking about?"

Sophia sighed. "I've told Warren to take some time and sleep around. He won't do it."

"WHAT?"

"Listen, I have previous experience. He doesn't. How can he know I'm the one if he hasn't tried anyone else?"

"Shit, Crash and I were both virgins before each other, and we don't worry."

"Yeah, but you had **some** experience. Maybe not fucking, but everything else. Warren had **none**."

"True. But I know what Warren means, though. I don't know if I could ever do it."

"Do you ever fantasize about it? With someone you know, or something?" Sophia asked.

"I can't think of hardly anyone that I'd want to do it with."

"Aha, Jess, you said **hardly** anyone."

"Well, I meant no one."

"You said hardly," Sophia grinned. "C'mon, Jess, confess."

"OK. There's one guy. Jason and I have actually talked about this. We asked each other, if you were going to have a fling with someone you know, who would it be? And I did have one name."

“OK, Jess, spill the beans.”

“No way,” she said firmly. “That is Jason’s and my secret. I can’t tell you.”

“Jess, I’m your best friend. You can tell me.”

“Oh, no, not **this**, especially not you.”

Sophia looked at her friend, and then realization dawned on her. “It’s Warren, isn’t it?” She said with a smile.

Jesse looked at her in disbelief. Sophia continued, “Come on, why would you be afraid to tell me if it was anyone other than Warren?” Jessie stared at her friend, expecting her to be pissed, but she was plainly amused. “Admit it, Jess, you got the hots for my boyfriend!”

“OK, I admit it. It’s Warren,” Jessie said, blushing. Sophia just giggled. “If it makes you feel any better, Jason picked you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And he was serious.”

Sophia thought about that for a moment. “Since it’s true confessions time, I’ll tell you that I’d pick Jason, too.”

“Warren?”

Sophia laughed. “We’ve never actually discussed it, but every time I tell him he should find someone else to experiment with, he makes a joke about you. I’ll tell him to go find someone, and he’ll say, ‘But Jess isn’t available’ or ‘Fine, what’s Jessie’s phone number’ or something like that. Based on the evidence, I do believe he’d pick you.”

Jessie thought for a moment. “Assuming you’re right about that.....We’ve got two weeks here. It’s only the four of us. Only we will know what goes on between these walls.” She took a deep breath, amazed at what she was about to say. “Maybe we should pick a night while we’re here.....and swap.”

“JESSICA REIDEL! Are you SERIOUS?”

“Yeah, I do believe I am.”

“Are you telling me that you want to sleep with my boyfriend?”

Jessie smiled at Sophia and said, “Only if you sleep with mine.”

Sophia sighed. “Jess, this is **not** the type of thing that you drop on me at eleven o’clock in the morning.”

“Soph, tell me the whole idea doesn’t turn you on, and I’ll drop it.”

Sophia sighed. “OK. So it does. But what will it do to us? To our friendships? To our relationships?”

“If it’s consensual and agreed on by everyone, why should it do anything? Look, I’m secure enough in my relationship with Jason. I **know** you and Warren are just as secure. I am **not** going to go to bed with Warren and then get all swoony over him. Listen, I love Warren. He’s my second favorite guy in the universe. And based on your descriptions I would fully expect spending the night with him to be utterly fantastic. But I’m not **in love** with him. I’m in love with Jason.”

“Look,” she continued, “you know how I would look at it? I am giving my very best friend and my boyfriend a gift—each other, for a little while. And you would be doing the same. Just for fun. It would be fun, I do believe, for all of us.”

Sophia smiled. “OK, I have to admit, it does sound like it would be fun. And deliciously wicked, to boot. All right, I’m in. IF……”

“If what?”

“If we can convince our guys. I don’t know if Warren will go along with it.”

“We’ll just have to ask them.”

Jason and Warren traipsed in in mid-afternoon, all happy with a bucket of fish. “DINNER!” Warren announced proudly. Jason chimed in, “Are we good, or what?”

Jason was the best at cleaning and de-boning fish, so he handled that, while Jess and Warren drummed up a recipe. It turned out to be wonderful.

The girls waited until the meal was done and they were all lingering at the table to bring up the topic at hand. Warren led them into it, actually.

“So, what did you ladies do all day while we he-men were out capturing the supper?”

Sophia giggled. “Oh, girl talk.”

“What about?” Crash asked

“Sex, what else?” Jess quipped. “If you must know, we were discussing fantasies.”

“Sophia tell you about hers, me ravaging her while she’s tied up on top of the third base dugout at Fenway Park?”

“WARREN!”

Jessie laughed. “Nope, she didn’t mention **that** particular one.”

Sophia smirked at Warren. “Well, **his** is to do it in the middle of the ice at the Olympics. With a full crowd. **And** a panel of judges.”

“Doling out the 5.9’s and the 6.0’s, of course,” Warren quipped.

“Of course,” Jess agreed. “No, actually, we weren’t talking about **where**. We were talking about **who**. Jason and I have had a discussion—if I released you for a day, who would you want to sleep with? That’s what we were talking about.”

“JESSICA!” Crash was mortified. “You TOLD her?”

Jess just nodded. “Did you tell her WHO?” Jess nodded again. Jason glanced sheepishly at Sophia, and then buried his face in his hands. “I think I am **very** embarrassed.”

“And I think I missed something,” Warren interjected.

“Well, War, Jason told me who he’d want to sleep with if I released him for a day. And the answer was Sophia.” Jason buried his head further in his hands, groaning.

“Oh,” Warren said. “Is that all? Doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

Everyone glared at him. “It doesn’t?” Sophia asked.

“Naaaah. He’s had the hots for you since the day he met you. What am I, blind?” They all chuckled, and Crash looked at Warren in obvious relief. Then he grinned at his girlfriend. “Tell him **yours**, Jess.”

“Oh, mine was also Sophia.” Warren looked at her in stunned disbelief, then caught the gleam in her eye and started laughing. “No, seriously, Warren. Mine was you.”

“I think I’m flattered. Mine would be you, too.”

“And mine would be Jason,” Sophia added.

“What an interesting conversation,” Warren said. “We’ve all now established that we wouldn’t mind jumping in the sack with each other’s significant other.” Everyone laughed.

“Right,” smiled Jess. “So, what Sophie and I were talking about was—let’s do it.”

“What?” Warren asked.

“Let’s swap. One night while we’re here. Tonight would be fun.”

Jason and Warren stared at the girls, then at each other, and then back at the girls. They still didn’t quite believe what they had heard.

Warren looked at Sophia and said, “So, what you’re telling me is this.....that you want to sleep with my best friend?”

Sophia smiled at him and said, “Warren, **only** if you also want to sleep with **mine**.”

Crash looked at Jessie. “You guys are serious about this.”

“Jason, **only** if **all** of us want to do it. If one of you says no, then we don’t. If anyone feels uncomfortable with this, then we don’t.”

“Jess, let’s go start in on the dishes. Let the boys discuss this for a bit.” The girls walked into the kitchen.

Warren and Crash just looked at each other a bit. Then they broke into broad grins. “You gotta admit, it sounds intriguing.” Crash said.

“Intriguing? It sounds like something you’d read at [www dot sexxxxxxxstories dot com](http://www.sexxxxxxxstories.com).” Crash cracked up laughing. Warren continued, “I guess I just wonder how it will affect our relationships if we do go through with it.”

“Yeah. I think Sophia and you wouldn’t have a problem, nor would Jess and I. I think we’re all secure enough to have a little fun and not get our feathers ruffled.”

“OK, but you agreed with me.”

“Actually, I was thinking about **us**. Are you going to be looking at me in twenty years when you and Soph are old and fat and have twelve kids and be thinking ‘that asshole slept with my wife’?”

“Naaaah. Not if we all agree to this. I’d only be thinking that if you snuck behind my back, if Sophia was **cheating**, know what I mean?”

“You wouldn’t consider this cheating.”

“If I agree, how can she be cheating?”

“Good point.”

Warren sighed. “The biggest problem I have with the whole thing is my basic insecurity.”

“Aaaah. Well, from what I’ve heard from Jess, Sophia says you’re in the Lovemaking Hall Of Fame, so I wouldn’t worry about it. I **know** I’m good, so I won’t worry about it either.” Warren cracked up at that. “Listen, if we do this, we’re going to have fun, and then Sophia is going to go back to her true love, the one that satisfies her in every way—which is **you**. And Jess is going to do the same.”

“Yeah. What the hell. The relationships here are strong, right?”

“And I got to say that Sophia has the best set of tits I have ever seen.”

“Right. And Jess has legs that won’t quit.”

“Right. You grab mine and I’ll grab yours?”

“Right.” They got up from the table and marched into the kitchen. Jason marched up to Sophia, spun her around, and planted a kiss on her lips. Warren approached Jessie from the rear, wrapped his arms around her waist, and started nibbling on her neck.

“HMMMMM,” Jessie purred. “Soph, I do believe the boys have come around.”

Sophia broke the kiss with Jason. “Oh, they sure have.” She grabbed Jason’s hand, looked back at Jess and Warren, and said, “Last one in the bedroom has to sleep in the wet spot!”

“Ground rules,” Jess said as they walked. “Nobody but me gets fed grapes by Jay.”

“Fine, I hate grapes. Nobody dances with Warren except me.”

“Fine, I don’t dance.”

“And, Jessica Reidel, you’d better return him undamaged!”

“Ah, you spoil all my fun.”

They entered the bedroom. Jason and Warren looked at the dividing screen, looked at each other, and folded it up. “I don’t think this is necessary,” Warren quipped. Then he led Jessie to his bed, while Crash and Sophie went to the other one.

Jessie plopped on the bed, and Warren grabbed her in his arms, and kissed her, deeply. She clung to his shoulders. He broke the kiss, and quickly reached for the bottom of Jessie’s shirt, and lifted it off. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Warren zeroed right in on her breasts, nibbling and sucking on them.

“Waitaminnit, Prep Stud,” Jessie said. She undid her jeans and they, and her panties, were quickly off. Then she tugged at Warren’s belt, and he helped her get his pants and then his shirt off.

“Now, sir, you are free to go back to what you were doing before. In fact, I insist.”

“Gladly”. He went back to her tits with his tounge, and reached down and slipped one finger, then two, into her sopping wet pussy.

“Hello, my dear,” he quipped to her, “Is that Lake Erie in your pocket, or are you glad to see me?” Jessie cracked up laughing. Jessie wasn’t as vocally demonstrative as Sophia, but she **was** vocal, letting Warren know with a series of rumbles and purrs and low moans that she was enjoying herself. “Oh FUCK!” she finally let out, before she started spasming on the bed as she gently bit Warren on the shoulder.

“You weren’t kidding about the fangs, she-devil,” Warren said.

“Damn right. And the claws come later. Right now, I got another use for these fangs.” And she slipped down and took his dick in her mouth.

Warren supposed comparisons were inevitable, because this was unlike any blow job he had ever had. Not better, not worse, just **different**, and very good. Jess was, as he had always suspected, an **animal**. She put his dick in her mouth and just devoured it. He came, very fast, and very hard.

Jess crawled up beside him as he caught his breath. “Jesus Christ, Jess, is it still **attached**?”

She giggled and looked down. “Yup. I think he needs a bit of a rest, however.”

“That’s fine, because it’s my turn.” But before Warren could move, they heard Sophia in the other bed, with her customary siren wailing. Warren froze for a minute.

Jess looked at him with concern. “You all right? I forgot how loud she is.”

Warren smiled at her. “I’m fine. It was just a little weird. I’m used to that scream being close enough to perforate my eardrum.”

Jess laughed. “You want I should ratchet up the volume some so they’ll know we’re having as much fun as they are?”

Warren laughed back. “Only if you feel the need, Jess.” And he crawled down between her legs.

And it was Jess’s turn to make a little comparison. Cunnilingus was **not** Jason’s favorite thing to do in bed. He’d do it if he was in the mood, and was good at it, but **not** like this.

“Warren, this is....mmmmmmm....fantastic.”

He continued, while Jess lied back and enjoyed it. “nnnnnngggg....aaaaaaahhhh....oh my fucking head, Warren, you are fucking **good** at this.” She wrapped her legs around his

head, and pulled him in closer. “FUCK.....FUCK.....FUCK.....OH MY FUCKING HEAD!” she screamed, as she came.

Warren looked up at her and laughed. “Well, I’d say that was plenty loud enough.” And went back to what he was doing. Jessie looked down at him, incredulously, and said, “You’re not done?”

“One is never enough, that’s my motto. You have any objections?”

“Not on your fucking life,” she sighed happily, and Warren went back between her legs. One became two, then three, then four, before Warren was finally done. He crawled up next to Jess, who was still gasping and shaking.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Warren, if pussy-lapping were an Olympic sport, you’d have the damn gold medal all sewn up. Fuck. Sophie said you were good, but I had no fucking idea.”

Warren just laughed. “Glad you enjoyed yourself.”

She eyed him speculatively. “C’mere, Prep Stud,” and she pulled him on top of her. “Fuck me.” So he did.

And, a few minutes later, as she started cumming, he found out something. No, she wasn’t screaming—she was growling—but she showed her pleasure another way. She bit down on his neck, while her fingernails dug into his back. After he had cum—accompanied by another from her—he collapsed next to her.

“Fangs and claws, for sure.”

“Huh?”

“When you came the first time, you gouged my back. **And** bit my neck.”

“I guess I did.” She looked at his neck. “Oh shit, Warren, I think I gave you a hickey.”

Warren just laughed. Jess snuggled up to him and said, “Warren, I am **so** glad we did this.”

“Yeah, I have to admit I am, too. You **are** a She-Devil, Jess, no doubt about it.” They heard more screams from the other bed. “There goes Mount Sophia, erupting again.” The both cracked up laughing.

Jess looked at Warren. “Since we don’t know if we’re ever going to do this again, you up for more?”

“Well, at the moment, I am **not** up, as should be plainly apparent”—Jess laughed—“but if you let me rest a bit, I’ll see what I can do.”

They actually kept it up for a couple more hours. They all knew that this was probably a one-time thing, and wanted to get as much in as they could.

At one point, Warren was kneeling on the bed, doing Jess from behind, and Sophia was on top of Jason, straddling him from the top, and Warren and Sophia's eyes caught one another from across the room. And, when they looked at each other, there was no resentment, no jealousy—just love, gratitude, and a not inconsiderable amount of lust. Sophia winked at Warren, and he responded by licking his lips. They both giggled, then went back to what they were doing.

“Whatcha laughin’ at, Prep Stud?” Jess asked.

“Sophie’s on top of Jay, and she just winked at me.” Jess herself laughed at that.

When they were finally done, collapsed on the bed exhausted, Sophia’s voice came wafting across the room.

“Jess?”

“HMMMMMM?”

“You want we should switch beds back before we go to sleep?”

“I am currently incapable of moving my legs, so that idea is not feasible.”

Sophia just laughed. “Come to think of it, you’re right. Good enough. ‘Night, guys.”

“Good night.”

Warren and Jessie curled up around each other, and went to sleep.

THE EXPERIMENT BITES BACK (Chapter 42)

Warren woke up. The first, barely coherent, thought he had was that he was clutching a breast. The second, slightly more coherent thought was “Did Sophie lose a cup size somewhere?” The third, now completely coherent, thought was—this isn’t Sophie’s tit I’m squeezing. It’s Jessie’s.

I’m in bed with Jessie. We slept together last night. I slept with my girlfriend’s best friend. And **she** slept with my best friend.

And I still can't believe we did it.

Warren got out of bed, since he had to pee. He managed to disengage himself from Jess, despite her still-asleep moans of protest, and headed to the bathroom. He checked the clock—5:30. He didn't think they had wound it down the previous night until, like, 2:00. Three and a half hours was not enough sleep. He really should go back to bed.

He looked at Jess, lying on the bed. Then looked at Sophia, all curled up with Crash. He looked at Jess again, looked at the bed, looked at the space he had just been lying in. And turned toward the dufflebag he had brought with him. He pulled out a teeshirt and a pair of sweatpants and the Dostoevsky book he was in the middle of. He pulled on the clothes, glanced back at the three people still in bed, and walked out of the bedroom. He went into the kitchen, brewed some coffee, poured himself a cup, and headed out to the front porch outside the cabin.

He looked out at the gorgeous sunrise over the lake, and sighed. Then he picked up his Dostoevsky and pretended to read it.

It was close to three hours later when the next person woke up. It was Jessie. She roused herself, and wondered where Warren was. Ah, she thought, the culinary marvel is probably out in the kitchen preparing the breakfast of all time. Shoulda waited for me. I'll catch up with him in a bit.

She crept over to the other bed, leaned over Sophia, and gave Crash a big wet kiss. As his eyes fluttered open, she grinned and said, "Hi, Big Boy, was it good for you, too?" Crash woke up and burst out laughing, which woke Sophia. She looked up at Jess leering at her, and laughed herself.

"Morning, Jess. Morning, Jason." Jason kissed her on the cheek.

Jessie looked at Sophia and asked, "Is he still functional? All the parts still work and everything?"

"Last time I checked, everything was in working order, but I'll let **you** do the final inspection." She sat up, and peered around Jessie. "So, where's **mine**?"

"Dunno. I just woke up, and he was gone. I figure he's out in the kitchen inventing Eggs a la Warren, or something."

Sophia giggled, and reached in her bag and pulled out a bra and a set of panties, and her long robe. She put on the bra and panties, and got off the bed. Jessica zoomed past her and replaced her in the bed with Jason, giggling. Sophie smiled, put on her robe, and went out into the kitchen.

“Warren?” He wasn’t in the kitchen, and he wasn’t in the bathroom. She looked in the living room—no Warren. She went back in the bedroom.

“Guys, Warren’s gone.”

“Did you check the porch?” Jessie asked.

She went out to the porch, and then came back in. “Guys, he **was** there—his book and an empty coffee cup are out there—but there’s no Warren. I’m worried.”

“The car’s not gone, is it?” Crash asked.

“No. I hope not, since he doesn’t have his license yet.”

Crash had a brainstorm. “Soph, go check down by the lake, on the dock or something. Warren’s told me before that being around water helps him think.”

“You’re right.” She hustled out of the bedroom and then out the front door. She walked down the little path through the trees that led to the lakefront. And there, sitting on the dock, staring out into the lake, was Warren.

“Snugglebear?”

Warren looked up, and gave her a half-smile. “Morning, Pookie.”

“I was worried. I didn’t know where you were.”

“Sorry. I couldn’t sleep. I was out on the porch, attempting to muddle through Dostoevsky, but I’m too incoherent in the morning to handle him. So I decided to come down and watch the sun rise over the lake.”

“Too bad I missed it. Sounds romantic.”

“Very beautiful. I like sunrises, I’m just not enough of a morning person to see them often.”

Sophia smiled, and sat on the dock next to him. She put her arms around him and gave him a hug—and he stiffened—just slightly, but she felt it.

“Warren, is anything wrong?”

“No, Pookie, everything’s fine.” But he was still stiff, and his arms were making no effort to return her embrace, as they normally would have.

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

She stood up, “Well, then, why don’t you come on up? I can help you make breakfast. Besides which, I think Jess wants to thank you for last night—she was **very** impressed.” And the minute she said it, she realized she had said the wrong thing, because she saw the muscles in his back clench, and heard him take a deep breath.

But he turned to her with a half-smile and said, “No, Pookie, you go on up. I’m not hungry. I’ll be up in a little while.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll be there in a bit.”

“OK.” Sophia turned away from Warren, and climbed the path to the cabin, and practically ran through the front door. She found Jess and Crash on the couch.

“Didja find the Prep Stud?” Jessie cracked.

“Yeah, I found him.”

“Is he coming in?”

“No. Not right now anyway.”

Jess and Crash looked at each other. “Where is he?” Jess asked.

“Down on the dock, by the lake. Looking like he wants to throw himself in.” Sophia was close to tears by this point. “I couldn’t get him to come back here. I gave him a hug and he stiffened. I made a joke about coming up here so Jess could thank him for last night and he **really** stiffened. I asked him if anything was wrong, and he said no, but there **is**.”

“Oh, shit,” Jessie said. “Regrets?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Sophia asked.

“Want I should go talk to him?”

“I don’t know if that would help, or hurt.”

“Let me give it a try.” She ran in the bedroom, threw on some clothes, and headed down to the dock.

“Hey, Prep Stud!”

“Hiya, Jess.”

She sat down next to him. “So, did you have fun last night?”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “It certainly was different. I gotta admit, Jess, you’re something else.”

“And **you** are very, very good.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Now, tell me, what happened this morning.”

“Huh?”

“You woke up, saw the rearranged sleeping arrangements, and got out of the bedroom like a rocket, didn’t you?”

Warren sighed. “Please don’t take offense to this, Jess, but I woke up snuggling the wrong girl this morning. I got up to go pee, and it was only 5:30, and I should have gone back to bed. I went back in the bedroom, and saw **you** where **Sophie** should be, and I got out of there.”

“Well, we all just kind of passed out where we were,” Jess said.

“I know, I know....it was just.....” he faltered. “Look, Jess, don’t get me wrong. I had a blast last night. It was great; **you** were great. But the only thing that’s been running through my mind all morning is, ‘Oh my God , I slept with my girlfriend’s best friend. How could I **do** that?’ over and over again.”

“Hey, she slept with **your** best friend, too. And she gave you permission.”

“The first part does **not** help, and the second part doesn’t seem to matter so much anymore. I thought it would be OK. I was wrong.”

“Oh, shit, Warren, now I feel horrible, since this was all **my** idea.”

“I agreed to it, Jess.”

“Yeah, but I can’t help but think that we pushed you.”

“I agreed.”

Jessie sighed. “Warren, I don’t know what to do or say right now. Look, I love Jason with all my heart and soul. I wouldn’t trade him for anything.” She took a deep breath. “But the reason I came up with this idea is that I wanted a night with you, just one night, and I wanted it in the worst way, and I was willing to share Jason with Sophia to get it.” Warren looked at her, startled. “Now, I also knew that Jason wanted a night with Sophia, in the worst way, and would be willing to share me with you to get it. But it was selfish, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry you regret it. I **never** meant to hurt you.”

“Jess, do you regret it?”

“If you’re this upset by it, of course I regret it.”

“Forget that. Outside of that, do you regret it?”

She looked him dead in the eye. “Not for a fucking second. Now, I say that knowing that Jason doesn’t have a problem with it. I’d **never** jeopardize what we have together, and I never would have wanted to jeopardize what you and Soph have, either. But if you weren’t out here having second thoughts, I’d be jumping for joy. You, my dear Prep Stud, are a legend, especially with that tongue of yours. Shit, Sophie should rent you out—you guys would make a mint.”

Warren cracked a smile at that. Then got serious again. “Jess, why am I the only one having regrets?”

“I can’t answer that, because I don’t know what’s going through your mind.”

“Fair enough, so tell me what’s going through **your** mind. Tell me what you thought of last night.”

“OK. I had fantastic sex with one of my dearest friends. Twenty feet away, my boyfriend had great sex with one of **his** dearest friends. And, when we were done, we all **still** knew who we were in love with.”

“Damn, Jess, you’re just too sensible.”

“Well, what’s going through your mind?”

“I cheated on my girlfriend with her best friend.”

“How can it be cheating when she gave you **permission**?”

“You’re sensible, I’m emotional.”

Jess cracked up laughing. “You’re right, Warren, you **are** emotional.”

“Jess, I have a serious emotional investment in my relationship with Sophia.”

“Of course you do. You think she doesn’t? You think Crash and I don’t?” Jessie thought for a minute. “Going to bed with me hasn’t thrown you into emotional confusion over Sophia, has it?”

Warren laughed. “No, of course not. That is **not** the problem. Don’t get me wrong, Jess, I love you, but I’m not **in** love with you, and I never will be. The sex was fantastic, but it was what it was.”

“Right, Warren, that’s **exactly** my point. It was what it was. It was great. I’d do it again, if everyone else agreed and if it didn’t put you in such a damn funk. But it was what it was.

Great sex with a dear friend, no emotional entanglements, no commitments. And don't forget one thing—Sophie **wanted** you to have this.”

“Hmmm,” was all Warren said.

“No, really. She's told me that she's badgered you about going to find someone else. Look. Instead of going out and finding some unknown girl who'd figure out how wonderful you are and try to dig her hooks in you, Sophie gave you to **me**. Her best friend, who would have lots of fun with you and return you to her, safe and unharmed.” She touched the hickey on his cheek, and giggled. “Well, **relatively** unharmed.”

Warren had to laugh at that. “Jess, maybe you have a point.”

“One thing puzzles me, Warren. You seem much more upset about what **you** did than what Sophia did.”

“Actually, I am. If I can come to terms with the first, the second will be easy. I'm not the jealous type; I'm really not. I gave her permission.”

“Yup. And so did she. If you can go easy on her, why can't you go easy on yourself?” She stood up. “Crash and I are taking off for a while. There was a little country store about an hour down the road that we wanted to go check out. So, go back to the cabin, and spend some time with your **girlfriend**. You know, the woman you love?”

“Good advise as always, She-Devil.”

“You know it.” She reached down and gave him a kiss. “Thanks for last night, Warren. It really was a whole hell of a lot of fun.” She walked back to the cabin.

He waited a couple of minutes, until he heard the car pull out of the road. Then he walked back up to the cabin.

Sophie was sitting on a couch, wearing only a bra and panties, reading a book. She looked up as he came in. “Hi,” she smiled.

“Hi yourself.”

He closed the door behind him, and she patted the couch next to her. He sat, and she put her book down and snuggled up next to him. This time, he didn't stiffen, as he wrapped his arm around her.

“Are you OK?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so. Jessie talk to you?”

“Yeah, I got the gist of it. I'm so sorry, Warren. If I had known.....”

“Ah, Sophia, **I** didn’t know. I went along with this, willingly. And last night, I was **fine** with it. But this morning.....”

“Yeah, Jessie told me.” Sophia looked up at him with a wicked grin. “So, how was she?”

“What?”

“How was Jessie? Good? Bad? Indifferent?”

“Sophie, this is **not** helping.”

“Yes it is, you just don’t know it yet. How was she?”

“You’re not gonna let me get out of this one, are you?”

“No. I’m working up to something, here. How was she?”

“Fine. Great. Very different.”

“Different? How so?”

“Quieter, for one.” Sophia cracked up at that. “Where you scream, she purrs and growls a lot.” Sophia was still laughing. “She’s more aggressive.”

“Yeah, I can **tell**,” Sophia said, fingering the hickey. “Damn her, I **told** her to return you undamaged,” she said, but with a smile.

“Oh, you haven’t seen my back yet.”

“Huh?” Warren took his shirt off, and leaned forward. “Scratch marks! That **hussy**!”

“Yeah, and she gave me the fastest blowjob of my life and I swear she took some skin off.” Sophia cracked up laughing. “Wait a minute, **why** am I telling you this?”

“Because, dear heart, I asked.”

“Oh.”

“Like I said, I’m building up to something. So, it was different, but fun.”

“I’d say that’s accurate.”

“Do you prefer the differences?”

“Are you asking me if she was better than you are?!?!?”

“No, I phrased it the way I did deliberately. Take actual people out of it. Do you prefer the way you did it last night? Abstractly.”

“It was fun, once in a while would be fine. Heck, **we’ve** gotten overly aggressive a couple of times. Once in a while, it’s an interesting and fun diversion. But all of the time? No. I prefer a more gentle approach most of the time.”

“Fine. One more question. Are you in love with Jessie?”

“WHAT? No! Of course not.”

“But you consider her a friend.”

“One of my best. After you and Crash, probably **the** best.”

“And you **are** in love with me.”

“You have to ask? Yes, I am completely, hopelessly, head over heels in love with you.”

“Thank you, Snugglebear, I never get tired of hearing that. So, what you’re telling me is that you had a fun, interesting diversion with one of your best friends, with my permission—but you wouldn’t want to have her all the time sexually, and it didn’t change your feelings about either me **or** her one whit. Does that just about cover it?”

“Yeah, that just about covers it.”

“OK, you think about it that way, and then tell me what the problem is.”

Warren couldn’t help but grin. “Well, when you put it **that** way.....”

“Y’see, I **told** you I was building up to a point.” The both smiled at each other.

Then Warren asked, “So, how was it?”

“Do you **really** want me to answer that?”

“I’m not quite sure.” They both laughed.

“Well, the basics are almost the same answer. He’s also more aggressive than you are, and it was a fun interesting diversion, but I prefer it our way 95 percent of the time.”

“OK, I’ll buy that.”

“I can’t imagine the two of them both being more aggressive. I’m surprised there aren’t more flesh wounds.” Warren cracked up laughing. “I love you, Warren.”

“I love you too, Pookie.”

“I’m gonna go make some tea.”

“Good idea. This place could use some music.” Sophie went into the kitchen, and Warren rummaged through his CD case. He chose a selection of swing music, and put it into the player. He was grooving to Opus One when Sophia emerged from the kitchen, with the tea—and **without** her bra and panties.

“Coffee, Tea, or ME?” she giggled.

“I’ll take the tea,” he teased.

“FINE,” she replied, and in one move yanked his sweatpants and underwear down to his ankles. “And I know **just** where to put it,” she said as she hovered the teapot above him.

“I’ve heard of Chinese Water Torture, but not Chinese **Tea** Torture.”

“You goof!” She put the teapot down and snuggled into him. He kicked his sweatpants off of his ankles. They snuggled for a minute, naked, not doing much of anything, and then Warren heard the song on the CD about to end, and he knew what song was next.

He stood up, and held his hand out to Sophia. She looked at him quizzically, but stood up and took his hand. He drew her close, without a word, and then the song changed, and Moonlight Serenade started. Wordlessly, they started dancing naked around the living room. There had always been an erotic overtone to their dancing, but nude, slow dancing to a beautiful, romantic song, the eroticism was overpowering. They held each other tight, his erection hard against her stomach, her nipples hard against his torso, eyes locked on each other, as they glided as one around the living/dining room. Their breathing got shallower as they danced, and Sophia got more and more flushed. They never said a word, and their eyes never wavered from the other’s.

When the music ended, they were in the dining room. They stopped moving, but didn’t break their hold on each other, nor did they break their gaze into each other’s eyes. The CD changed to the uptempo beat of In The Mood, but they didn’t even notice. The music was gone, the cabin was gone, the world was gone, and all that was left was each other. And this wasn’t just sex. It was sex, and passion, and romance, and love, all wrapped up into one.

Without breaking his gaze, he suddenly grabbed her by the hips and lifted her onto the dining room table. Still, no words were spoken—none needed to be. She spread her legs, and he aimed and entered her.

He kept his hands on her hips, and she put hers on his shoulders. She was quieter than usual, panting roughly, flushed from her head to her breasts. They kept their eyes locked on each other, as they moved back and forth, she moving on the table to meet his thrusts. They both usually had the tendency to close their eyes during sex, but not this time—they kept them open, and locked, gazing deep into the other’s. Their orgasms were not long

coming, and they were powerful and glorious. Sophie let out a wail, but, even in the midst of their orgasms, their hold on each other's eyes never faltered.

And, it didn't falter afterwards. And Warren, unusually for him, didn't go soft. They stayed there, still looking at each other, for a minute while they came down from their orgasms. Then Warren drew Sophie in close, wrapping her arms around his neck. Again, no words were needed, as she wrapped her legs tight around his waist. He reached under her, supporting her under her ass, and lifted. And he carried her, still buried in her, to the bedroom.

Quite a long time later, when they were done, they were snuggling in the bed.

"Right girl, right bed?" Sophia teased.

"Right girl, right bed, right dining room table, right dance floor, right teapot, whatever." They both laughed.

"Better about last night?"

"Yeah. It was a fun diversion, but you are **it**, you know that."

"I know."

"And, if it ever happens again—which, knowing you and Jessie, it probably **will**"—Sophia giggled at that—"just promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"I don't mind fun, interesting diversions, but the **only** person I ever want to wake up next to, is you. Call it the 'switch beds before actual **sleeping** so your sweetie wakes up clutching the correct breast' rule."

Sophia giggled. "Deal. Since I've reserved you for dancing, you can reserve me for sleeping."

"Oh, you bet your bippy that you've reserved me for dancing. After **that**? If we ever have a daughter, my **father** will have to teach her to dance, because I'm taken on the dance floor for ever."

They quieted for a minute. Then Warren laughed.

"What's so funny, Snugglebear?"

"I was just thinking. We're using last year's free dance for the Junior Grand Prix because of the length difference, right?"

“Right.”

“Moonlight Serenade is part of that music.” Sophia widened her eyes in realization, and cracked up laughing. “I am **never** going to look on that particular piece of music the same way again, and now I’m going to spend all fall ice dancing to it with you in front of an audience.”

“Dear heart, when you perform in front of an audience, the mental trick is to imagine the **audience** naked, not your **partner**.”

“Too late. That music is going to come on, and all I’m going to be able to think of is today.”

“Well, that might be a good thing, because today I give you a 6.0, 6.0.”

“Yeah, but will we get an increase in the base mark if I boff you on the judges’ table?”

They snuggled into each other, still laughing.

OH WHAT A BEAUTIFUL MORNING (Chapter 43)

Warren and Sophia got out of bed and threw some clothes on. The pot of tea they had neglected on the table was ice cold right now, so Sophia dumped it and brewed another one. They curled up on the couch, he with his Dostoevsky, and she with the latest Danielle Steele.

However, the exertions of the morning combined with Warren’s lack of sleep to being with, quickly caught up to them, and they fell asleep. For July, it was fairly cold, and they had a thin blanket covering their legs, as Sophia was wearing a skirt and Warren shorts. Warren was half on his back and half on his side, as was Sophia, her back to his front, her head nuzzled right under his chin, his arms around her waist.

Which is how they were when Jessie and Jason arrived back. Jess entered first, with Jay behind her, prattling about something, but Jess saw them sleeping and turned to Jay and shushed him. Jay looked around Jessie and saw Warren and Sophia.

“Oh, look at the cuddlebirds,” Jason teased.

“They look so peaceful,” Jessie pointed out.

“This is a shot that should not go to waste.” Jason reached into the bag he had brought with him and took out his camera, and took a photo of the romantic scene.

“I hope Warren’s OK.” Jason said.

“Well, it at least looks like the two of them are OK, which is a good sign.” Jesse said. She walked over to the dining room table to put something down on it, and stifled her laugh as not to wake them up. “Yeah, they’re fine. Come here.” Jason did. Jessie pointed to a telltale puddle on the dining room table.

Jason stifled his own laughter. “I guess they’re OK if they were so turned on they couldn’t make it to the bedroom.”

“Come on, help me with this stuff, and I’ll grab a washcloth.” Jason helped her put their groceries away, and Jessie wiped down the table. Jason had gone back to where Warren and Sophia were sleeping.

“Jess, come here.” She did. Jay pointed at Sophia and Warren. “Notice a little movement in the hand area?”

Jessie looked, and had to bite down on her hand to keep from laughing. Warren’s right hand had slipped up from Sophia’s waist and had firmly attached itself to her left breast.

“Are they still asleep?” Jessie asked.

“Definitely”. Jason said. He grabbed his camera and snapped another shot, to Jessie’s delight. He put the camera down, as Jessie sat in the other couch, across from Warren and Sophia.

“Jay, look at this.” Jessie whispered. “She’s definitely breathing heavy.”

“Yeah, she is, isn’t she.”

“He’s making her horny in her sleep.”

Just then Sophia’s mouth opened, in a little ‘O’, as her breath got just a little ragged and gasping. She was still sound asleep.

“This is **perfect**,” Crash said, as he snapped one last picture of them. “Hmmm. End of the roll. I can’t wait to get these developed, and show them.”

“That Walgreen’s we saw in town has 1 hour developing.”

Crash looked at Jess, then at his watch, then at Jess. Then he grabbed the car keys, and said, “Be back about four!” and ran out with the roll of film in his hand.

Jessie laughed, turned on the TV at low volume, grabbed a cup of tea from the pot, and sat down in the other couch.

An hour later, Sophia stirred. She didn't quite open her eyes, but she was half awake, and her first sensation was a delicious pressure on her breast.

"MMMMmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm" she hummed, as she put her own hand on top of Warren's as he kneaded her breast in his sleep.

Then she heard soft giggling across from her. Her eyes fluttered open. "Hi, Jess," she said with a smile.

"Hi, yourself. Enjoying yourself?"

"Hmmmmmmmmmm.....yup."

"He's been doing that for an hour, in his sleep. It's been fascinating to watch."

"Ah, that explains the river running down my legs."

"I think it's leaking onto **my** legs," she heard from above her.

"Hiya, handsome," she looked up and said to Warren.

"Hi, beautiful," He looked over. "Hiya, She-Devil. Where's the Crashmeister?"

"Had to run an errand so he went back into town."

"Aah." Sophia flipped herself over so that she was facing him, and wrapped him up in a long kiss.

"Gag, gag, gag," Jessie joked. "Can't you guys wait until you get into the bedroom? Shit, I already had to clean up the dining room table after you guys."

"Oops," Sophia blushed.

"The dining room table? Cheez," Jess said. "Crash surmised that you guys somehow were so hot you couldn't make it to the bedroom."

"That's actually true." Sophia recounted the events of the day.

"That is so totally you two I can't believe it," Jessie stated. "Sounds very hot, in a Warren-and-Sophia kind of way."

Sophia cracked up. "It was memorable."

Jessie looked at Warren. "Warren, you OK?"

"Fine, Jess. Really."

"You seem a little withdrawn. Towards me."

Warren smiled at her. “No, Jess. I am **fine**. Better than fine. I’m just not totally **awake** yet.”

Jess laughed. “Good. I was afraid you were still feeling awkward, and towards me. I thought I was going to have to beat it out of you. I have the deep seated need to mercilessly ride your Prep Boy ass with my witty repartee, and if you were going to start getting all pissy on me, I was going to have to deck you.”

“What, the claws weren’t enough? I think one or both of you ladies is going to have to put salve on my back.” Jess and Sophie both cracked up. “No, Jess, I am **fine**. Really. First I got your Miss Sensible routine outside this morning, then Pookie and I had a talk about it.”

“Plus she danced nude with you and let herself be put up wet and rode hard on the table, just to seal the deal.”

Warren laughed. “There **is** that.”

Just then Crash came crashing in. “Evening, ladies and Warren.”

“Get em?” asked Jess.

“Yup.” He withdrew an envelope.

“Whatcha got?” Sophie asked?

“Pictures.” Jess smiled. “Jay finished a roll, so he took ‘em to be developed. Here.” Jessie started handing the pictures one by one to Sophia and Warren. “Those are your copies, Jay got two sets.”

The first bunch of pictures were leafed through. There were some mundane vacation-type ones, and some funny ones, like one of Warren holding a fish, a hilarious one of Warren and Jessie making dinner, and one that Warren took of Jason and Jessie dancing—well, **attempting** to dance—that had them all in stitches. And, of course, there was the obligatory Jay-feeds-Jess-grapes picture.

And then they came to the last three in the roll.

“These were taken this afternoon. This is what you guys looked like when we walked in the door,” Jessie said.

“Aw, how sweet,” said Sophia.

“And this is a little while later,” Jess said with the second picture, “after Warren let his fingers do the walking.” Sophia burst out laughing, as Warren blushed.

“And here, a few minutes after that,” Jessie handed over the last one, “Sophia either felt those fingers or was having a **really** good dream.” Now it was Warren’s turn to crack up, and Sophie’s to blush.

“I tell ya, sometimes a good photographer just has to walk in the room at the right time,” Crash quipped.

“These are fantastic,” Sophia said. “Do you have the negatives, Jay?”

“Sure.”

“I want them blown up. I want to hang them on my wall.” Sophia said.

“Yeah,” said Jess, “and maybe Jay can blow ‘em up for his first exhibition. I can see it now: The Photographs of Jason Kowalski: Warren Catches A Fish, Sunset Over The Lake, over here we have Dinner At Eight, we can call this one Grapes Before Bedtime, and, then, the piece de resistance, Sophie Gets Felt Up.”

Warren made dinner, which everyone enjoyed. Afterwards, he and Sophia decided to play a game of chess, while Jess and Jay curled up on the couch.

“Hey, look,” Sophie said at one point. “Jay and Jess are actually **cuddling**. I think I just saw her kiss his neck without **biting** it! I’m shocked and stunned. Where’s that damn camera?”

Whereupon Jess looked up over the couch and shot Sophia her “death” look, one she rarely used and just about **never** with Sophia. Sophia was a bit taken aback. Jess, getting upset at teasing? JESS? She looked at Warren, who shrugged his shoulders. They went back to the game.

After they finished—Sophia was all excited, because she won, a rare enough occurrence—Sophia and Warren headed off to the bedroom.

“You guys staying out here?” Sophia asked.

“Yeah. What, are you and Warren the only ones allowed to cuddle around here?” Jess said, with real venom.

“No, of course not,” Sophia said, taken aback again. “Well, good night,” she said, walking with Warren into the bedroom.

“What’s gotten into **her**?” Sophia said after they had closed the door.

“That’s a good question.”

“Well, I’m not going to push it now, she’s clearly not in the mood. I’ll ask her tomorrow what’s up. Meantime, come here, Snugglebear.” She grabbed him—by the crotch—and pulled him towards the bed.

“What, didn’t you get enough this morning and afternoon?” Warren joked.

“There is no such thing as ‘enough’, not with you.” She pulled his pants down, and kneeled in front of him. “Enough of **this** beautiful thing? Perish the thought,” she giggled.

They actually **were** tired from the day’s exertions, and passed out fairly early. When Warren woke up he glanced at the clock, and noticed it was only about 5:00. That didn’t surprise him, they had passed out about 9:00. And, as he became more awake, he realized something. Sophia was on top of him, sprawled out, her head on his shoulder, her arms and legs wrapped around him—and his dick was still buried in her pussy. Shit, he thought to himself, we really **were** tired. I’m amazed I was actually able to **sleep** with her wrapped around me—**all** of me—like this.

He looked at Sophia. She was the most gorgeous thing ever. She was flushed and panting a bit—big surprise, she’d probably been doing that all night—but she was definitely asleep.

Hmmmm. Well, here’s a wake up call for you, Pookie, he thought, as he gently rolled them over so he was on top of her, and then slowly withdrew his dick and slowly slid it back in.

He did it very slowly and very deliberately, trying to gently fuck her awake. It worked.

“Hmmmmmm...oooooooooh.....ooooooooohhhh...HUH?” Sophie said, now fully awake.

“Good morning, Pookie.”

“Warren?” She realized that he was fucking her. “Oh WOW what a way to wake up!”

“Well, we actually fell asleep with me in you, you were on top of me. Slept all night like that.” She looked at him, amazed. “I woke up and I was all the way in and hard as a rock. I’m gonna pass up an opportunity like **that**?”

She giggled, panting, as he, still slowly, moved in and out of her. “Well, that explains some of the **dreams** I was having last night.”

“Oh, really?”

“Oh, yeah. Baseball bats, telephone poles, a crosstown bus, the Empire State Building, all attached to you and inside me..” Warren laughed and buried his head into Sophia’s neck, so he wouldn’t laugh too loud. “Good boy. Mustn’t wake the neighbors,” as she pointed to the other bed.

“Oh, yeah? And what will the neighbors do if I bring you to orgasm, and you try to reach Quebec with your wailing?”

“Well, you’ll just have to prevent that, then, Studmuffin.” She reached her hands up to the back of his head. “Kiss me, you fool.”

He did, long and deep, and then nibbled on her lips and kept kissing her, as his cock plunged deep into her pussy. She was groaning and gasping, and even let off a couple of little wails into Warren’s mouth. “Oh, God, Warren, I’m gonna make my mother let you move into my room with me—I wanna wake up like this every morning.”

Warren just laughed. “Close?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Hold on. And if you feel the need to scream, kiss me first.” He picked up the pace, as she wrapped her legs tightly around his hips. “Oh, Jesus, Warren,” Sophie moaned. “I guess you’re awake now, huh?”

He just smiled, and kissed her, as she moaned into his mouth. Then, he felt her body stiffen, her back arched, and her pussy spasmed around his dick. He watched her cum, still pumping, and then finished himself off with a little assistance from Sophia’s very well controlled muscles.

“Shit, Soph,” he said after they had finished, “I think you bit my tongue.”

She giggled, “But I didn’t wake the neighbors.” Warren looked over at Jay and Jess, still sound asleep. “And believe me, you really made me want to scream.”

Warren smiled at her, and then quickly withdrew and went to disentangle.

“In a rush, Snugglebear?”

“When guys wake up, shortly thereafter, they usually have to pee. When guys wake up and right away fuck their girlfriends silly, they **really** have to pee.”

Sophia giggled, and watched him run to the bathroom.

He actually had to do number two, also, so he was in the bathroom for a bit. When he came out, he saw Sophia on the couch, wearing a tee-shirt and a pair of panties, and clutching her long robe. She had next to her his underwear, pair of shorts, and shirt. “Here, Snugglebear, put these on.”

“What’s up, Pookie?”

“I’m in love, I’ve been well-fucked, and I want to take my man down to the lake and watch the sunrise.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He grinned.

While he got dressed, she went into the kitchen and poured tea from the pot she had brewed into the two travel cups that they had brought with them. Then she walked out to the living room.

“Ready to show a pretty girl a pretty sunrise, mister?”

They walked, hand in hand, down to the dock.

REPERCUSSIONS AND REALIZATIONS (Chapter 44)

They sat there, cuddling close to one another, occasionally kissing, and chatting as the sun rose over the lake.

“You know, it feels like it might end up being hot enough to go **swimming** in this lake,” Warren said.

“Yeah, finally. 65 degree days when you’re on vacation in **July** can be a bit of a drag.” Sophie picked up her travel mug. “I’m just about out of tea. You?”

“Pretty much. You want I should get a refill?”

“I’ll take care of it, Romeo, you just make sure the sun don’t set without me.”

Warren laughed. “I think we’ve got some leeway with that, since it’s only 6:30 AM.” Sophia gave him a kiss on the cheek, and stood up, heading up the path to the cabin with the two teacups.

“Morning, Jess,” Sophia said upon seeing her friend on the couch. “What’s up?”

“Not much.” Jess had a strange look on her face. “Hey, Soph, where’s Warren?”

“Down on the dock. I just came up to refill our tea.” She giggled. “I woke up this morning with him gently fucking me. Apparently we fell asleep with him still in me, if you can believe that, and when he woke up he decided to wake **me** up with a little nookie. Then, after we were done, we went down to the dock to see the sun rise.”

Jessie got a little faraway look in her eyes. “That sounds positively lovely.” Sophie blinked. There was **no** sarcasm in that comment, and Jessie had never been a romantic-interlude type of person. That’s why she fit so well with Crash—they were both aggressive, sarcastic, biting, non-romantic people.

“Look, Soph, I need to ask you a favor,” Jessie said, very seriously. “Can I take Warren’s tea down to him? I need to talk to him. As long as I’m not interrupting anything, of course.”

“Nah, the sun’s up and the lovey-dovey stuff had petered out, anyway.” Jessie laughed. “We were just going to discuss what we might like to do today, is all. We can do that later.” Sophia looked at Jessie quizzically, because Jess had an obvious look of relief on her face. “Jess, is something going on?”

“All will be revealed, Sophia, I promise. But I need to talk to Warren first, especially with him on the dock down there, because I need to talk to him privately. Trust me, Sophia, I’m done with him, I talk to you.”

“OK.” She went and filled Warren’s travel mug and handed it to Jess. “Just don’t give him any more hickeys, OK?” she laughed.

Jessie got a very strange look on her face. “I think I’ve sworn off hickeys for a while. Thanks, Soph,” and out the door she went, leaving a very confused Sophia in her wake.

“Hey, Prep Stud.” Warren looked around, and saw Jess coming down the path. She got to the dock and handed Warren the travel mug. “Compliments of Sophia’s Kitchen—or teapot, at the very least—and Jessica Express Delivery.”

Warren laughed. “Morning, She-Devil. No offense, but what happened to Sophia?”

Jessie sat next to Warren. “I asked her if I could borrow you for a bit. I need to talk to you.”

“Sure thing, Jess. What’s on your mind?”

Jessica took a deep breath. “Remember the little conversation that we had on this very dock about 24 hours ago?” Warren nodded. “Well, I have a confession to make. I lied to you. Now, the reason I lied to you is because I couldn’t tell you the truth yesterday. Jason and I had a long talk—a series of them, actually—yesterday, so now I can tell you why and how I lied to you.”

She took another deep breath, and stared out at the lake, not looking at Warren. “I told you, yesterday, that you were the only one affected by what happened the other night. That was a lie. I was affected. I was profoundly affected, and I found out later yesterday that Jay was, also.”

“The first thing you need to know is that I love Jay with all my heart and soul. But something’s been missing. I knew it, and he knew it, but neither of us knew **what** the problem was. So we just did our thing. It was very comfortable—the way we related to

each other, the way we acted, the way we made love. It was comfortable—our relationship has always been comfortable.”

“And then I went to bed with you. Fun, right? A harmless diversion? That’s what I told you yesterday, right?” Warren nodded. “No,” Jessie said, staring down at her hands. “It wasn’t. What that little ‘harmless diversion’ turned out to be was the greatest night of my life—sexually speaking at least, and possibly of all time.” Warren’s jaw hit the ground. Jessie was staring down at her hands, and wringing them. “You spun my head around. You touched me in a place that I didn’t even know **existed**. It was awesome, and devastating.”

Warren didn’t know what to say. Jess didn’t give him a chance to think of something. “Look, I meant it when I said I love Jason. And I **don’t** love you, not in that way, I’m not **in love** with you, and I never could be. But making love to you was earth-shattering.”

“So, I’m out with Jason yesterday. And we both know something’s not quite right, OK? So, we decided we needed to have a big talk, and put **everything** on the table, everything we were feeling and thinking, with no resentment or recriminations allowed. So I told him.”

Warren gasped. “Y’know, that’s the reaction I thought I’d get from **him**,” Jessie said with a small smile, looking at Warren for the first time. “But he didn’t. He said he knew what I meant, because his night with Sophia was the best **he’s** ever had.”

“Oh my sweet Jesus,” Warren muttered.

“Yeah, what you said. Anyhow, so there we are, me telling him his best friend is better in bed than he is, and **him** telling me that **my** best friend is better than **I** am. We kicked that around for a while, and we discovered that ‘better’ wasn’t necessarily the right word. Different was.”

“It was the little things. You’re a gentle and tender soul, Warren, and so is that girlfriend of yours. There was one point where you were eating me out, and I saw you look up at me to see if I was enjoying myself—which I was—and you looked up at me with this little grin on your face and a twinkle in your eye. And there was one point where we were doing it, and you reached down and just caressed my tit for a bit. You brushed the hair back out of my eyes at one point. Jason told me that, at one point, he was doing Sophia and she looked up at him and smiled at him, and kind of touched and rubbed his arm. Little things. Even the thing you told me about, when you and Sophia caught each other’s eye, and she winked at you.”

“You let your guard down **completely** during sex, Warren. Apparently so does Sophia. Not only do Jay and I **not**, we’re not sure we even know how. You know the joke about the biting and clawing? Now, it **is** true that I occasionally lose control and do that involuntarily—that night is an example, I really didn’t mean to give you a hickey—but somehow that got to be how I am. Jess is an animal in bed, and Jay is a piledriver. That’s

what we do. One thing Jay has on you, Warren, is that he has more stamina. He can go upwards of 45 minutes and that's **before** he's had a cum."

Warren gaped at her. "Wow."

"Yeah. So, that's what we do. Minimal foreplay, he mounts me, and rams into me for three quarters of an hour while I bite and claw. The Crashmeister and the She-Devil. It was always good. Don't get me wrong for a second, he's **good**, and he'd say the same about me. But I found out the other night that it's not enough."

"And, when we were talking, we realized that it's not just sex. The other day, we walked into the living room, and you and Sophia were curled up on the couch, she was snuggled into you, and you had your arm around her, and you were both reading. This, of course, is the opportunity for me to crack wise about the lovebirds, right? Well, I don't remember if I did, but my heart wasn't in it."

"When we were talking, I reminded Jay of this little scene, and I wondered why we never did that, or anything like it, and he said because that wasn't us. And I asked him **why** it wasn't us, and he said that he didn't know."

"Ah," said Warren, "now I know why you were so defensive when Sophie cracked wise about you guys cuddling last night."

"Yeah," Jessie admitted, "and I **am** going to apologize to her for that. Anyway, this is what we figured out. Somehow, we got locked into roles. Jay and I are both 'on' a lot of the time; we're natural performers. It's almost like playing a part. You and Soph aren't like that."

Warren laughed. "I'm not quite so sure about that. Whose the couple that goes out and ice dances in front of a few thousand people? Not to mention swing dance clinics at the prom."

Jessie laughed. "You guys aren't performers, you're exhibitionists. Really. You do **your** thing, and allow other people to watch. Hey, look, I know a little bit about ice dancing, thanks to Sophie. I see the difference between your ice dancing and a lot of your competition. How was it that your friend Christine described you guys?"

"An oasis of romantic true-love dancing in a desert of overly-theatrical bad mock-acting."

"Right. Do you guys **ever** act? Do you ever play a role, on or off the ice? You don't have to answer, because we both know it's no. Jay and I are locked into roles—Crash and the She-Devil—that really are only **part** of who we are. But somehow they became almost all of who we are."

"I've seen the real Jason enough to know that **that** is who I'm in love with. And Jay has seen the real me enough to know the same thing. The funny thing is that I got **all** of **you**,

in one night, no hesitation, no reservations. You gave me everything you had. And I still haven't recovered. And Sophie did the same to Jay."

"So, Jay and I were talking, and I found out something that I never knew, after sleeping with the guy for a year and a half—his stamina is forced. He holds back. I just thought it took a lot for him to cum. He was in Sophie for fifteen minutes and came. Because she told him to. She said to him, 'Don't kill yourself, go ahead and cum, we have plenty of time.' And I never even noticed he was holding back."

"Ah, that's because she's used to me," Warren said. "I do **not** have Jay's stamina, so I try to hold back if I can, and she's always telling me to 'let myself enjoy it, she's fine' and the like." They both laughed.

"The difference being," Jess quipped, "that by that point she's already cum seventeen times from your tongue." Warren burst out laughing.

"Anyhow, since we decided to not hold anything back, I asked Jay—why do you hold back? Why don't we ever have much foreplay? Why are you so aggressive when we fuck? And he asked me—why do you bite and claw me all the time? Why are you always growling, why do you never smile? Why don't you touch me? Why don't we ever kiss in the middle of sex?"

"And we kicked that one around a while, and the answer we came up with was that we thought the other person **expected** us to act the way we were. And we were too afraid to break the pattern, **and** too afraid to ask the other person to break the pattern."

"Until you, with me, and Sophie, with Jay, broke the pattern."

Jessie stared out into the lake for a minute. "Why did you give yourself so much to me that night?"

"I suppose it's just because that's the way I am. Look, Jess, I might not be 'in love' with you, and you're not my girlfriend, but I **do** love you. I also trust you. "

"Yeah, but I love and trust Jay."

"Yes, but I'm naturally open with people I love and trust. I don't think you're naturally open with **yourself**. I **know** Jay isn't."

"I know. I'm still a little amazed that you would give me so much of yourself, in what was supposed to be a meaningless fling."

"It wasn't meaningless. Harmless, maybe—in theory, anyhow—but never meaningless. Why did you want to sleep with me, Jess?"

"Because I thought it would be good."

“Why’d you think that?”

“Sophia’s descriptions.”

“Is that all?” Jessie just looked at him. “If Sophie was describing all her fantastic sex, but you **hated** me, would you still have wanted to?”

“No. No I wouldn’t.”

“Right. Jess, I’m the **second** person you’ve ever slept with. You don’t sleep around. You held Aaron off for two years.”

“True.”

He looked at her. “Jess, it’s called **making love**, remember? Now, you didn’t get all I have to give. There’s no way you could’ve; your name is not Sophie. There’s a huge part of me that is reserved for her. But you got as much as I could give to anyone not named Sophie. And you have to understand one thing, that there is not a single other person in the universe that I would have trusted enough to do that with.”

“I think I’ve just been complimented.”

Warren just laughed. “Y’know what, Jess? **I** can see behind the She-Devil exterior. I always have been able to, from the first day we met. Remember that day?”

“Yeah.”

“One of my first impressions of you was that this girl is a whole lot sweeter than she lets on.”

“Prep Boy, there you go, ruining my rep again,” she said with a smile.

“Uh-huh. But I have to confess that sometimes seeing behind the She-Devil is hard work.”

“Yeah.”

“So, what are you and Jay going to do?”

“It really turned out to be a nice talk, after all the bad stuff was out on the table. We’ve made a commitment to open up to one another. Now I have to get over my extreme hatred of appearing vulnerable, that’s all.”

“Vulnerable to the outside world and vulnerable to your boyfriend are two different things, Jess.”

“I know. That’s why we ended up on the couch last night. We never made love. The last person I made love with was **you**, and that’s an obstacle right now, because I do believe we’re both scared. However, we ended up on the couch. We cuddled, we talked. I even gave him a foot massage, because his feet were cramping. We even eschewed the only romantic thing we ever do—the grapes—because it would fall back into the old pattern. He rubbed my back. We kissed more than we usually do.”

“How was it?”

“Soft and warm and very nice and absolutely terrifying.” Warren laughed. “At first. Then it got better.”

“I think you’ll be OK, Jess.”

“I do too.” She thought for a minute. “If we can make this work, I would say that you gave me a wonderful gift the other night.”

“The biggest problem is this—most of me believes that Jay and I can work this out, and then it will be better than ever, and that’s a worthy goal to be working on. But the evil part of me just wants **you** again.”

Warren laughed. “Work out things with Jay, will you please? Then we can talk. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’d do it again?”

“Maybe. We’ll see. Not before some of this crap gets cleared up, though.”

Jessie leaned in conspiratorially towards Warren. “Did you know that Sophie’s deepest, darkest, sexual fantasy is a threesome?” Warren stared at her, and then cracked up laughing. “Mine is, too.” Jess added.

“That sounds intriguing.” Warren said with a grin.

“PIG!” She laughed. Then she stood up. “Now I have to go drop this load on Sophie.” She leaned over and kissed Warren. “Thanks, Warren. You’re the second-best.”

Warren cracked up laughing, “Same goes for you.”

She smiled at him, and then headed up the path.

He sat out there for quite a long time, just thinking and enjoying the morning. A couple birds kept him company from a tree branch above. He thought about going up for his fishing pole, but just didn’t feel like getting up. He knew Jess—and probably Crash—were talking to Sophia now, and he didn’t want to interrupt.

After a while, he heard footsteps coming down the path, and he looked up.

“Hi Pookie.”

“Hi Snugglebear.” She sat down next to him, and wrapped her arm around his. “You OK?”

“Yeah. A little stunned, but OK.”

“I know. Who knew we were **that** good?” They both laughed. Then Sophie got serious. “I just hope we didn’t ruin things for them forever.”

“I don’t think we did. Was Crash there when you guys were talking?”

“Yeah. I think he’s a little afraid to face you.”

“Ah, fuck that. I’ll have to fix that, pronto.”

“Listen, here’s the deal. We’re going to go up there and get properly dressed, then you and I are taking the car and getting lost for the day.”

“Sounds like a plan. We’ve barely left the cabin since we got up here.”

“Right. Let’s go exploring. And let’s leave the cuddling to **them**.”

Warren laughed. “Interesting twist after interesting twist.”

Sophia and Warren had a very nice day out, exploring that part of Maine, and just generally being two kids in love enjoying the day. And, when they came back, something was definitely different.

“Warren,” Sophia said when the other two were out of earshot, “I don’t think I’ve **ever** seen Jess **grin** that much.”

“I know. And Jay looks pretty satisfied with himself. Y’think those two old dogs taught themselves a couple of new tricks, or what?”

Things loosened up considerably after that. Sophia and Warren ended up naked-dancing again, but this time to fast music, and this time with an audience. “After all that’s happened, I still think that my enduring memory of this cabin is going to be Sophie shaking her groove thang bare-assed to Little Brown Jug,” Jessie quipped. “Just like I told you, Warren—exhibitionists.”

And they did experiment a little more. They kind of made an agreement that as long as it happened **there**, in the cabin, it was all right. There was one night when they all ended up

in the same bed—“Crowded, but cozy” was Sophie’s verdict—doing the opposite partner, until after about two hours when they were right in the middle and Jason yelled “Switch!” and he and Warren did. “Shit, and I don’t think they even missed a stroke,” Jess observed. And there was a second night, shortly before they left, that they **did** experiment with three-way, with the fourth person close at hand to be groped. “Now I think I’ve had every fantasy fulfilled,” Sophia observed.

“Except for that whole Fenway park thing, of course,” Warren quipped.

By the time they left, the four of them were closer than ever.

“Y’know,” Crash observed, “I’m pretty sure I can get this place for these two weeks just about any year I want it, as long as I tell my Uncle early enough.”

“Make that reservation for next year now!” Jess exclaimed.

CHANGES IN THE FAMILY (Chapter 45)

Right after they got back, Sophia was waiting for Warren to come to her house so they could go to the ice rink. He had gotten his license right after they had gotten back. “Finally, I’m not the only child around here,” he quipped.

They got to the rink and they were putting their skates on. June was there, waiting for them.

“Guys, I’ve got an idea. I want to scrap the Sinatra program.” Warren said.

“Huh?” Sophia asked. “It’s half way choreographed!”

“Yeah, I know, and if you don’t want to, we won’t. But I really like the big band free we’re doing for the Junior series, and I thought I wanted to do something similar for the Senior Free we’re doing at nationals. So, I made a couple cuts, all Glenn Miller, and I really like it. No slow stuff, just mid-tempo and fast.”

“What cuts?”

“String of Pearls and Little Brown Jug.”

“Got it?” Warren nodded at her. “Put it in.”

They got on the ice, and Warren popped the CD of the cuts he had made into the CD player. As was their habit, they played it a couple of times, just skating around together on the ice, and playing with a few basic ideas.

“You’re right,” Sophia agreed, “I like this better. June?”

“I agree. That’s a killer cut, Warren.”

“And just think,” Sophia said mischievously, “I’ll be shaking my grove thang to the end of Little Brown Jug. Jess oughtta like that.”

Warren laughed. “You just keep your costume on, Pookie.”

“Whassamatter, lover boy, you don’t want to naked ice dance in front of 15 thousand paying customers and a nationwide TV audience at Nationals?”

“Actually, I’d love to, but we’d lose a couple tenths on the presentation mark when the judges find out that you can’t properly point your tits like you do your toes.”

“Lessee—ice dancing nude in front of thousands with my sweetie in a cold ice rink. I **guarantee** my tits would be pointed.”

“Yeah, but can you make them bounce and jiggle in unison?” She just hit him that time.

They walked into Sophia’s house, and found Dan, her mother's boyfriend, there, along with a girl a couple years younger than Sophia.

“I’m glad you’re home,” Ellen said. “Hi Warren. Sophia, we figured it was time you two finally met. This is Dan’s daughter, Katherine.”

“Hi, Sophia, I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Me, too,” Sophia smiled warmly. “This is Warren, my sweetie.”

“Hi, Warren. I’ve heard a lot about **you**, too.”

“My reputation precedes me,” Warren grinned.

“How was skating?” Ellen asked.

“Great, considering I had to put up with yet another brainstorm from Christopher Dean over here. Scrap the partially choreographed free dance, I’ve got a better idea. And, since it was **him**, it **was** a better idea, because he’s always right, infuriating as **that** is.” Sophia was grinning the whole time.

“Hey, what can I say. I’ve got Glenn Miller on the brain. And that music will lend itself to a killer ending.”

“Let’s go out into the living room,” Ellen suggested.

“This seems like a family thing. You want I should get lost?” Warren whispered in Ellen’s ear.

“Of course not, Warren, you **are** family,” she smiled at him.

“I saw you guys on TV this winter at Nationals. I’m a figure skating freak, you know,” Katherine confessed. “I was watching it with a couple of friends and got all goofy ‘Hey, that’s my Dad’s girlfriend’s daughter! Wow!’”

Everyone laughed. “The funny thing is,” Warren told her, “they almost never show juniors on TV, and nobody told us they were showing us. We’re watching what we thought was going to be the Senior free dance, and there **we** were. We got as goofy as you did.”

“It’s a good thing my sweetie here has a compulsion about videotaping all televised figure skating, or we might have missed getting it on tape,” Sophie said.

Katherine giggled. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you guys. I’ve met Eric and Tara, but kept missing you.”

“My impossible schedule,” Sophia laughed. “Our coach keeps begging us to train more, and we keep telling her, not until they come up with the thirty hour day. So, Katherine, how old are you again?”

“I turned fourteen in January. Oh, and call me Kate, everyone else does.”

“January? What date?” Sophia asked.

“The fourteenth.”

“Cool. Exactly three days after Warren’s.”

“We Capricorns have to stick together,” Warren grinned.

“How old are you?” Kate asked. “I don’t remember if Dad ever told me that.”

“I turned seventeen in May. Baby-face, here, turned sixteen in January. I’m a cradle-robber, you see,” she said to Kate’s laughter.

“I’m going to be a freshman this fall—I take it you’re going to be a senior?” Sophia nodded. “And Warren’s going to be a junior?”

“No, Warren’s going to be a senior.”

“So, he’s almost exactly two years older than I am but he’s three grades ahead of me?”

“I started school a year early,” Warren told her.

“Y’see, Kate,” Sophia told her, “if you stick around long enough, you will find out, that when God was passing out brains, Warren kept sneaking back into line and got seconds. And thirds. And fourths.” Kate giggled, while Warren hit Sophia with a pillow.

“You guys go to Oceanview, too?”

“I do. Warren goes to St. Mike’s.”

“Aaah. A preppy.”

“Yup.”

“Well,” Ellen interjected, “there was a reason we wanted to make sure you guys met as soon as possible, because you’re going to be seeing a lot more of each other.” She smiled at Dan. “We’re getting married.”

“WHAT?” Sophie jumped up and wrapped her mother in a bear hug. “Mom, that’s fantastic!” She walked over to Dan, and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Welcome to the crazy family, Dan.”

“Congratulations, you guys,” Warren echoed.

Then everyone noticed that Kate was not sharing in the enthusiasm. “Married?” she said hesitantly.

“Are you all right, honey?” Dan asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I thought you liked Ellen.”

“I love Ellen, I really do. But married? I mean.....I’m happy for you guys....I do want you to be happy, Dad....but...I....” she faltered.

Sophie looked at Kate. “Your mom left when you were five, and you don’t see her much, right?”

“Yeah. She’s whacko. I prefer to avoid her if at all possible.”

“So,” Sophia continued, “For nine years, it’s been You and Dad Against The World, right?”

Kate relaxed and smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s it. I **am** happy for you guys, but this is a huge change.”

“Sophia, you’re an insightful young lady,” Dan supplied.

“I keep telling her she should go into psychology instead of meteorology,” Warren said.

“Ah, I’m gonna combine the two and become The Weather Shrink. I’ll have my own radio show. ‘You need to explore your inner child, so I suggest you go run barefoot through the park tomorrow, when it will be 75 degrees and sunny with a light breeze from the northwest.’” Everyone cracked up at that.

Kate smiled. “I’ll be fine. Congratulations, guys. I just need to adjust.” She thought for a minute. “When?”

“ASAP. Before the summer is out. Small ceremony, just you kids,” Ellen offered.

“That’s fast. Where are we going to live?” Kate asked.

“Here,” Ellen smiled. “Plenty of room.”

“Can I ask a selfish question?” Kate asked.

“Sure,” Dan said.

“Is there a room for me? I’m used to having my own room.”

“We don’t, at the moment, have an extra room. We thought about putting you in with Tara, but she’s eight and that wouldn’t be fair to you. We also thought about putting you in with Sophia—her room is huge—but that probably wouldn’t work, either, because Sophia needs her privacy.”

“Uh-huh,” Kate said with a huge grin, looking back and forth at Sophia and Warren.

“So, this is what we came up with. We have a basement, that we started finishing part of, and never finished.”

“Yeah,” interjected Sophia, “there’s a room down there, and it’s huge, but there’s nothing in it.”

“It needs a finished ceiling, and a few other touches. We were going to make it into a playroom, but we never did. But it’s heated, there’s electricity in there, we just have to touch it up. It even has its own entrance from the outside. It would make a terrific bachelorette pad.”

“I’ve got some guys that are going to come help,” Dan said. “We’re going to fix it all up.”

“However,” Ellen looked at Kate, “Sophia gets first dibs on that room.”

“That’s fair. She’s got a boyfriend, she needs a bachelorette pad more than I do,” Kate smiled.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Sophia smiled.

“You’re old enough,” Ellen said, “and I know what’s going on. The house is going to be a lot more crowded now. You need your privacy. Nobody will bother you down there. I expect Warren will practically move in, now.” Everyone cracked up at that.

“And, you, Kate, will get Sophie’s room,” Ellen said.

“You’ll love it,” Sophia said.

“Can I see?”

“Sure. C’mon, Warren, let’s show the kid the make-out pad we’re bequeathing to her.”

Kate loved the room—“it’s huge!”—and seemed to be a lot more at ease, now that the living arrangements were coming together.

“It will be weird, though. From two people in a house to six will be a big adjustment.”

“Luckily, it’s a big house,” Sophia laughed. “And it’s six-and-a-half, because Warren’s here a lot.”

Warren was reading a book. “I even have half my book collection here, because I read more here than I do in my own house. This one’s Sophie’s, though.”

“I must admit, I do enjoy the thought of having a big sister. I don’t have a sister, I don’t have a mother, I just have Dad. And there’s certain things a girl can’t ask her Dad.”

“About what?” Sophia asked.

“About.....well.....you know.” She blushed and glanced at Warren.

Warren picked up on it. “You ladies want me to make myself scarce?” he grinned.

“No,” Kate smiled. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“First of all,” Sophia said, “it is not intruding, and Warren is never upset if I send him away to have girl talk, and he will leave now if we want him to. Second, though, you have to understand that you don’t **have** to send Warren away. He’s not like most guys, he has more female friends than male friends, and he gets involved in more girl talk than most **girls**. Plus, he’s a great listener, offers great advice, and will never make fun of you or say that a question you ask is silly.”

“OK. I suppose I have to get used to him.” Kate smiled at Warren, then turned back to Sophia. “You guys.....you know.....do it?”

Sophia smiled. "Every chance we get."

"What does your mother say?"

"Change your own sheets, dear," Warren cracked up, as Kate looked at Sophia in amazement. "She's known all along."

"And she doesn't **mind**?"

"Nope."

"Wow," Kate said. "I think if I was having sex, my Dad would kill me."

"I am not you, trust me. I have a little bit of a past." She outlined most of it for Kate.

"Wow. And you're so **healthy** now, or so it seems."

"It's real. I have changed a whole hell of a lot since I was your age."

"And I take it, after all that, your Mom figured that having sex with a guy that really loved you was no big deal?"

"Exactly. Plus, she loves Warren to death, that makes a difference."

"So you guys weren't virgins when you hooked up?"

"**I** was not a virgin," Sophia offered.

Kate looked at Warren. "You **were**?"

"Guilty as charged," Warren quipped. "Pookie over there was my first. And, oh, what a first it was."

"I seduced him," Sophia said with a gleam in her eye. "He didn't know what hit him."

"True, all true." Warren agreed.

Kate looked back and forth between them, wide-eyed. Sophia added, "There's a lesson for you, Kate. When you really figure out what you want, grab it. And don't let it go. Even if it squirms."

"I **never** squirmed."

"OK, so you flinched."

“That was because you made me **deaf**.” Kate’s eyes just got bigger, as she looked at Warren. He just laughed. “Kate, let’s just say we’d probably better make sure they soundproof that bachelorette pad downstairs because, if it’s not, you’re going to have yourself some high-decibel entertainment.”

Kate looked at them blankly. Sophie smiled at her. “I scream during sex.”

“Really, **really** loud,” Warren embellished.

Kate just shook her head. “I am **way** too sweet and innocent for this.”

Sophia laughed. “Are you really?”

“Well.....” Kate smiled. “I am a virgin, if that’s what you mean. But call me intensely curious.”

“Just wait until it feels right, Kate. Don’t rush in out of curiosity. Trust me on this one.”

“OK. Actually, I don’t know if I’m actually curious to **do** it. Knowing what it’s all about would be nice. I know next to nothing. I know what sex is, that’s about it.”

“What do you think sex is?” Sophia asked her.

Kate blushed furiously. “Well, you know. The guy takes his thing and sticks it in...”

“Ok, that’s intercourse. What about other kinds of sex?”

“What do you mean?” Kate was confused.

“Well, like oral sex. Fellatio. Cunnilingus.”

Kate looked up. “That last word, I asked my Dad once what it meant, and he went off on me. He said it was dirty, and never to say it again.”

“Did you ask any friends what it was?” Sophia asked her.

“I actually don’t have a lot of friends. I keep to myself.”

“Well, cunnilingus is oral sex with the female being the recipient,” Sophia told her.

“I don’t get it.”

“He uses his tongue...down there.”

“HUH?”

“Yup.”

Kate blushed furiously. “Does Warren do that to you?”

“Frequently, and with great skill and enthusiasm, as a matter of fact.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s fantastic. One of the best feelings a girl can have, if the guy knows what he’s doing, and Warren **does**, believe me.”

“Wow.” Kate thought for a minute. “Dad said that only dirty people did stuff like that.”

Sophie got a look in her eyes that Warren recognized—barely restrained fury, restrained because Kate was not the object of it.

“Well, Kate, your father’s wrong. What else did he tell you? Anything about masturbation?”

“Huh?”

“Playing with yourself.”

“Oooh, my Dad **caught** me doing that. I was alone in my room, and he walked in on me with my hand down my pants. I wasn’t even **doing** much of anything.. And he took my head off. Said good girls don’t do that.”

Warren looked at Sophia. She was **really** steaming.

“He’s wrong.” She looked at her glass of soda. “I’m empty. Anyone else need a refill?” Kate and Warren demurred.

Sophia got downstairs. Dan and Ellen were in the living room. Sophia filled her glass, and walked into the living room, visibly trying to control herself.

She walked up to Dan, and hugged him from behind. “Look, I want to make sure you know, Dan, that I’ve always liked you a lot, and I think you’re great for my Mom, and I’m thrilled you guys are getting married.”

Dan looked at her, bemused. “Why, thanks, Sophia.”

“Good. I wanted to make sure you knew that before I took your head off. WHAT the FUCK are you doing to your daughter?”

“What?”

“We’re up there and she’s asking me about sex. She’s fourteen years old, and she doesn’t know jack! She’s got no close friends she can confide in, she’s got no mother, and she

asks her Dad, the only person she can talk to, the simple definition of a word like cunnilingus, and he jumps down her throat and says ‘Don’t talk about that, that’s dirty’? You walk in on her masturbating—and if Mom ever walked in my room without knocking I’d kill her—you walk in on her, and tell her that good girls don’t do that? WHAT are you thinking??”

“Look, Sophia, I don’t need a seventeen year old girl who’s too big for her britches to tell me how to raise my fourteen year old daughter! If you’re going to be my stepdaughter, you’re going to learn some manners.”

“Not hardly.”

“WHO are YOU to talk to me this way?” Dan’s fury was almost matching Sophia’s.

“Who am I, Dan? I’ll tell you who I am. I’m a peer counselor. That’s a program we have at school, where kids can come in and talk to other kids about their problems. We’re trained in some of this, so we can handle some of these problems, and we have advisors and a good Psychologist available. But I’m a Peer Counselor, so the kids come to me first. You know what I see, there, Dan? Rape victims. Victims of abuse, like I was. Pregnant girls who have no clue. Lots of other things.”

“Now, I was a special case when I was in trouble, because Mom was never closed about stuff like this—my problems had other causes. But 90% of the kids that I see with problems that relate to relationships or sex are **repressed**. They make bad decisions because they never got the information needed to make good decisions.”

“I’m just trying to protect her,” Dan said, his anger cooled.

“That’s my point. You **can’t**. You can only give her the support to protect herself. You aren’t doing that, Dan. And what you’re doing is only ‘protecting’ her from the feelings she’s getting from her own body. And that is wrong, wrong, wrong.”

“Sophia, she’s only fourteen.”

“Yeah, Dan, and when I was her age my virginity was two years gone and I was getting beat up and forced to have sex regularly. You know that. Look at your daughter, Dan. She’s not a little girl any more. Hormones are hormones, whether you’re 14 or 44. You can deal with yours. I’ve learned how to deal with mine, after much pain. Kate doesn’t have a clue.”

“Listen. Every kid knows about intercourse. I’m sure you had the birds and bees talk with her. And I’m sure you said something about ‘that’s for older, married people’ or something like that.”

“Something like that.”

“Right. So, now intercourse is The Forbidden Fruit. Anything short of intercourse, like oral sex or masturbation, has been defined as ‘dirty’. And her hormones are going full tilt. This is a fucking recipe for disaster. Trust me. And I’m sure that you’ve never said a word about birth control.”

“Abstinence is birth control,” Dan said peevishly.

“Bullshit. You rely on that—especially if she thinks anything else that might get her off is dirty—and you’re gonna be a grandfather before your time.” She took a deep breath. “Or something a whole hell of a lot worse.

She looked down at her hands. “I lost one, you know. One of the girls I counsel. About a month before school got out. I haven’t talked about this with anyone except Warren, because it’s extremely painful to talk about. But I lost one, a freshman, not much older than Kate is. She was pregnant. She wasn’t completely sure just quite how this had happened. And, since she was either in denial or ignorant—I’m not sure which—the pregnancy was not confirmed until it was too late to abort it. And, faced with telling her father that she was four months pregnant, she took the easier way out. She slit her wrists. And now she’s dead.”

Ellen and Dan gasped.

“And the stories she told me of her father, Dan, I’m sorry to say, sound a lot like Kate describing you.”

The room got quiet then. Sophie stood up.

“Dan, before you and mom walk down the aisle—and I hope you **do**,” she smiled, “but, before you do, you need to know something. Any question Kate **ever** asks me about sex is going to get a straight and honest answer, to the best of my ability. You need to know that, and you will not be able to stop me, and nothing you do to me will stop me; and if you try to stop me **here** then when she gets to Oceanview she can march right into the peer counseling office and ask me **there**. I will be **darned** if I have to go to another funeral for a pregnant teenaged suicide and it’s my **stepsister**.”

“Oh, and one other thing—when Kate asked me what cunnilingus was, I told her.”

“Did she ask you anything else about it?”

“Yeah, she asked me if I had ever had it done to me, and if I liked it. And I answered her.”

With that, she marched up the stairs.

“Damn, I knew she saw some bad shit in that peer counseling office, but not like **this**,” Ellen said.

“Be that as it may, Ellen, I could have used some support there. She’s your daughter.”

“Dan, she’s right.” Dan just stared at her. “Look, I almost lost Sophia, because of my mistakes. Now, I didn’t make the same mistakes you are, but I certainly recognize them—because **my** father made them. Sex is wrong, this is dirty, etc etc. And I ended up pregnant and married at 18 to a violent drunk.”

Dan just stared at her.

“I never knew you treated Kate this way. I would have said something myself. I know you don’t want to hear it, but Sophia is **right**. And she’s right about something else—if you marry me, and Kate moves into this house, she will be living in the house with a sexually active seventeen year old. Sophia sleeps with Warren, in this house, that’s the way it is, and that’s the way it’s gonna be. I came too damn close to losing her to worry about a little sex with a guy she loves. You need to figure out if you can deal with that.”

“Part of it is fear,” Dan said. “Sometimes I don’t know **what** to tell her, so I try to push off her questions. Not the right way, either, apparently. Shit, Ellen, it can be tough being the single dad of a teenage girl. Sometimes I just get tongue tied, and then I say the wrong thing.”

Ellen smiled. “That’s easy. Now you can say, ‘that’s a girl thing. Talk to Ellen.’ Or Sophia, for that matter.”

“I guess her talking to Sophia makes me nervous.”

“I can see why, but, really, it shouldn’t. Because Sophia lost her virginity way too young and for the wrong reasons, and she **knows** it. She won’t be advising Kate to jump in the sack with some guy too hastily. She’s told me many times she wishes she had saved it for Warren.”

“Yeah, but even she and Warren started too young, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Yeah, but would they have if she was still a virgin? I doubt it. Besides which, she and Warren together are special, and Kate will figure that out quick. Look, Sophia’s a bit.... unrestrained.....I know, but she’s sensible. She’s been through too much, and seen too much at peer counseling, not to be.”

The kids were on their way downstairs.

“I love the room,” Kate enthused. “Dad, are you all right?”

“Yeah, Katey, I’m fine. Did Sophia tell you she read me the riot act?”

“No. What?”

Sophia looked chagrined. “When I came downstairs, I took your father’s head off for making you ignorant and repressed about sex.”

“WHAT?” Kate screamed. “Oh, Sophia, why did you do that?”

“It’s OK, Kate. I needed to hear it. But I need to ask Sophia a question.”

“Shoot, Dan.”

“If Katey comes to you in, say, six months, and says ‘Billy wants me, should I go to bed with him’ what would you tell her?”

“If you have to ask me, then you should wait. If there’s enough question in your mind to ask me, then you should wait. When you are **so** sure you have no doubts, then that’s a different story.” Sophia smiled. “And I’d remind her about all those non-dirty things you can do with a guy without actually going all the way.”

Dan had to smile. “OK, Ellen you were right. Very sensible.” He turned to his daughter. “Kate, it’s been very tough to talk to you about sex and stuff. I’m sorry about that.”

Kate smiled. “It’s OK.”

“Well, I’m going to try. And, if I can’t give you an answer, since we’ll be living here, you’ll have Ellen and, God help me, Sophia, to ask.” Dan smiled at his soon-to-be-stepdaughter, who smiled back at him.

GLENN MILLER, PHIL COLLINS, AND A PATCH OF ICE (Chapter 46)

“Right here. Pookie, you need to swing your leg right here, on that beat.”

“Right.”

Their blades cut into the ice, as they tried a move.

“That right?”

“Yeah, but my turn was too slow. I came out of it a half-beat behind.”

“’sokay, Snugglebear, let’s try it again.”

It was the middle of August. Sophia and Warren were trying to nail down their new free dance, before they pulled their old junior-length free from last year out of mothballs for the Junior Grand Prix.

It had been a busy summer. Dan and his buddies quickly renovated the basement, because Dan and Kate wanted to move in as quickly as possible. Sophia was thrilled with her new bachelorette pad—Ellen had even had Dan install an intercom, which anyone had to buzz before going down there--and Sophia had the pleasure of waking up next to Warren a couple of times already. Warren's parents were a little wary about that, as was Dan, but it didn't happen every night. And, since everyone knew what was going on anyway..... Warren just had to call Peg and tell her, because she worried.

Ellen and Dan were getting married next weekend. The weekend after that, Sophia and Warren were travelling to Washington, DC, to attend the wedding of John Garrison and his dance teacher, Amanda Glover. They were thrilled to have been invited, and were really looking forward to it. The crème de la crème of the figure skating world promised to be there—and John was a dear friend. After that, the school year would start, senior year for Warren and Sophia, interspersed with trips to Europe for the Grand Prix. Plus they had to do their college applications.

So, finishing this free dance **now** would be nice. They wanted it done—or almost done—today. Plus, some of their family members were going to stop by for a grand preview.

Family members—Sophia had more of them now. She smiled at that. After that big blowout, Dan and she had gotten along much better. Somehow, Dan stopped seeing her as a kid after that encounter. Now, we just had to get him to stop seeing **Kate** as a kid, Sophia thought. That was coming along a bit, but it was harder. As for herself, Sophia loved Dan. She thought he was a great guy. Kate had confided that meeting Ellen had been the best thing that ever happened to him, because Ellen had loosened him up.

Kate, herself, Sophia found delightful. There were over 8 years difference between Sophia and her next oldest sister, Tara, so having a stepsister close to her own age was fun. And Kate was a wonderful young lady. She was almost as tall as Sophia, slender, with a cascade of sandy-blond ringlets hanging past her shoulders and bright green eyes. She affected a funky bohemian style, wearing long wraparound skirts and cotton tee shirts, often accompanied by beads and bracelets and something unusual in her hair, or a unique hat. Different from Sophia, whose wardrobe contained, in Warren's words, "either 'My boyfriend is a preppie and he bought me this', or basic sexbomb," but it looked good on Kate.

And Sophia realized that Kate had a passion. It became apparent quickly after Kate moved into Sophia's room—Sophia went up there to retrieve a few things she had left, and found one corner completely given over to easels, canvas, paints, cleaning equipment, palettes, and the like. Kate was an artist—specifically, a painter. And she was good, too.

“That's my stress relief. Anytime I'm bothered by something, I paint.” Kate had said to Sophia.

“It's always good to have an outlet.”

“Are you creative?” Kate had asked her.

Sophia just laughed. “Who do you think choreographs Warren’s and my dances? Well, both of us, actually, but, yeah, we are our own choreographers. Believe me, that’s creative.”

“Yeah, it is,” Kate smiled.

Now Kate was sitting in the stands, along with Ellen and Dan, and her best friend Tanya. Tanya was also a figure skating fan, and a photographer, and Kate had asked if she could come along and take some pictures.

“Only if we get a copy,” Warren had smiled.

Peg and Jim Kelleher joined them, and the skaters skated over to them.

“Now, remember, this isn’t 100% done. Close, but not quite,” Warren told them. “We’ll tweak some, I’m sure.”

“And we’re not in costume,” Sophia added. “He’s gonna wear a tux, and I’m gonna wear some slinky queen-of-the-dance-floor dress.” Everyone laughed. “And my hair will be up, proper, not just a ponytail.”

“Anyway,” Warren concluded, “here’s the rough cut. Fred and Ginger Revisited.”

They took their opening positions, and June hit play on the CD player. The slinky, sassy strains of Glenn Miller’s String Of Pearls filled the rink. Sophia and Warren glided around the ice, playing off of one another, sure-footed and confident. Their innate musicality shone through, as every step, every glide, every nuance was keyed perfectly to the walking bass and the gently swaying horns of the swing classic. The dance was technically difficult, with changes of handholds and difficult intertwining steps. They did very little side-by-side dancing, and stuck close to one another, which was more difficult. The ability to work their feet while skating extremely close together was a skill they had mastered early, and it was impressive. As the music gained in intensity, so did they, doing a fabulous diagonal step sequence in closed position, with perfectly timed turns and swaying hips. And, when they ice danced, they smiled. Always. They **loved** doing this.

Then the music changed, to the more uptempo, harder swinging Little Brown Jug. They started that portion with their side-by-side step sequence. As the song really got going, they went back to skating close together, changing positions and holds, turning and swinging with abandon. When they got going, they were **fast**, and this part of the dance showed their speed, without sacrificing an iota of difficulty in footwork.

Their cut of Little Brown Jug proceeded through a number of bars of various horn solos, with the band gently but relentlessly swinging behind the soloist. Sophia and Warren sped around the ice, swinging each other around and digging their skates into the ice in time with the swinging rhythm.

Little Brown Jug has a Big Finish, and Sophia and Warren had choreographed for it. About thirty seconds before the end, the last soloist finishes up. At that point, the drummer switches from rim shots to a relentlessly pounding snare, and the horns swing with a vengeance. Sophia and Warren went into this section with Warren behind Sophia, his hands on her hips, her hands on his, right close together, and they **swung**, shaking their hips perfectly to the beat, all the while keeping their skates moving with difficult footwork and deep edges. Then Sophie turned, and they went into classic closed position, not losing their rhythm for a second. For the last series of bars, he pulled her in close, and they skated, arms around each other. There was seemingly no room for their feet to continue moving, but they did. They ended with a spin, and a big flourish.

The small group of their supporters erupted with applause. Kate and Tanya were especially impressed, because they had never seen them skate live. Dan was **really** impressed—he had never seen them skate at **all**.

“My God, you guys are **good**!” he enthused. “That was really something.”

“I can’t believe two kids your age can swing that hard,” Jim added.

“Thanks. We’re glad you like it. We love it,” Warren said.

“I keep telling them that if they skate it clean, it’s going to get them on the podium at Nationals,” June said.

“Well, it’s very **us**,” Sophia said. “Well, one side of us.”

“Yeah, and for the other side of us, you guys wanna see the exhibition?”

“Exhibition?” Dan asked.

“If we finish high enough—it’s usually top 3 or top 4—in any of our events, we get invited to skate in the post-competition gala,” Sophia told him. “You can skate to anything you want to, no rules, so most people choreograph a special exhibition number. I don’t know if I agree with June about Nationals, but we fully expect to finish high enough at the Grand Prix events, so we choreographed an exhibition.”

“In fact, that’s our main motivation for making it to the podium at Nationals. They don’t televise the Junior Grand Prix, but they **do** televise the exhibitions at Nationals, and we want to do this dance on TV.” Warren said.

Sophia added, “It’s not as technically complex as our competitive programs, but it’s got other things going for it. Don’t need the ponytail for this one,” she said as she took it out.

“Love to see it,” Dan said. Everyone else agreed. “I’m glad I brought extra film,” Tanya added, to general laughter.

“So, what type of dance is this?” Jim asked as they skated to their starting positions. “Tango? Rumba? Classical? Techno?”

Sophia giggled, and smiled at him. “Call it a love letter.” June started the CD player, and “You’ll Be In My Heart,” by Phil Collins started playing.

The song is a passionate, intense, love song, and Sophia and Warren’s dance was passionate, intense, and loving. The footwork was scaled back a bit from the Glenn Miller dance, as fits an exhibition, but the rest of the dance compensated for it. Their dance was all about deep edges, close holds, constant eye contact, a touch of a cheek, a caress of an arm, a loving smile. They sang snippets of the lyrics at each other as they glided around the ice, lost in their own world. Sophia smiled gently at Warren, who smiled gently back, as they held each other, dancing to the beautiful love song. The love and passion they had for each other was unmistakable.

When they were done, they were slightly out of breath from the intensity of it. And their audience was thunderstruck.

“I thought I knew what you guys felt about each other. I was wrong. **Now** I know,” Kate pointed out succinctly.

“Love letter is an apt description,” Jim added.

“I keep telling them that if that dance gets any more intense, they’re going to end up skating on bare concrete because the ice will have completely melted,” June said.

“No doubt,” Dan agreed.

“I hope you do get to do that at Nationals,” Kate said. “It would be a little calling card for your career. ‘Hi, America—we’re here, we’re really good, and you just **wish** you were this much in love.’” Everyone cracked up laughing at that, Sophia and Warren most of all.

“We’re glad you guys liked it,” Sophia offered.

“And I’m so glad you guys let me come and take **pictures** of it!” Tanya enthused.

Kate and Tanya went right down to the Walgreen's downtown to get the pictures developed. They got two sets, and went back to Kate’s house and gave a set to Warren and Sophia. The skaters loved them, and Tanya was very pleased with how they had turned out.

Kate was thumbing through Tanya’s copies. “Hey, Tanya, can I borrow this one?” she said of one that had really caught her eye. “Just for a couple days. I’ll give it back.”

“Sure. Make sure you give it back, though, that’s one of my favorites.

After Tanya had left, Kate made a beeline to her room.

Sophia came upstairs at about 9:00 that night, to fetch sodas and make popcorn. Ellen and Dan were sitting in the living room.

“Hi guys. Where’s Kate? Warren and I were just watching movies, I thought Kate might like to join us.”

“She’s in her room,” Ellen said.

“Ah, I’ll go see if she wants to come down.”

“Uh-uh,” Dan said. “I went up there a little while ago. She’s painting. I learned long ago that you do **not** disturb Kate when she’s painting.” Ellen and Sophia laughed. “Especially since she told me, when I went up there, that she’s in one of her legendary painting grooves.”

“Painting grooves?” Ellen asked.

Dan smiled. “That’s what she calls it. ‘I’m in a groove, Dad.’ That means she’s working on something really good and she can’t stop and she’ll be there pounding away at the thing until it’s done even if it takes until four in the morning, so don’t bug her.”

Sophia laughed. “Aah. I can relate, I’m the same way when I’m reading, and my Snugglybear is even worse. Anyhow, if she gets a cramp in her brush hand or something, tell her she’s welcome to buzz the intercom. Warren and I already had our ‘private time’ tonight.”

Dan grinned at her. “I’ll tell her.”

Sophia got up for breakfast—Warren had spent the night, but had left, because he got an extra shift at the donut shop—and was surprised to see just Ellen and Dan there.

“She still painting?” Sophia asked.

“Yup,” Dan confirmed. “She actually went to bed last night, but got up at the crack of dawn and went right back to the easel.”

Warren came back over in the afternoon, after his shift. Both he and Sophia were planning on quitting the donut shop when school started, because they just had too much going on this year, and were trying to squirrel away as much money as they could.

He came in through the front door, saying hi to Dan, Ellen, and Tara and Eric who were home from their fathers by that point. “Hiya, folks. Beautiful be downstairs?” Ellen laughed and confirmed it.

A few minutes later, Kate came running downstairs, paint on her hands, and even some on her face. “Well, if it isn’t Michaelangelo emerging from the Sistine Chapel for a breath of fresh air,” Dan joked.

“Thanks, Dad. Was that Warren coming back in?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” She walked over to the intercom. “Hey guys can I come down?”

“Sure,” Sophia’s voice came over.

“Great. I’ll be down in about ten minutes.”

“OK.”

She ran back upstairs and was up there for a few minutes. She emerged with a large object—clearly, a framed canvas wrapped in white paper.

“That what you’ve been working on, Pumpkin?” Dan asked.

“Yeah. But it’s for Warren and Sophie, so they get to see it first.” She hustled down to the basement.

She knocked on the door to Sophia’s room, leaving the canvas outside. Sophia opened the door, and Kate walked in. She made a little show of looking around the room.

“Y’know, I was thinking. These walls are awfully bare. You need something on them, Sophie, besides your prom picture, and that Feeling Sophie Up series.”

Sophia giggled. “Actually we were thinking about asking Tanya to blow up some of those pictures she took.”

“I’ve got a better idea.” She opened the door and grabbed the canvas. “This is for you guys.”

Sophia looked at Kate in amazement. “This what you’ve been working on for two days?”

“Yup. When inspiration hits....” She giggled. “Open it.”

Sophia did, with Warren helping. When they got the paper off, Sophia gasped.

Kate had taken the photo she had borrowed from Tanya, and used it as a reference. She didn't copy it, but had made a painting that was all her own. Sophia and Warren were dancing, in closed position, gazing into each other's eyes. Kate had captured, perfectly, the flush in Sophia's cheeks, the twinkle in her eyes, the sure, steady, loving gaze in Warren's. Sophia's long black hair was flowing gently behind her, to help create the sense of movement on the ice.

"I can't believe you did this!" Sophia exclaimed.

"That is really, really good," Warren agreed. "Kate, you're a talented girl." Kate just blushed.

"What a wonderful gift." She gave Kate a big hug. "Thank you so much."

"Thanks, Kate," Warren said as he kissed her on the cheek. "This is fantastic."

Sophia was still looking at it in wonder. "You captured the joy," she said incredulously. "The joy we feel when we skate with each other. It's all here. You got it."

"You're absolutely right," Warren agreed.

Kate had the world's biggest grin. "You ever get done with a dance, and say to yourself, 'that was exactly right, that's every step exactly the way it should be.'?"

"Sometimes," Warren said. "It's what you shoot for. Doesn't happen all the time."

"Right. Painting's like that. And you telling me that I succeeded in capturing the joy—well, it's like straight sixes for you guys. Thank you for noticing. That's what I was trying so hard to do."

"You did it. We'll cherish this forever," Warren said.

"Damn straight," Sophia agreed. "And I've got a hook right here." She hung the painting up, right above the bed.

Just then, Dan and Ellen rapped at the door. "We were wondering if we could see this painting that Kate worked so hard on."

Sophia opened the door, and pointed.

"Wow," Dan said after a minute. "Wow, wow, wow."

"Double Wow," Ellen agreed.

Kate was feeling giddy and embarrassed, all at once. "I'm so glad you like it. I need to go soak in a tub to wash this paint off." She giggled, and bounded out of the room and up the stairs.

“What a gift. She’s such a great kid.” Sophia said.

“I think she got inspired yesterday,” Ellen commented. “She was all dreamy while you guys were doing that dance.”

“Yeah, and look at this painting—she captured the joy, and the passion. And that was second hand. Dan, if that daughter of yours ever falls in love you are in **big** trouble, because she is going to do so with the white-hot passion of a thousand suns.” Sophia grinned at him.

Dan got a rueful look in his face. “Don’t you think I figured that out long ago?”

JACK’S WEDDING (Chapter 47)

Ellen and Dan’s wedding was a small affair, but Sophia and Warren had a good time. They really did make each other happy, and Sophia was just plain crazy about Kate.

A week after that, Sophia and Warren found themselves en route to Washington DC for Jack Garrison’s wedding. They were booked at a hotel, and made mad love before crashing. It was an afternoon/evening wedding, outside, on a large estate.

They wandered in, found what table they had been assigned to, and went to find it. As they approached it, they heard the bellow of Christine Arsenault: “Well, if it isn’t Daniels and Kelleher, the future of American Ice Dance!”

“Shut up, you,” Warren said, as he walked up to her and gave her a kiss. He did the same to Elizabeth Cushman, who was with her. Sophie hugged them in turn.

“You guys at table ten, I hope?” Liz asked.

“Yup. You?”

“Yeah. Christine and I don’t have dates, so they put us together, which was nice.”

“Hope the press doesn’t get a hold of that,” Warren quipped. “There would go all those Arsenault Cushman vicious rivalry stories.”

“Yeah, well, to be in a rivalry, one skater has to actually **beat** the other skater occasionally,” Liz quipped.

“HEY! I beat you at Nation’s Cup last fall!” Christine said indignantly.

“Oops, you’re right.”

They found their table. Already seated were former National pairs champion Renee Miller and Ted Sorrell. Sophia and Warren had met them a couple of times, and had liked them. They exchanged greetings.

“Check it out, Liz, two swinging single gals like us, and they stuck us with all the old married couples.”

Renee and Ted just laughed, but Warren said, “Not only are we not married, but old? I’m two years younger than you are, Arsenault.”

“OK, so you’re not old. Married is accurate, if not yet legally, and you know it.”

Warren and Sophia just smiled at one another. “So who’s the other married couple at the table?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I was talking about you two and Renee and Ted.”

They were chatting about not much, Warren always enjoyed the dynamic between Christine and Liz. They were fierce competitors, but they were also close friends. It was interesting.

They also both liked to tease. Each other, and other people. They had, along with Jack, set up an elaborate joke at Warren and Sophie’s expense, and, as Liz caught a glimpse of two people walking across the yard, it was time to set into action.

“Hey, guys, I don’t know if I know this. We’ve been talking about skaters we like and stuff, but I’m not sure if I know who you guys’ favorite dance team of all time is.”

“Malekova and Boranachenko,” Sophia and Warren said simultaneously. “Great technique and passion to burn,” Warren said. “We worship them,” Sophia added.

“Ah, what a wonderful thing to hear from a young talented ice dance team,” Warren heard said behind his back in a Russian accent. He and Sophia turned—and saw Anya Malekova and Gennadi Boranachenko. Sitting into their seats. At **their** table—Anya was right next to Warren, as a matter of fact.

And Sophia and Warren both had their eyes bug out of their head.

Anya smiled at them. “I know you two. Sophia Daniels and Warren Kelleher. Second at US Nationals in juniors last year, first in the free dance. We were there. You’re very talented.”

“Thank you,” Sophia managed to squeak out.

“Yes, thank you very much. Oh my God, I’m sitting next to Anya Malekova,” he said to the air. Anya and Gennadi just laughed.

“Hey, guys?” Liz interjected. “You know, I lied. Warren told me six months ago that Anya and Gennadi were your idols. And I know them, because they work out of my rink and choreographed some stuff for me.”

Warren stared at her. “This was a set-up!”

“Uh-huh.” Liz grinned. “Chris, Jack, and Anya and Gennadi were all in on it.”

“We’re just innocent bystanders,” Renee Miller smiled.

“Right!”

Warren looked at Liz, and then at Anya. “You know, we promised each other we were **not** going to hero-worship today. And, we were doing a good job of it. Heck, I met Shae-Lynn Bourne and Nicole Bobek today and didn’t gush once.” Everyone laughed at that. “And then **you** two showed up. Ah, well, so much for keeping our composure.”

“You have to understand,” Sophia told them, “your Bach free dance that won you the Olympics in France is **why** I’m an ice dancer.”

“Thank you, that’s quite a compliment.” Gennadi said. “Although, having seen you skate, I’m a little surprised. That’s one of our most romantic dances.

“Aah,” Warren said, “Well, our love of Big Band has kind of taken over. In fact our free this year is another big band mix. We like to swing on the ice.”

“However,” Sophia smiled, “wait until you see our exhibition. Not classical—it’s to a pop song—but very M&B, or at least that’s the goal.”

“Aah, but you see,” Anya said, “to have the passion **on** the ice, you must have the passion **off** the ice.”

Christine cracked up laughing. Warren and Sophia just looked at each other and smiled.

“Did I miss something?” Anya asked.

Christine sputtered. “I have a picture of them, skating together, that Warren emailed me. I think the ice melted.”

“My stepfather saw our exhibition and said he thought he was going to have to hose us down,” Sophia added. She looked at Anya and Gennadi. “We’ve been a couple **off** the ice longer than we’ve been a couple on it. We started dating when we were fourteen.”

“Ah, but you’re so young, even now,” Gennadi said.

“True love don’t know age, guys,” Liz interjected.

“True,” Anya agreed with a smile.

The rest of the wedding was great. Jack and Amanda made a great couple. Sophia and Warren got to dance a lot—although, in a crowd of ice skaters and Amanda’s dancer friends, they blended more into the crowd than they usually do, which was a nice change, actually. They met lots of people, and even got to talk to some of them. Anya and Gennadi turned out to be sweet and charming. And Warren even got an unexpected surprise when a slightly inebriated Stephie Eberhardt, his favorite skater, fell into his lap—literally. She even chatted amiably and gave him a kiss on the cheek—making him blush bright red—before she got off his lap. “Oh, Snugglebear, you must have thought it was Christmas,” said a plainly amused Sophia.

“Oh, and you don’t think I didn’t notice you drooling over Mr. Boranachenko all night?” Sophia blushed as Gennadi just grinned at her.

The next morning, Jack had planned a little party, since he and Amanda were not going on their honeymoon for a couple days. Since lots of his guests had flown in, they made a weekend out of it. Jack had called his skating friends, and told them of his idea—Saturday, the day after the wedding, they’d have a brunch in the hotel, then they’d rent a rink. Everyone could show up, around their skating friends and the other wedding guests, and show what they had been working on. If enough people were comfortable with that, that is. The response was enthusiastic, so it was done.

Warren and Sophia were, at first, all for it. Until they saw the array of skating talent that they would be sharing the ice with. What was worse, Jack had drawn up a little order, and had them skating directly after Malekova and Boranachenko. They were terrified.

“Come on,” Liz said during brunch. “I really want to see your new stuff.”

“Me, too,” said Christine. “He’s going to let everyone speak, so you’ll be able to tell everyone who you are.”

“Yeah, and we want to see that exhibition,” Anya said.

“OK, we’ll do it. God help us,” said Sophia.

They were instantly glad they did it. Hanging out with all the skaters, seeing what they were up to. Warren loved Liz’s new program. Jack went first, and showed his fine new long program. Christine did her long, and a new exhibition to some Beatles music. “Nice music, Skate Babel!” Warren yelled, as she shook her butt at him in response. Malekova and Boranachenko were Malekova and Boranachenko—that is to say, romantic, passionate, and beautiful. Then it was Sophia and Warren’s turn.

“Hi, all,” Warren took the mic. “I’m Warren Kelleher and this is Sophia Daniels. Amongst this crowd of World Medallists, we’re the scrubs. I’ve known Jack for years,

over the internet, when he was still a junior, and I was still a singles skater who didn't compete because he couldn't jump. We became good friends, though, which is why he asked Sophia and I to share this ice. And made us follow our idols, Anya and Gennadi, for which we will **never** forgive him." Jack cracked up laughing. "We were the silver medallists in Juniors this past year in Ice Dance. We'll be competing in the junior Grand Prix this fall, but, this year at Nationals, we'll be competing in seniors. Today, we've got our new senior free dance, and our exhibition. We are one of the few classic ballroom holdouts left in ice dancing today, and we swing dance as a hobby, so our free dance is to Glenn Miller. Our exhibition is something else entirely. We hope you like them."

Sophia grabbed the mic. "Oh, and some people who don't know us well asked us last night if we were a couple **off** the ice as well as on. Well, if the exhibition leaves any doubt in anyone's mind, then we're not doing it right." She smiled at the laughter around the rink, then handed the mic back to Jack, as she and Warren took their starting position.

They realized something right off. They needed an audience. Although they didn't consciously reach out to an audience—they focused on each other—the audience gave them strength. They had only done the Glenn Miller free in front of their small family group. There were a few hundred people watching them do it now, and it was damn near perfect. They flew around the ice, swinging and grooving. It was a crowd-pleasing program, they knew that, and even their competition-jaded skating friends responded to their unbridled enthusiasm and obvious skill. When they hit that final thirty seconds, they could sense their friends getting into it. Christine even let out a war whoop as Warren swung Sophia's hips back and forth.

They hit their ending pose, and their friends erupted. It was very satisfying. "Hey, who choreographed that?" Gennadi yelled from beside the boards.

"We did," Warren yelled back. "We do all our own choreography."

"WHAT?" someone yelled from the stands. Gennadi looked stunned. "I think they like our choreography," a beaming Sophia whispered to an equally beaming Warren.

As the skaters chattered about these two kids doing their own—great—choreography, Sophia and Warren worked themselves back to their starting positions for "You'll Be In My Heart."

The music started, and so did they. On an occasion to celebrate love—their friend's wedding—they took **their** love for one another, and, in front of their friends, put it on vivid display. They wrapped themselves up in their love, in this music, in dancing with one another, and showed it to all that cared to watch. And it was **magic**.

And, as they left the ice, they got two compliments that they would treasure forever, more than any medal they would ever win. The first was the sight, up in the stands, of their dear friend Liz Cushman having been moved to tears by their skating. The second, as they stepped off the ice, was Gennadi Boranachenko's words of quiet admiration: "Just like us. Exactly like us."

LITTLE SISTER (Chapter 48)

School had started. The good thing was that Warren was now with license and with car—his mom’s old minivan, to be precise--so he didn’t have to take the bus anymore. He drove in. With him was a friend, David Linnet.

Warren had met David on the bus last year, and they had occasionally chatted on the phone or done something together. David was only a sophomore—and Warren a senior, now—but Warren never worried about stuff like that. He liked Dave. When he mentioned to Dave that he was going to be driving in, Dave asked if he could join him, offering to split the gas money. Dave hated the bus. Warren readily agreed.

It was the second week of school. During the first week, Warren and Dave had started a little ritual—they made sure Warren picked Dave up early enough to swing to the Dunkin Donuts for some coffee. That’s where they were headed now, when they saw two girls walking out of a side street.

“Hey, it’s my Pookie! I forgot, her car is in the shop this week. It’s not a long walk, but let’s pick them up anyway.”

“That’s Sophia, I take it?” Dave asked.

“Yeah, the one with the straight black hair.” He pulled over, and leaned over Dave and yelled out the passenger side window—“Hey Gorgeous, need a ride?”

Sophia looked up. “SNUGGLEBEAR!” she exclaimed happily, and ran over to the van. She pulled the sliding door open and climbed into the back seat, accompanied by Kate. “What a wonderful surprise, sweetie,” Sophia said, kissing Warren on the cheek. “Hi Warren,” added Kate.

“Ladies, this is my co-pilot, Dave. Dave, this is my girlfriend Sophia, and her sister Kate.”

Dave shook both their hands. “Nice to meet you.” Then he looked at them again. “Sisters?”

Sophia laughed. They did not **look** like sisters. “Stepsisters, actually. Kate’s Dad married my Mom this summer. But she’s my sister, as far as we’re concerned.”

“Cool,” Dave said. “You guys go to Oceanview?”

“Yeah. I’m a senior, and Kate’s a freshman. And I know you go to St Mike’s with Snugglebear over there.”

“Yeah, I’m a sophomore.”

“Hey, we were gonna get coffee,” Warren interjected. “You ladies up for it?”

“Sure.” Sophia said.

“Yeah”, agreed Kate.

They pulled into the parking lot, and all got out. They had enough time to go in and sit for a few minutes, so they did. Warren and Sophia got into a discussion about their first Grand Prix event, in Kiev in a couple weeks. David and Kate were both shy, so they spent a lot of time just kind of sitting there, stealing glances from one another.

“Is Kate short for something?” David asked.

“Katherine. With a K.”

“I always liked that name.” Dave sipped his coffee. “Did you live in Oceanview before you moved into Sophia’s house?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah. I live up off of Lawrence Street, near Kingston Park.”

“That’s not too far.”

Dave looked at the girl in front of her, and, he realized she was **really** cute. She had great eyes and a wonderful smile, and he liked her style. She was wearing a light blue long skirt and a dark blue shirt, had about thirteen bracelets on, and some sort of floral-design wire headband in her hair.

Unbeknownst to him, Kate was looking at him with just as much interest.

They repeated the same thing on Tuesday, except that Kate and Dave talked a little bit more. Dave found out that Kate liked basketball—and Kate found out that Dave not only liked it, he played it.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I was on the freshman team last year. I’m a guard.”

“Cool!”

Kate noticed that Dave was always holding doors for her and stuff. She also noticed his warm smile. Dave, for his part, noticed her offbeat style and unique way of looking at things.

Wednesday, they did the same thing. Kate was dressed in an ankle-length purple floral print dress, with a matching floppy purple knit hat with a pink flower on the front. Plus her customary bracelets. They were talking about basketball, and then started telling each other about school—he cracking her up with his imitations of some of his teachers, and her cracking him up with her witty observations about hers. Both shy, they both realized the other was really easy to talk to.

At one point, Kate leaned over on the table, resting her chin on her hands, smiling. The image burned itself into his mind. When he got to school, he was still 20 minutes early, and went to find a corner where he would not be disturbed.

Warren was in Sophia's room, that night, when Kate asked if she could come down.

She plopped in a chair, and looked at the floor, kind of twirling her hair. Then she looked up at Warren and said, "Warren..tell me about Dave."

Warren cracked up laughing. "Now, where have I heard **that** song before?"

"What do you mean?"

"Hey, Warren, tell me about Kate."

"Really?" Kate lit up in a big smile.

"Really. What, you haven't noticed that he can't keep his eyes off you?" Warren smiled at her. Kate blushed.

"No, I don't think I noticed, because I was too busy not being able to keep my eyes off him."

Sophia interjected, "I certainly noticed **that**!"

"Well," Warren said, "This I'll tell you. He's a good kid. He's a bit of a loner, has his own attitude about things, doesn't make friends very easily. He got teased a lot on the bus last year, because he was always in a corner, lost in whatever he was doing."

"Boy, does **that** sound familiar," Kate smiled.

"I know. He's very gallant. We've talked about girls and stuff, and he's never had anything even remotely resembling a girlfriend. And he's got some definite ideas about how a guy should treat a lady, and knows that it would take a special girl to appreciate it. He's into chivalry."

"Chivalry?"

“Notice how he always opens the door for you? That kind of thing. He’s also a sensitive soul. He’s very gentle.”

“It almost sounds like your describing my dream date, Warren. I hate macho guys. I hate guys that have to show off. I hate guys that aren’t sensitive. Now you’ve got me even **more** intrigued than I was previously.”

Warren just laughed. “I also happen to know that you guys have something **very** important in common, but you will just have to figure that one out yourselves. I didn’t spill those particular beans to **him**, either.”

“Aw, come on!” Kate begged. But Warren wouldn’t budge.

Dave got in the van the next day and jumped into the back seat. “We’re picking up the girls, right? I just thought you might appreciate having Sophia up front with you.”

Yeah, riiiiiiiiigggh, Warren thought to himself with a smile. All he said was, “Why thanks, Dave.”

They pulled up in front of Sophia’s house, and the girls came running out. Sophia looked quizzically at the seating arrangements. “Dave just thought you should have your customary seat back, Pookie.” Sophia just gave Warren a smile.

Dave got out and opened the door for Kate. “Thank you, kind sir,” she said with a giggle. The long wraparound skirt was red today, with a floral arrangement, as was the cotton shirt. The beret was black. Beret? Dave thought to himself. This girl has got style.

They rode mostly in silence to the coffee shop, Dave and Kate sitting right close together. Dave was trying to work up his courage for something. They pulled into the coffee shop and decided to do the drive through today.

On the way to Oceanview High, Dave finally screwed his courage on and reached into his bookbag. Kate, curious, watched him. He withdrew a piece of heavy paper and handed to her. “Here,” he said, his voice a bit shaky. “This is for you. I did this yesterday morning.”

Kate looked at it. It was a pencil drawing. Of her. It was a very, very good pencil drawing of her, wearing the hat she had had on yesterday, resting her chin on her hands and smiling, bracelets running down her arm. She remembered sitting like that at one point yesterday. He did this from memory, she thought to herself, amazed. “KATHERINE” was written on the top. She couldn’t take her eyes off of it. It was beautiful. **She** was beautiful. He made her look beautiful.

“Wow,” was all she trusted herself to say.

“So, do you like it?” Dave asked hesitantly.

“Like it? I **love** it! It’s wonderful. I can’t believe how good it is.” She reached over and wrapped him in a hug, startling him. He recovered quickly enough and returned the hug. It felt very nice. “Thank you so much, this was unbelievably sweet,” she whispered in his ear. They broke the hug and settled back in their seats, a little afraid to look at one another.

“Well,” Kate said after a minute, “now I know what Warren was talking about.”

“Huh?” said Dave.

“He told me last night that you and I had something important in common, but he wouldn’t tell me what it was. He said that we would have to discover what it was ourselves. Now I know.” She pointed at the drawing, and then looked at Dave and smiled. “Mine’s not drawing, so much, though—it’s painting.”

“You paint?” Dave asked, delighted.

“Oh **boy** does she paint,” Warren interjected from the front seat.

“Yeah, we have a Katherine Thompson original on my wall in my room, of us ice dancing,” Sophia added. “It’s stunning.”

Kate just blushed.

“Wow,” Dave said. “Another obsessed artist?”

“Yup.

“Do you know how many kids—especially girls—think I’m some sort of freak because I’m apt to go in a corner and ignore the world when I have an idea for a drawing?”

Kate smiled. “Believe me, I completely understand. I locked myself in my room for a day and a half doing that painting for them.” They both laughed.

By that time, they had arrived at Oceanview High. Dave got out of the door and held it open for her. She looked at the drawing one more time, and tucked it into her bookbag. She smiled at Dave, leaned into his ear, and whispered, “Thank you again. I’ll treasure it,” and kissed him on the cheek.

Dave got into the front seat, looking rather stunned, to Warren’s great amusement.

“Nice opening gambit, you romantic,” Warren teased him.

“Ah, shut up,” Dave said, but he was smiling. “That wasn’t really what it was. I saw her sitting there like that yesterday and I **had** to draw her. And when I was done with it, I had to give it to her.”

“Yeah, and tell me you weren’t secretly hoping she’d react **exactly** the way she did.”

“There is that,” Dave agreed. “And I didn’t know she was a fellow artist, even. If she’s an artist, she understood what that drawing meant to me, and what it meant to me to give it to her. Which is a little overwhelming, when I think about it.”

“Well, here’s more overwhelming for you. Sophia’s car gets fixed this weekend. Tomorrow is the last day for our little coffee klatch, unless we arrange to meet or something, but they won’t be in the car with us.”

“So?”

“So, if you want to ask Kate out on a date—which you **do**—tomorrow’s the day to do it.”

“Oh God,” Dave moaned.

“Come on, Dave—you think she’s going to say **no**?”

“I don’t know. You can never know. Dating is **not** my strong suit, Warren. I don’t think I’ve ever had a real date.”

“Neither has she, Dave. She’s as nervous as you are, trust me. Ask her. She’s gonna say yes.”

“Hmmmmm.”

Dave didn’t sleep much that night, thinking about it. When he got in the car, he jumped into the back seat. Sophia and Kate came into the car, and Dave got out and held the door for her. “Good morning, kind sir,” she said to him with a warm smile. “Good morning, my lady Katherine,” he said, surprising himself. Kate just giggled.

They got to the coffee shop and pulled into a space. “I’ll go fetch it. Hey, Soph, come with?” Warren shot her a look, which she caught, and said, “Sure, sweetie, you can borrow me.”

Thanks, Warren, Dave thought to himself. Thanks a whole hell of a lot. Oh, well, if I’m gonna do it, now’s the time.

“Katherine?”

She giggled. “Nobody calls me that. I like it when you call me that.”

Dave smiled. “You look more like a Katherine to me. Listen, I was wondering. Next Friday night, would you like to go out with me? We can grab supper, and then walk down to the movie theatre and see what’s playing.” There. He said it. And was afraid to look at her.

She was smiling. “I’d like that. I’d like that a lot.” She reached into her bookbag and tore out a small piece of paper, and grabbed a pen. “Here. Here’s my phone number. Call me?”

“I’d like that myself.” He smiled.

Warren and Sophia got back in, and noticed Kate and Dave looking at each other and grinning. The guys dropped the girls off, and Dave opened the door, as always, and Kate gave him another kiss on the cheek.

“Will you be home tonight?” he asked her.

“Yes.”

“Can I call you.”

“Yes.” Smiling, she walked off with Sophia.

At the same time that Dave was telling Warren “SHE SAID YES!”, Kate was telling Sophia, “HE ASKED ME ON A DATE!!!!”

They talked on the phone almost every night for the next week, just getting to know one another, and they found it easier and easier to talk, much to their delight. And Kate realized he was something special when they talked on the phone—or, rather, **didn’t** talk on the phone—on Tuesday. The phone had rung, and she had picked it up, and heard his voice on the other end. And she said, more exasperated than she meant, “Hi, Dave, I’m right in the middle of a canvas.”

“Understood,” he said, and she could hear the warmth in his voice. “I’ll talk to you later, then. Good night, my lady Katherine.”

“Good Night, sir David,” she giggled. And hung up the phone. And looked at it, amazed. He **understood**.

He really understood. She shook her head in wonder.

And went back to her canvas.

Friday came, and Dave went to pick Kate up. One of the good things about Oceanview’s downtown area is that lots of stuff to do was in walking distance—perfect for a date between two young kids that didn’t have driver’s licenses. Dan gave Dave a bit of the third degree, but it was relatively painless—Warren having already told Dan that Dave was a good kid. They discovered they both loved Chinese, so they went to the Chinese place downtown for supper. They found that the week of phone conversations had burned off a lot of their shyness—at least with each other—and they talked happily and easily.

They talked about art, painting, what it was like to be a bit of a misfit, basketball, lots of things. Kate told him about Warren and Sophia, who were in Kiev, Ukraine competing and were in first place after the original dance. They talked about their families. Kate even told him about her mother. It was so **easy** to talk to him. He felt the same way.

They walked to the movie theater, hand-in-hand, and found a sweet romantic comedy to watch. They both enjoyed it—Dave bought her popcorn—and had a good time. He opened every door all night, and he took her hand in his again for the walk home.

“Thank you, David, I had a really nice time,” Kate said when they reached the front porch.

“I did, too, Katherine. I’d like to do it again.”

“I’d really like that, too.” She looked at him, smiling, expectantly. She **really** wanted him to kiss her.

He did not disappoint. It was warm, and soft, and she felt it down to her toes. She threw her arms around him, and whispered in his ear. “That was my first kiss, you know.”

“That makes two of us.” He whispered back. She pulled back from him and their lips met again, longer this time. That one she felt **everywhere**.

They broke the kiss and smiled at each other. “Good night, my lady Katherine.”

“Good night, Sir David. Call me?”

“Just try and stop me. Unless you’re painting, then I’ll let you stop me.”

Her delighted giggle followed him as he walked down the street.

IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO (Chapter 49)

(Author's note pertaining to music alluded to in this chapter: a Piazzola tango is a tango written by Argentinean "Nuevo Tango" master Astor Piazzola, who wrote tango music that combined "Classic tango" with elements of classical and jazz. It's very sensual stuff. It has been successfully skated to over the years, one of my favorites being American ice dancers Liz Punsalan and Jerod Swallow, who did a **very** passionate and sensual dance (they are married, and you could **tell** <G>) to a Piazzola tango at the 1998 Olympics in Japan.)

The last weekend in September found Warren and Sophia in Kiev, Ukraine, competing in their first event in the Junior Grand Prix series. They won it, handily, much to their delight. But, when they skated in the exhibition, they did not skate to “You’ll Be In My Heart.” They had choreographed something else. The reaction “You’ll Be In My Heart” got at Jack Garrison’s wedding convinced them that it was special, and they wanted to save it. They used it as their carrot—the top four finishers at Nationals got to skate in the exhibition, so that was their goal. Top four, so we can skate that program again. They wanted to unveil that program to the wider world at Nationals, not in Kiev, Ukraine. As an added bonus, Nationals were in Providence, Rhode Island, close enough to their home that lots of family and friends would be attending.

Three weeks later, they were in Ostrava, Czech Republic, for their second event. They won that, also, and guaranteed themselves a place in the Junior Grand Prix final, in Hamilton, Ontario, in December.

Back in Oceanview at the end of November, they were exhausted but pleased. Senior year in high school--plus getting their college applications done--combined with the travel schedule had tested them, but they had handled it well. They were sitting in Sophia's room talking.

"So, what do you think our chances are at the Final?" Sophia asked.

"I think we have a hell of a chance to medal. Winning is a different story, we haven't faced Kratsulina and Zhargov yet. They're the defending junior world champions. They also won both of their events."

"I was talking on the internet to Shawna Vickers."

"Really?" Warren was surprised.

"Yeah. She's actually a good kid. It's Kim Burlington that's the bitch. Shawna and Evan are good people. They're moving up to seniors for Nationals, too. Anyway, she was telling me that she and Evan finished second to Kratsulina and Zhargov in Mexico City, but that Evan had a bad fall. They had been leading through the OD, and probably would have won the free if Evan hadn't gone splat. Disrupted the whole flow of the program. Anyway, Shawna told me she is distinctly unimpressed by Kratsulina and Zhargov."

"Hmmm. Very interesting."

"Shawna thinks they won the Junior Worlds last year by default. Shawna and Evan weren't ready. There weren't a lot of good teams there. And, they're Russian."

"Which automatically gives them a leg up in the presentation mark."

"Right. Shawna thinks we should be much more worried about her and Evan than them."

Warren laughed. "OK. Well, we'll see them in Hamilton, too, since they won their other event."

"Right. Next thing. Colleges."

"Yup. We're decided on Wisconsin, right?"

"Right," Sophia confirmed. "And, I'm going to do BU and you're doing BC."

"Right. Are we doing Princeton?"

"What the hell, right? The worst they can do is reject me. Oh, and we're doing Vanderbilt, right?"

"Right. And Ohio State."

"I think that covers it. And I'm doing Umass as a safe school."

"Right."

"You know what? I think Kate's up to something."

"How so?"

"She told Mom and Dan that she didn't want to go to Hamilton. Said she's got a big paper due right before Christmas and needs to work on it."

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, I think that's true--but I also think that she wants the house to herself. So she can have Dave over."

"Aaah. Have they done anything yet?"

"Not that I know of."

"Not that I know of, either. But he certainly is ga-ga over her."

"Yeah, and that is mutual."

"Did anyone see through her little ruse, except for you?"

"I think Mom did, but you know Mom. Dan is dense, which is good for Kate." Warren laughed. "Oh, I got more gossip," Sophia continued. "Nick is going out with Karen."

"What happened to Karen and Bill?"

"Oh, they broke up a couple months ago. I think Nick has been mooning over her since he broke up with Missy, but she was with Bill. Now she's not, and they are together."

"Cool."

They arrived in Hamilton, Ontario, about two weeks before Christmas. Both sets of parents would be joining them as the competition got closer. They were currently on the ice for their first practice, where they almost ran into Shawna Vickers and Evan Pogdar.

"Whoops!" yelled Warren, screeching to a stop.

"Will you two amateurs watch where you're going?" Shawna asked with a smile. They greeted each other, hugs and handshakes all around.

"All the predictions on the internet say you guys are shoo-ins to win," Warren said slyly.

"You read that stuff?" asked Evan.

"Oh, we post, too," Sophia informed him. "Everybody knows who we are. One of our best friends has been ragging on us for two weeks, saying 'Vickers and Pogdar are gonna kill you guys!'"

"This is a *friend?" Shawna asked, incredulously.

"Yeah," Warren told her. "Dennis Frobeck. He's knowledgeable, opinionated, and sticks to his guns. But he's a good guy. The good thing about him is, if we *do* win, he will happily allow us to rub his nose in it for a month."

They all laughed. "Well, we can't have *that*," Evan said. "We'll just have to kick your ass. Seriously, good luck. May you skate wonderfully to a silver medal."

Warren and Sophia cracked up. "Same goes for you," Warren said.

Kratsulina and Zhargov won the compulsories, with Shawna and Evan second, Sophia and Warren third. The results for the original dance were exactly reversed, with Sophia and Warren winning, followed by Shawna and Evan, and then the Russians, who fell. What that meant was that whoever won the free dance among the top three couples would win the event.

After the original dance, Warren and Sophia went to supper with their parents. Then they retired to their room. No sooner had they gotten in the door, and Warren wrapped Sophia up in a hug and gave her a long kiss.

"Oh, dancing the tango makes me soooooooo horny," Sophia giggled.

"Oh you betcha," Warren agreed. "We need to have our good luck fuck, tonight, anyhow." It had become a bit of an amusing tradition. They always seemed to make love the night of the OD, which was always the night before the free dance. And, as Sophia had pointed out, this was especially true this year, with the OD being a Tango. They were skating to a sensuous Piazzola tango. There were some days when it took all their will power not to attack each other on the ice when they were done.

Tonight, they had had to wait until after dinner with their parents--the whole time playing footsie--and they were very needy by the time they got back to their hotel room. Clothes started flying everywhere, and before they knew it, they were in bed, Warren with his face buried in Sophia's breasts.

"Wait a minute," Sophia said. She scrambled out from under Warren. He flipped over, lying face-up on the bed, and watched her, curiously. She went across the room, to her CD boombox she had brought with her. Reaching into her CD case, she withdrew a CD, and put it in. It was an entire CD of Piazzola tangos. Warren laughed, as Sophia sashayed back to the bed, in time with the music.

"You need to be carrying a rose in your teeth, my love," Warren said.

"How 'bout something else in my teeth?" She reached down and gently grazed Warren's nipple.

"Ooooooooooh." They had recently discovered, quite by accident, that Warren's nipples were almost as responsive as Sophia's. She nibbled on one of his nipples, while she reached down and grabbed his cock.

"You like?" she teased?

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmm.."

She giggled at him. "It's kind of nice to be the bearer of foreplay, rather than the recipient."

"I'm not complaining. Not that you mind being the recipient."

"Of course not. I just like finding a way of getting you going, besides a blow job." She went back to sucking on his nipples.

"Mmmmmmmmm...oh, you are definitely getting me going...."

"I noticed." She gave his nipple one last nibble, then slipped down, kissing his stomach down to his cock, which she quickly enveloped in her mouth. She was lying along side him, her feet up near his head, so he grabbed her legs and pulled them towards him. Picking up on the hint, she took her leg and swung it over him, then settled her pussy down on his face.

She groaned into his cock, as she felt his tongue lap up and down her pussy lips. He took it easy, just gently tonguing her, but enough to get her going, as she devoured his cock. He didn't take long, exploding into her mouth after just a few minutes. Satisfied, he went to work in earnest on her pussy with his tongue.

"Oh....oooh....aaaangghh.....ayiiiiii...." Sophia moaned as Warren lapped her drenched pussy. She had been sprawled out on top of him, but gradually rose up so that she was almost sitting, her pussy grinding into his face. "Oh God, Oh God, Oh God," she moaned, bouncing up on top of him almost unconsciously. He reached up to grab her hips to steady her, as she pressed her overheated pussy into his face. When she came, she made sure not to yell as loud as she usually did--they **were** in a hotel--but she completely lost control of her legs, and came right down on Warren's face as she orgasmed.

She came down from her orgasm, gasping, thrilled. That had been a particularly good one. It almost felt like he had gotten his whole face in her pussy. Then she heard a "MMMMM!!! MMMMM!!!" from underneath her, and realized he **had** gotten his whole face in her pussy--because she had sat on it. She got off in a hurry. Warren gasped for air.

"Oh, Jesus, Warren, are you all right??"

He sputtered, and then laughed. "Yeah, I'm fine. I can just see the teaser on SportsCenter: 'Ice dancer suffocates in partner's crotch.'"

Sophia laughed. "I must say, Snugglebear, that was one hell of a cum. I'll have to almost-suffocate you with my pussy more often."

"I really didn't mind, right up until the very end, when I **really** had to **breathe**. After you came, because, when you came, you plopped right down."

Sophia looked down, and smiled. "Well, the momentary lack of oxygen didn't hurt your biggest asset any." He was hard as a rock. "You get off on asphyxiation, sweetie?"

"I don't think so. A close-up view of your gorgeous, orgasming pussy is another story. I just need an airhole next time." They both laughed.

"Well, my legs are back in working order, so I can take care of this while you breathe." She swung herself around so that she was straddling his crotch instead of his face. She pulled herself up, and sank down on his cock with one plunge.

"Oooooooooohhhhhh....I forgot how much I liked it this way."

Warren grinned up at her, as he reached up to fondle her breasts. "Every time we do it this way, I remember the first time."

"Oh, you mean the night the wise, experienced woman introduced the naïve, inexperienced boy to the joys of carnal knowledge?"

"Actually, I thought it was the night that the naïve, inexperienced boy showed the wise, experienced woman that she was multorgasmic."

"There *is* that." She slid up and down on his cock. "Oooh....ugggghhhh.....ohhhhh...."

"Did you know that Evan's room is right above ours?"

"Unnggggh.....ooooohhhh.....want me to get louder, Snugglebear? Might break his concentration...."

Warren just laughed, as he started matching his upthrusts to her downstrokes. "I love you, Sophia."

"I...unngggh....love you too, Warren."

They came together. Then they cuddled up and went to sleep.

They were the first to skate in the final group of the free dance. They were very pleased--they didn't think they could skate that program any better.

The Russians skated next. Sophia and Warren weren't impressed. Neither were the judges.

Shawna and Evan were the last to skate. They were very good, Sophia and Warren agreed, much better than last year. They really had tightened up their line. They skated the program well. Sophia and Warren knew it would be close.

It was, but when the numbers were all crunched, Sophia and Warren had won the Junior Grand Prix championship. It was their first major international title.

ONE STEP UP (Chapter 50)

It was that Saturday, a week and a half before Christmas, the same day that Warren and Sophia would be skating their free dance.

Kate had invited Dave over, as Sophia suspected. He was supposed to arrive at three, they were going to order some Chinese for delivery and just hang out for the afternoon and evening. Dave knocked on the door precisely at three o'clock. After a moment, Kate answered it.

Her long curly hair was roughly tied in a bunch behind her head. She was wearing an old, paint-splattered set of coveralls, a paint-splattered shirt underneath the coveralls, and no socks or shoes. She had little blotches of paint on her face, and all over her hands. Dave couldn't help but grin at her. Kate, on the other hand, was mortified.

"Dave! OHMYGOD! It's not three already, is it?"

"Yes it is, my beautiful paint princess."

"Oh, jeez, I look *horrible*. I meant to shower, I'm covered in *paint*! I'm not presentable...."

"Katherine, calm down." They were still standing at the door. "First of all, can I come in?"

She giggled, and moved out of the way.

"Second of all, you look absolutely beautiful. Third of all, get back to your easel! We're not in any rush."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'll find something to do, I'm sure."

"OK, but you have to stay away from the painting. You can't see it until I'm done. I was trying to finish it before you got here."

"OK."

They went up to her bedroom, and he took a seat across the room. He could see her just fine, but not what she was painting. He had brought his backpack with him--he always did--and withdrew his sketchpad. She was so intent on finishing the painting, that she didn't even notice, and didn't notice the "skritch skritch skritch" of pencil on paper.

About twenty minutes later, she finally stepped back from the easel, took a deep breath, and said, "Done!"

"Good. So am I," Dave replied.

"Huh?"

He smiled, and held up his drawing. It was of her, at her easel, painting.

"Wow. You just did that?"

"Uh huh."

"Is that what I look like when I paint?"

"Yeah. You get all lost in your own little world, and your eyes sparkle, and you bite your lip. I've never seen it before. It was fantastic."

She giggled. "That's one thing I envy about you. You can whip one of these things off in twenty minutes, and it looks fantastic. I've been slaving over the painting for two days. Is this for me?" she said, pointing at the drawing. He nodded. She quickly put it up on her wall, next to the one he had done when they had first met. "OK, your turn." She led him over to the easel.

He gasped. She had painted him. He was wearing all black, with a black cape wrapped around his shoulders, and a black hat with a red feather in it. And, he was riding an all-white horse, through the forest. It was Dave as Prince Charming out of a fairy tale.

"Wow."

She beamed. "You like it?"

"Like it? I love it."

"I didn't know if you would. It's a bit fanciful."

"That's one of the things I love about you--you're not afraid to let your head drift into the clouds. Katherine, I love this. I can't tell you how much I love this."

"I'm so glad you like it. I did this for you." They smiled at each other. Then Kate looked down. "My God, I need a shower." She looked at Dave, who had gotten charcoal pencil all over his hands and face. "You do too, for that matter. You want to go first, or shall I?"

Dave blurted out what he was thinking. "We could always take one together." He paused. "Oh my God, did I really **say** that?" He looked up at Kate, laughing, trying to pass it off as a joke. They hadn't done anything more than kiss at this point. He thought she would be offended, so he tried to laugh it off.

She wasn't offended, nor did she laugh. She just stared at him, hard. "Katherine?" he asked, his laughter dying out. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She grabbed his hand, and led him out of the bedroom. "Let's go." She led him into the bathroom across the hall. She closed the bathroom door behind them, even

though they were the only ones in the house. She looked at him, smiled, and said, "You weren't just kidding, were you?"

"Deep down inside, no. But are you sure?"

"Yes." She started unsnapping her overalls. He quickly kicked his shoes and socks off, and lifted his shirt over his head. She pulled the overalls down, and stepped out of them. He stared at her, as he unsnapped his jeans. She stared back, as she pulled her shirt over her head. She wasn't wearing a bra. They stood, looking, as they each pulled their underwear off. Kate gasped at the sight of his hard cock. Dave couldn't believe how beautiful she was, how perfect her breasts were. They stared at each other, frozen for a moment, until Kate finally had the wherewithal to turn the shower on. She adjusted the temperature, pulled the curtain back, and they both stepped in.

The shower was decent sized, but they were still standing close together, almost touching one another, still frozen. She looked down at his erection. He looked down at her red-haired bush and her pert breasts. They looked into one another's eyes, afraid to say anything, almost afraid to move.

Finally, Dave broke the silence. "You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life."

Kate giggled. "And you, sir, are as handsome naked as you are wearing a cape and riding a stallion." Dave couldn't help but laugh. Kate turned, so that she was facing away from him. "Wash my back?" she asked, shyly.

"Gladly." Dave picked up a washcloth and soap, lathered up the washcloth, and started washing her back, starting at the shoulders. Kate was enjoying his touch, as he worked his way down her shoulder blades. Suddenly, he stopped.

"Something wrong?" Kate asked.

"Well, I'm just trying to figure out how you got a big blotch of green paint halfway down your **back!**"

Kate cracked up laughing. "I have no idea."

"You must have scratched your back with your brush or something. Hold still." She did, and he used the washcloth to get the paint off. Then he continued washing her back. He washed it thoroughly, but was obviously shy about proceeding past it. Kate picked up on his hesitation. "You can go lower," she whispered. He did, washing her trim, firm ass. She let out a little sigh. He continued down, and washed her legs. She turned around to face him as he stood up, her eyes shining, a slight smile on her lips, a blush on her cheek. "You're half done," she said, very softly. He reached up and put the washcloth to her face, scrubbing slightly to get the paint off of her cheeks and chin. Next, he went to her hands and arms, removing the paint from them. After he finished her arms, he washed her shoulders, and her neck, and then moved down. She closed her eyes, and nodded, as he

brought his soapy hand down to her breast. He spread the soap over her breast, and watched her nipples get hard, as her breathing became a bit more labored. He dropped the washcloth, and just used his hands, one on each breast, working the soap on them. Kate gasped, and backed into the wall, using it to help hold her up, as his hands washed her breasts. "Oh God," Kate whispered, as he cupped water into his hands and rinsed her breasts off, still touching them.

He dropped his hands from her breasts, and retrieved the washcloth, proceeding down to her stomach. He washed that, then down her hips, and down the length of her legs. Her breathing was a little unsteady, as he finished her legs, not having yet come near the junction between them. He stood up, and got very close to her. He wasn't going to touch her there unless he was sure.

"Did I miss a spot?" he asked, very softly.

She knew why he asked. "Yes," she whispered. She looked into his eyes, as he dropped his hand in between them, a drop of soap on his finger. He drew the finger the length of her pussy, as her eyes widened and she gasped. She spread her legs slightly, and felt a finger slip into her opening. "Oh, God," she gasped, her eyes closing. She threw her arms around his shoulders to help hold her up. He worked his finger in and out, slowly, and then withdrew it, bringing it up the length of her pussy. He knew what he was looking for, but, never having done this before, wasn't quite sure where it was. He knew he found it, when he felt her legs jerk.

"Yes! Right there," she whispered at him. He moved his other hand down, and massaged her clit with a finger on that hand, while snaking a finger on the other hand back into her opening. It was a bit awkward, but he managed. It helped that they were almost the same height--Kate was actually an inch or so taller. She still held on to him around the neck, which didn't give him much room, but he didn't need much. She spread her legs as much as she could.

"Oh Dave, oh yes....." escaped her lips, as she became enveloped by the sensations between her legs. She had done this to herself before, but to have **him** here, doing it to her, in the shower, her nipples up against his chest, her arms around his neck--it was nothing like she had ever experienced. Dave watched her as she mumbled incoherently, her eyes squeezed shut, the blush deepening on her cheeks.

He felt her grip on his neck tighten. "Oh....my....I'm going to cum....." and so she did, grabbing him tightly to support herself, as her lower body spasmed around his hand. He withdrew his hands when she was done, and grabbed her hips, to help hold her up, as she came down from her orgasm. Her breathing returned to normal, and she rested her head on his shoulder, his erection hard against her thigh.

"Oh, wow," was all she could say. Then she opened her eyes, and giggled. "Your turn! Turn around, back first." Dave smiled at her, and complied. She washed his back, giggling when she got to his ass. She turned him around and did the same as he did to her, washing the charcoal pencil off of his face and hands, then moving to his chest, idly

playing with his sparse covering of chest hair, and washing his chest. She was amazed to see his nipples get hard. "I didn't know guys got perky nips."

"Yup. Not quite as big."

Kate giggled, and, on some weird impulse, bent down and sucked on his nipple a bit. Dave groaned a little bit. Kate stood back up and smiled at him. "That's one you owe me," and bent back down to wash his stomach and legs. She did the same as he did, washing his legs, avoiding his crotch.

"So, did I miss a spot?"

"Yes, I think you did."

She looked down at his erection. "A very **big** spot," she giggled. She soaped up her hands, and grabbed his cock, and started running her hand up and down it. Dave gripped the sides of her shoulders for support, and leaned against the wall a little bit.

"Is this right?" Kate whispered.

"Ummm....yeah....."

"Tell me what you like," she implored.

Dave groaned, low and deep. "This is perfect." She looked intently at his face as she worked her hand up and down his erection. His mouth parted, as his groans got louder. He opened his eyes and she looked into them and smiled.

"A little faster," he managed to get out. She complied.

She moved in closer to him. "Are you going to cum?"

"Uh-huh." She felt it jerk in her hands, and then he came, ropes of semen spurting out of it, all over her stomach and breasts. She couldn't help but giggle. He caught his breath, and opened his eyes, to see her standing there, smiling at him, her torso covered with his cum.

"Wow," he said.

"Wow, is right," she looked down and giggled again. "Is there always this much?"

"No. I've never cum that hard doing it to myself."

"It's good we're in the shower. Easy clean-up." She was going to turn into the water to wash it away, but first, she scooped some up with her fingers and looked at it. Then she stuck her fingers in her mouth and swallowed it. Dave looked at her in amazement. She just laughed, and turned and washed herself off.

She turned back towards him, and they just looked at each other, not wanting to break the spell. Suddenly, Dave turned behind him and grabbed the shampoo. "I forgot to wash your hair. And there's paint in it." Kate giggled, and ran her hair under the water. She turned her back to Dave, and he lathered up her hair with the shampoo. She loved the feeling of his hands in her long curls, washing them. When he finished, she rinsed off, and then did his hair.

"I think we're clean. If we stay in any longer we're going to be prunes," Kate said, turning off the water. They stepped outside the shower, and clumsily tried to help each other towel off. They were both trying to dry the other at the same time, which wasn't quite working, causing them to collapse against each other in howling laughter. Finally, they managed. Dave picked up his clothes, and followed Kate into the bedroom, where she rustled through her drawers to find clothes for herself. They both got dressed, and ended up on Kate's bed, snuggling.

"Damn. Why did we bother to get dressed?" Kate said, laughing.

Dave just looked at her. "What has gotten into you?"

"Lust. Or love, one of the two." Dave just stared at her. "At this point, I'm not quite sure I can tell the difference."

"I can," he told her.

"Which one are you feeling?"

"Both."

"I'll buy that." She snuggled closer into him. "You made me feel alive, in a way I've never felt before, Sir David."

"I've felt alive since the first time I kissed you, Lady Katherine."

"OK. So have I. OK, so today I felt especially alive." She giggled.

"Yeah, I think I can relate. But, to answer your previous question: why did we get dressed? In my case, it was because I was **cold**."

"Ah. So after you warm up, we can get undressed again?"

"Try and stop me."

"Good. But, it will have to also be after we **eat**, because I am starving."

"Chinese delivery?"

"Sounds heavenly."

Dave made the call, and they went downstairs to wait for the food to arrive. They ate downstairs, spread out on the living room floor, watching a college basketball game.

The game ended, they put the leftover food in the fridge, and Kate lead Dave back up to the bedroom.

She closed the door, and reached for his shirt, pulling it over his head. He did the same. Quickly, they were nude again, on the bed, snuggling.

"Kate," Dave asked, "How far do you want to take this?"

"Well....I hadn't thought about it....I think I got a little carried away." She giggled. "I'm not quite sure I want to.....you know.....well, part of me does, but....." she trailed off.

"I think that can wait."

"You don't mind?" She breathed a sigh of relief. "I thought you'd be disappointed. I feel a bit like a tease."

"Lots we can do without doing *that*. Some of which that can be completely satisfying. As you so wonderfully proved in the shower." He grinned at her blush. "Anyhow, if you want to hold on to your virginity, that's fine with me. Honestly, I don't think either of us is ready. This is the first time we've ever done anything more than kiss, after all."

"Dave, I love you." She blurted out, surprised she had said it.

He was just as surprised to hear it, but he knew that it was true. "I love you, too, my lady Katherine." He kissed her, long and deep, then broke the kiss. He nibbled on her neck, and then moved his lips lower. "I do believe I have a debt to repay," he said, then engulfed a nipple into his mouth.

"Oooooohhhh...." she moaned, as he used his mouth on her nipples. Then she felt him pull away, and move down lower. She opened her eyes, and his head was between her legs. She smiled slightly to herself, remembering that first conversation with Sophia about cunnilingus. As Dave dove in and started lapping up and down her wet pussy, slipping his tongue into her hole, lapping onto her clit, she moaned.

"Oh.....wow.....now I know why Sophie told me she liked this so much...."

Dave pulled off, because he was laughing. "You guys talk about this stuff?"

"All the time. My Dad was always afraid to tell me *anything* about sex. I get all my info from Sophie."

"I got a lot from my older brother." He dove back into her pussy.

"Unnnngggghhhh....I do believe he gave you the correct information.....oh Jesus....."

She wrapped her legs around his head, and started gently thrusting her pussy into his face. He nibbled on her clit, and moved his hand up, slipping a finger into her pussy.

"AAAYYYYEEEE!!" She screamed. She humped against his finger in her, and his tongue on her clit, and quickly came.

He lied down with his head on her thigh, looking up at her, as she came down off of her orgasm. Her eyes flew open as her breathing settled down, and she smiled broadly at him. "Dave, that was *fantastic*! Wow, wow, wow."

"I'm very glad you liked it."

He scrambled up from her legs, lying next to her on the bed. She was on her side, propping up her head with an arm, smiling broadly at him. "I'm so glad I decided to be less naïve."

"You're glad? Not that I was any less naïve, mind you."

"True," she giggled. She looked at him shyly. "You want I should return the favor?"

Something clicked in his brain. "No. Not right now." He reached for his boxer shorts.

"Something wrong?" She asked, starting to sit up.

"No. And DON'T MOVE!"

"Huh?"

"I only put the underwear on because I didn't want Mr. Woody getting in my way. I said don't move!"

She settled back into the same position, on her side, hand propping up her head. She looked at him curiously, and then got the picture when he reached down and found his backpack, withdrawing his sketchpad and a pencil.

She giggled. "You are really lucky that you're dealing with another obsessed artist. Most girls would think you are very strange for turning down oral sex in favor of drawing."

"I am very strange, but there is no *way* I could pass up this pose."

She burst out laughing. She was actually thrilled, and flattered, that he wanted to draw her nude. She smiled widely at him, as he furrowed his brow in concentration, looking back and forth from her to his sketchpad. After a few minutes, he flipped the page.

"Mistake?"

"No," he said, still drawing. "Two copies. One for me, one for you. I've given you both drawings I've made of you. This one, I want one for myself."

"I think I'm flattered."

He scritchd away at the paper for a few more minutes. Then he looked up. "OK. I'm not done, but I've got the basics, so you can move, before your arm falls asleep."

"Good, because I have to go pee." She got up and headed for the door. "You just keep drawing, sweetie."

"I plan on it."

Kate was thinking while she was in the bathroom. As first sexual experiences go, this one was certainly unique. But, so far, it was wonderful, and so **them**. She finished up, and returned to the bedroom. Dave was still scritchng away at his sketchpad.

"Hi. Yours is done." He handed it to her. She gasped.

"My word. Do I really **look** like that?"

"All over," he smiled.

"I thought the other pictures you did of me made me look beautiful. This one makes me look radiant. It's stunning."

"The picture is only as good as the subject. **You** are stunning. That's why the picture is." He continued to work on the second one.

"I know better than to interrupt you, but, when you get done, I owe you one hell of a kiss, you wonderful guy, you."

He looked up and smiled at her, then went to finish the drawing. She looked at hers. "I have a problem."

"What's that, sweetie?"

"I don't think I can get away with hanging this on the wall." They both laughed. Then she looked down at the drawing again. "To hell with it." She hung it on the wall.

"Katherine, your father will freak."

"Let him. This is too good not to be seen."

"OK." He made a couple last pencil marks. "Great, mine is done."

She looked. "It's almost an exact copy. That really is incredible."

"I'm just glad it came out as good as yours." He stood up. "Got to go wash my hands, be right back."

He went back into the room, and Kate made good on her promise, giving him his first blowjob. She was apprehensive, but ended up enjoying herself, even if she spit out most of it. Then they lay there for a while, half-watching a college hoops game, as they cuddled and fondled each other until it was time for Dave to leave.

Before her father got home, Kate chickened out. She took the picture off of her wall. But she wasn't going to stick it in a drawer somewhere. She hung it inside her closet door, so when she opened her closet, she could see it, but it wasn't completely out in the open.

She knew Ellen had seen it, and she had showed it to Sophia, who thought it was fantastic.

If her father ever saw it, he never said anything to her.

MAKING A NAME FOR THEMSELVES (Chapter 51)

The weekend after Sophia and Warren got back from the Junior Grand Prix, John Vassar had his annual Christmas party. Four days later, it was Christmas Day. Even though she had more of a family this year, Sophia still went over to Warren's for Christmas. It had become "what she did" for Christmas, and she enjoyed it.

They had won money with their skating. Although they were saving most of it for college and the like, they did spend a little more on this Christmas than they usually did. Sophia got Warren a twelve-string acoustic guitar, among some other stuff. Warren bought her some great outfits, the usual pile of books and CDs, and a pearl necklace.

"Oh my God, Honey, you didn't have to do this!" Sophia exclaimed when she opened it.

"Yes, I did. One of the reasons I got this was very specific. Your Free Dance costume for Nationals **needs** this. It will look fantastic."

"You're right. And, after all, we are skating to String of Pearls, right?"

Nationals were in the middle of January, in Providence, RI. Sophia and Warren arrived on a Saturday evening, and quickly settled into their hotel room. Practices would start on Sunday.

Sophia and Warren had always approached their ice dancing with no illusions. Their win at the Junior Grand Prix had come as a complete shock, and they expected the good fortune to end at Nationals. They were practicing about 15 hours a week now, and that was a considerable increase over the past--and they were still on the ice half the time as their competition. They referred to themselves as the "part-time scrubs" of ice dancing. When people asked them what their hopes for their first senior Nationals were, they joked "Top Ten." Which sounded reasonable, until the questioner was told that there were only ten teams entered. The US never had a lot of senior dancers--that's why Warren and Sophia hadn't had to go through regionals and sectionals this year.

Seriously they thought, maybe, they could get into the top six. Sharon Nicholas and Steve Coleman were the defending National champions. Marie Beauchamps and Victor Anders were the defending silver medallists, and Linda Bowers and Kurt Mullins the bronze. Then there were Allison Kingsley and Ed Forberg, bronze medallists two years ago, who had missed last year with an injury. Last, but not least, were their friends, the defending junior national champions, Vickers and Pogdar. Although they had beaten Shawna and Evan at the Grand Prix final, they *did* consider that a fluke.

The ten teams were split into two practice groups. Sophia and Warren had Nicholas/Coleman, Beauchamps/Anders, and Kingsley/Forberg in their group. Sophia and Warren had the second practice group, but showed up for the first, sitting in the stands, watching the other couples. They shouted greetings at Evan and Shawna.

One of the things that was best about Nationals was seeing all their friends. Jack Garrison hadn't arrived yet, but Liz Cushman and Christine Arsenault quickly joined them in the stands.

"You two dragged your asses out of bed at 7 am to watch dance practice?" Warren teased them.

"What, and pass up the opportunity to see the First Couple of Ice Dance perform a tango? Perish the thought," Christine replied.

This was an original dance practice, so Warren and Sophia would be practicing their Piazzola tango. They watched the first group, applauding their encouragement to Evan and Shawna, and then went below and put on their skates.

They hadn't realized it yet, but their win at the Junior Grand Prix had created a bit of a buzz about them. Most of the judging panel plus a lot of the TV people were in the stands, and Sophia and Warren were one of the reasons why. The first thing these observers noticed was what they were wearing.

This was **not** a good thing. The tradition of practices at major competitions held that, even though it was only a practice, you dressed almost as well as you did for the competition. You were being watched. However, as Warren and Sophia always joked, theirs was "a budget operation." Sophia had exactly one decent practice dress--and she was saving that for some of the later practices. She took the ice in her usual practice attire--a black leotard with black tights. Warren, for his part, was wearing blue sweatpants with a grey "St. Michael's' Prep Athletics" tee shirt. They knew this was going to happen, but they didn't much care, nor did they have the money to throw around on practice dresses. Leotards and tights were cheap. Their practice clothing etiquette faux pas did not go unnoticed by the people in the arena--especially their competition.

Sharon Nicholas was pointing it out to her partner, Steve Coleman. "How wonderful. They must think that they're still taking a little cruise around the Oceanview Ice Rink."

Steve agreed, as did Marie Beauchamps, but, Marie's partner, Victor Anders, protested. "I think it's great. I think they've got guts. It's practice, wear what's comfortable."

"But what about how you **look**?" Marie asked him.

"They look fine," Victor insisted. "She, especially, looks better than fine. Assets like those don't need accoutrements."

"Oh, really?" Marie asked.

"Really. That girl could show up in a burlap bag and still stop traffic. You ladies are jealous, face it." Victor was laughing. Marie skated away from him in a huff. Victor grinned at Steve, and then skated away to catch up to his partner.

Sophia and Warren were the last in their group to run through their program. They watched all the rest, and agreed that Nicholas and Coleman were the class of the group, but as for the rest.....

"We can compete with that," Warren whispered to Sophia.

"You're right."

When they took their starting positions, there was still a bit of a buzz about what they were wearing. That stopped pretty quickly when they started skating.

Victor turned to Marie halfway through Sophia and Warren's skate, and said to her, "We're in trouble."

"Huh?" she replied.

"You watching this? We're in trouble."

"They're not **that** good."

"What, exactly, are you watching? They are definitely that good. Look at the speed. And where in hell did two seventeen year olds that practice part time learn how to tango like that? We're in trouble, Marie, I'm telling you."

Victor's foreboding only increased that night, after he had seen Sophia and Warren practice their Glenn Miller free dance.

The compulsory dances were the first part of the competition, held on Tuesday night. There were two different dances, but every couple did the same steps to the same music for each of the two dances. This was the hardest part to judge, because the differences between couples were often miniscule. Because of that, reputation counted for a lot. Sophia and Warren ended up the compulsories in fifth place, with Nicholas and Coleman first, Kingsley and Forberg second, Beauchamp and Anders third, and Vickers and Pogdar fourth.

The next night was the original dance, the tango. They knew they skated it well, but were absolutely shocked when they ended up in third. They were third overall, too, behind Nicholas/Coleman and Kingsley/Forberg. Victor Anders' foreboding were being justified, he and Marie were fifth. But both they and Shawna and Evan, who were in fourth, were in shouting distance of the bronze medal.

The free dance was the next night, Thursday. Sophia and Warren would be the last team in the final five to skate. They knew the free dance was their strength, but they still didn't think they could hold on to a medal. They expected Shawna and Evan to overtake them.

Shawna and Evan were the first team to take the ice for the free dance. Sophia and Warren watched their friends skate on a monitor backstage, and were impressed.

"They just keep getting better," Warren said.

"Yup. Hey, fourth isn't bad," Sophia quipped. "Not for our first senior nationals."

"You never know," Warren replied.

Beauchamps and Anders were rather lackluster, placing well behind Shawna and Evan. Nicholas and Coleman skated like what you'd expect from a team that was eighth in the world last year, and easily moved into the lead. Kingsley and Forberg, however, had lots of problems. They had a couple of untimely stumbles and were generally ragged. They placed behind Shawna and Evan in the free dance, although they were still ahead of them overall.

Then, it was Sophia and Warren's turn. They took the ice in front of the almost-packed house. Their skating friends like Jack, Christine and Liz were there, but a lot of their internet friends were also there. Plus, since Providence was fairly close to Oceanview, a

whole contingent had come down--all of their families, and a lot of friends, like Crash, Jessie, Nick, Meggan, Josh, and lots of others. Even John Vassar had come down, sporting a sign that said, "Go Sophia and Wimp-Man!"

They took their starting positions, surprisingly relaxed and comfortable, waiting for their music to start. Warren was wearing a white tux, while Sophia had donned a deep burgundy dress, low-cut and slinky, her hair up in a bun, wearing the pearl necklace that had been her Christmas gift from Warren. Then the music started, and they took off.

It was magic from the start. Every step was perfect, every movement precise, and the crowd realized it from the start. The applause grew, as they moved through their dance better than they ever had. Their smiles grew wider and wider as the program went on. By the time they hit the up-tempo Little Brown Jug section, the crowd was clapping along with the beat. They flew through the tricky circular footwork, and headed for the Big Finish. They banged their hips back and forth, as the crowd went nuts. After the final spin, as they did a few final movements headed into the final pose, Warren gave Sophia an unscripted kiss, causing her to hold the final pose eyes-wide with surprised laughter. Then, as the crowd erupted, they pumped their fists in triumph.

They took their bows, and then skated off to the Kiss and Cry area, where they found June, their coach, almost delirious. "MY GOD! That was PERFECT! Jesus, I can not believe how good that was!"

"I can't believe it either," an out of breath Warren agreed.

Sophia and Warren sat down next to one another, smiling broadly. Then, the marks came up. The first marks, the technical marks, were mostly 5.8, with a couple of 5.7s and even one 5.9.

"OH MY GOD!" screamed Sophia.

"Look at that! Look at that!" said Warren, in wonder, pointing at the scoreboard. The second set of marks, for presentation, was similar.

"That's got to keep you on the podium," June said, waiting for the ordinals to be posted.

They were, and Warren screamed. Underneath the slots on the scoreboard for the nine judges, Warren and Sophia saw the number 2 seven times.

"Oh my God, we won the silver medal," Sophia almost whispered. Seven of the nine judges had placed them in second place in the free dance. Because Kingsley and Forberg had finished fourth in the free, that was enough to give Warren and Sophia the silver medal.

They wrapped their arms around each other. Then they stepped out so that the crowd could see them, to acknowledge the cheers that were still going on. The crowd was delirious.

They were quickly cornered by TV commentator Sandra Willis, the ice dance analyst. It was their very first TV interview.

"That might have been the greatest upset in American Ice Dance. How does it feel?" Sandra asked.

"We still can't believe it," Warren said.

"That is the absolute best we've ever skated that program. We couldn't have done it any better," Sophia said.

"You're young," Sandra said, "but you have a wonderful ability to communicate on the ice. You have a fantastic awareness of your own body, and your partner's. Your unison, and your ability to skate close together, is remarkable. How have you managed to achieve that at such a young age?"

"Part of it is musical awareness," Sophia said. "Letting the music take you, instead of the other way around, tends to produce a program that's unified."

"Yeah, and we do our own choreography, so there is just the two of us, figuring all that out," Warren added.

"Also, being as close as we are definitely helps," Sophia smiled. "We've been a couple *off* the ice for almost three years--that's longer than we've been skating together. We can almost read each other's minds at this point. I think that shows up on the ice."

"Right," agreed Warren. "It's not mandatory to be completely in love with your ice dance partner, but it doesn't hurt," he grinned.

Sandra grinned back. "That it doesn't. Congratulations to both of you, that was truly a special performance."

Dance was the first discipline to finish, so Warren and Sophia got to watch the rest. Jack Garrison repeated as Men's champion. Liz Cushman did as ladies, but it was a **very** close thing, as both she and Christine Arsenault skated at their best, and Liz won on a 6-3 split.

The competitor's party after the end of the competition was great, but the after-party party in Liz and Christine's room was even better. Christine and Warren conspired to get a couple of bottles with the help of Jack Garrison—who was old enough to buy them—and they proceeded to get sweet, innocent Liz rather drunk. It turned out that Liz was absolutely hilarious when she had one too many, going on and on about how "If Christine Arsenault ever beats me, I'll kill her"—with Christine in the room—and confessing unrequited love for men's competitor Mike Pallas, who—unfortunately for Liz—was gay.

Finishing second got them their main goal. They got to take part in the exhibitions, doing "You'll Be In My Heart" in front of a packed house and a nationwide television audience. It was fantastic.

Since they had finished second, and the US had earned two slots for ice dance at the World Championships, they were invited to go. However, they were also invited to go to the Junior world championships.

"Let's see," Warren said to Sophia, "Junior Worlds are in Norway in February, and Senior Worlds are in Paris in March."

"I'd like the exposure of going to senior words, but at Junior worlds we could win a medal, and some prize money," Sophia pointed out.

"Let's do both."

"Sure. It's a good thing we're seniors--senior slide has set in anyway," Sophia joked.

"For **you** maybe. I still have a chance to be salutatorian. I'll be studying on the plane to Norway."

ODDS AND ENDS (Chapter 52)

Warren and Sophia were clearly on a roll. They went to Junior Worlds, and won, with Evan and Shawna winning the silver medal again.

After returning to Oceanview, Warren got a phone call.

"Warren? This is Jim Golick, from the University of Wisconsin admissions office."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Golick, what can I do for you?"

"Actually, it's what I can do for you. I have been authorized to offer you a full academic scholarship, covering all tuition, fees, and room and board, to attend the University of Wisconsin."

"Wow! Mr. Golick, this is **great** news!"

"Is Wisconsin your first choice, Warren, or are you waiting to hear from someone else?"

"Both, actually. Wisconsin **is** my first choice, but I need to see what other schools are offering."

"If Wisconsin is your first choice, Warren, you're not going to do better than a full ride."

Warren laughed. "True, but I'm only half of the equation."

"I don't understand."

"Mr. Golick, is there anyone in your office who is a figure skating fan?"

"Yeah, Linda Allard."

"Is she there? Call her over."

"OK." There was a brief pause. "She's here. I'm putting you on speakerphone."

"Hi, Ms. Allard," Warren said. "Mr. Golick tells me you're a figure skating fan. Do you know who Warren Kelleher is?"

"Sure!" Linda said. "He's an ice dancer. Won the silver medal at nationals, and just won junior worlds."

"That's me."

"Really?" Linda said. "Wow! I'm a big fan!"

"Thank you," Warren said.

"OK, there's a point here, but I'm missing it," Mr. Golick said, bemused.

"Ice dancers have partners," Warren said. "Mine's name is Sophia Daniels. As an added bonus, she's also my girlfriend. You'll find her application on your desk, somewhere. We know she got in to Wisconsin, but we haven't heard about her financial aid deal yet. Wherever we go, we go together."

"Got it. Let me find Miss Daniels' file and see where we're at."

"Great!"

Warren called Sophia and told her about the phone call. Thirty minutes later, Warren got called back.

"Full scholarship!" Sophia crowed into the phone. "And, it had nothing to do with you, I was getting it anyway, I was just further down on the phone call list."

"Great! I told you they'd ignore freshman year." Warren enthused. "Are we going to Wisconsin?"

"We're going to Wisconsin."

But first, they had to go to Paris, for the Senior World Championships. They were on the same practice ice as the defending world champions, Olga Bradochkina and Nikolai Zhargov of Russia, and the defending world bronze medallists, Renee Damphier and Christian Gaudler of Canada. This was, at least at first, very intimidating.

It turns out that Renee and Christian were great. They were ballroom-oriented in their dancing, also, and immediately took a liking to Sophia and Warren's style. After their first practice of their free dance, Christian skated by them, and said, "Glenn Miller? I like you guys already."

As they stood by the boards, they saw Bradochkina and Zhargov approach. Olga Bradochkina had the reputation of being the Diva of Ice Dance, but Sophia and Warren's teammate Sharon Nicholas had told them, "Don't worry about her. Her bark is much worse than her bite."

"So....." Olga began, "you are new American dancers. Warren and Sophia?"

"That's us," Sophia smiled. They shook Olga and Nikolai's hands. "We know who **you** are," Sophia smiled at them.

"Of course you do," Olga said in her thick Russian accent. "We are the best. But, you, you dance different. You smile and smile."

"We do smile a lot," Sophia admitted. "We love this."

"Ah. Is good. You dance like old times, but is very good dance. I like it."

Sophia and Warren looked at each other, amazed. "Thank you very much. From Olga Bradochkina, that's high praise." Warren said.

"Ah. Nothing. We see you next practice," and with that, Olga and Nikolai were gone.

"Wow," said Sophia

"I'm wondering if Nikolai is allowed to speak," Warren said with a giggle. Christian Gaudler, skating by, overheard him and said, "Generally, no!" Warren and Sophia collapsed in laughter.

The competition was a hoot. Sophia and Warren finished tenth, far beyond their expectations, as their teammates Nicholas and Coleman finished sixth, their highest Worlds placement ever. Jack Garrison, after winning the bronze last year, won the silver this year. Their friends Andrea and Brett, in their first world championship in pairs, finished seventh. And Liz Cushman had a few problems, and gave up her World

Championship—to a stunned Christine Arsenault. "If I had to lose, at least it was to Christine," Liz said to Warren after it was all over.

Most of the skaters left Worlds to immediately join the Tour of Champions, but Warren and Sophia had to get to school. They did join the tour for a few weeks later on, picking up some money for their troubles, and leaving audiences enraptured with "You'll Be In My Heart."

Warren missed out on being salutatorian, but was OK with that. Both of their proms were great, and graduation was fine. Jessie threw a massive graduation party.

They spent the summer working, back at the donut shop, and getting ready for the move to Wisconsin, and reworking their Frank Sinatra free dance for next year. They had already declined an invitation to participate in the Grand Prix series, wanting to leave the autumn for adjusting to college, but planned to go to Nationals again.

IDLE TALK (Chapter 53)

Sophia was sitting in her bedroom at the beginning of August. With her were Jessie and Kate.

"Last month, I asked Ellen to put me on the pill," Kate revealed. "She arranged it. I've been on it a little longer than a month, now."

Sophia looked at her, surprised. "Have you and Dave done it, yet?"

"No, but I am ready, ready, ready," Kate giggled. "You know that Dave and I have done everything but. Well, it's getting more and more frustrating to stop without finishing, you know? I'm sooo ready."

"As long as you're sure," Sophia smiled at her.

"Sure as the sun coming up in the morning. They say you have to wait two months after starting the pill before you're safe, right? Two months is Labor Day weekend. Dad and Ellen are going away. I have a big surprise for my boyfriend," she giggled. "He doesn't even know I'm on the pill."

"He's gonna be a happy boy. Send him back to the Prep with a smile on his face," quipped Jessie.

"Oh, he won't be the only one smiling," admitted Kate.

"So, what's up with Crash?" Sophia asked Jessie.

Jessie looked at the floor. "We've decided to break up."

"WHAT?"

"Yeah. We've talked about it. Look, I'm going to Umass, and he's going to Northwestern. We'll be a thousand miles apart. I don't want to spend college cooped up in my room. So, we're going to see other people, and see what happens. If Jason is the one, then it will keep. Meantime, we do a little exploring, and figure out if each other really is "it". You're lucky, Soph, you're bringing yours with you. That was not possible for us, for lots of reasons."

"True", Sophia smiled. "I know who I want. Of course, your idea sounds a touch intriguing, but I know that Warren is the guy for me."

"Of course you do," quipped Jessie. "But what do you mean by intriguing?"

"Well, before Warren and I knew we were going to be able to go to the same school, we discussed this, what would we do if we were separated. And we decided that we'd do exactly the same thing that you and Jason are doing. In our case, however, I think we **knew** it would just be a series of flings, and then we'd come back to each other. Warren is the guy for me, in the long run, and I know that completely. However, four years of variety has a certain.....appeal." She giggled.

"Well, ask Warren! Shit, if you want to open up your relationship, I don't think he'd have a problem with that," Jessie said. "Shit, he didn't have a problem with Jason."

"Yeah, that's because he got you in return!"

"I'm telling you, Sophia, if you opened up your relationship, Warren would **not** be staying home at night. All it would take was for one girl to experience that tongue, and it would be all over the University of Wisconsin and he'd be fending them off with a stick."

Sophia giggled. "Yeah, that's what **worries** me. No, really, I don't really need anyone else, and I wouldn't want to do that with him there at the same school."

"I don't see why you'd want it anyway. All you'll find out is that most guys can't hold a candle to that boyfriend of yours."

"Yeah, and I **know** that, too."

"Good."

Warren was talking to Jason about the breakup, also.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "We just don't want to box ourselves in. We're young, we've got plenty of time to decide if this is permanent or not."

"Hmmm. I'd be afraid of one thing."

"What's that?"

"That **I** would realize I want it to be permanent and **she** would not."

"Yeah, but that's the chance we've decided to take." Jason looked at Warren. "You're afraid of that anyway, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"What, are you kidding? Sophie adores you, absolutely adores you."

"Sometimes I wonder."

"Well, **this** is new."

"Not really." Warren sighed. "We're connected in so many ways, I'm wondering if those connections are what keep us together. She depends on me. She relies on me. There's the ice skating. I wonder if that's all we have, dependence and a career together. Not from **my** end, mind you, I love her more than life itself. But I wonder if she truly loves me. I wonder if she **knows** the answer to that question."

"Jesus, Warren, you've been together for **three** years!"

"Yeah, as have you and Jessie. And you're ending it."

"First of all, we're not looking at it as an end, just a postponement. A hiatus. And, second of all, though I love Jessie, I have **never** seen our relationship like I've seen yours. You guys were made for each other."

"I hope you're right. I've been thinking about this anyway, but moreso since you told me you and Jessie were calling it quits. Sophie and I did **not** have a good start to our relationship. She asked me out too soon after Scott, and she took me to bed too soon after that, and I went along with it. I still wonder if gratitude and dependence aren't all she has for me.

"You're nuts."

"Could be. I hope so. Because I don't know what I'd do without her."
