

A World of My Choosing

An Out-of-this-World Story by Gil Gamesh

Chapter One

Tonight she was sitting at a table by herself. As usual, she wore a baseball cap with her hair pulled back on the sides and cascading out from the back of the cap in curls and tangles. She was looking down at her mess tray and seemed to be studying something. I decided to take a chance.

“Hello, Anna. May I sit with you?”

I felt like a schoolboy: trying to impress a girl he liked, wanting to get to know her, but fearing her rejection. She looked up at me and smiled. The tension in my body relaxed a little.

For weeks I had been trying to find the courage to speak to her. I first saw her almost a month ago, going through the mess line ahead of me. As tall as she was she stood out in the group of women who seemed to be helping her to get acquainted with the mess hall. That first time, she turned, looked directly at me for a brief instant, and I saw her face. She smiled, perhaps at me, perhaps at something else. I was struck by her beauty and her smile and, for the rest of that day, her face kept haunting me.

“Yes, David. Please do. I’d be glad to have your company,” she said.

I put my food tray on the table, sat down, and held out my hand to her. She looked at me quizzically.

“We haven’t been formally introduced,” I said. “I’m Lieutenant David Blunderbuss.”

She put her hand in mine for a few seconds. It was soft and warm and dry. Mine was warm but callused and probably sweaty. The touch of her hand caused my heart to beat faster.

“And I’m Lieutenant Anna Conda,” she replied, smiling at me again.

I knew her name and I’m sure she knew mine. When we first came to the super-secret training base in the high desert of Arizona, we had been instructed to use our real first name, to make up a last name, and never to reveal our real last name. I didn’t know the last name of any of the other trainees. We all understood why. Captured soldiers cannot be tortured to reveal what they don’t know. Since my skills with a rifle had got me into sniper training, I thought mine was a fun name. From what I had heard about Anna, hers was too. With her looks and dark eyes, she could probably encoil any of the men she met. However, her reputation was that she was cold and aloof and didn’t like men.

“Your name doesn’t fit you,” I said.

“Neither does yours,” she answered. “I hear you’re really cool and always hit your target. Am I your target for tonight?”

“I hear you’re almost unapproachable,” I countered. “A lot of the guys think you don’t like men.”

She frowned at that.

“Ca me fait chier,” she whispered, and then repeated it in English in case I didn’t understand French. “That pisses me off.”

“Well, it makes me angry when you think I’m just hitting on you,” I said. “The simple truth is: I want to talk with you, Anna. That’s all.”

I felt a touch of panic at my stupidity. For weeks I had been stealing glances at her whenever I saw her in the mess hall. I was drawn to her and I had no clear idea what I wanted. Like any man, I suppose there was an element of sexual attraction but I knew there was more than that. What was it I wanted from her? I really didn’t know but something kept telling me that she was the one I had been looking for and that I’d be a fool if I didn’t try to get to know her. I’d never before felt drawn to a woman with such certainty that she and I were meant to be together.

Suddenly her frown turned into a faint smile and I relaxed a little. She looked at me appraisingly. I waited.

“Could we start over?” she asked, smiling again.

“Yes, please,” I answered, smiling back.

“I’ll talk with you, David,” she said, “but I’m starving. Could we eat first and talk later?”

Tuesday night’s dinner was Tex-Mex. It was popular with all of us but some of the guys complained because they weren’t allowed to have cold beer with it. Since alcohol in any form was forbidden where we were going, we were supposed to get used to doing without it. I had sworn off drinking anything alcoholic anyway so it was no sacrifice for me.

We watched each other without a word while we ate. She reached over once, wiped something off my mustache with her napkin, and smiled at me again. I was pleasantly surprised. Perhaps I really would be able to talk with her.

“Yours is a new approach,” she said when we were finished. “Is that really the truth, that all you want to do is talk with me?”

“Is that so hard to believe?” I asked.

“Yes, it is. I’m been the target of too many men here, David. I know what they want and they’re not going to get it from me,” she said.

“I’m not like most men here, Anna,” I said.

“I suppose not. You have a reputation for being rather aloof and untalkative,” she said. “Even when you’re with a group, you don’t have much to say. Why do you want to talk with me?”

Why did I want to talk with her? I needed to talk to someone about my life and I knew that my time at the base was limited. Why her? I had no idea why except that I thought about her every day and every night, especially during the night when I had nothing to do but think. Every time I thought of her, there was an uncanny feeling that we belonged together.

“Anna, I need to talk to somebody before I go to...wherever they assign me. If I can open up to you, will you promise to keep everything to yourself? I need...I just need to talk.”

That was our beginning. Over the next few weeks, we gradually came to know each other and talking with her became easier. It was the one thing I looked forward to most, even more than the excellent dinners they fed the trainees. We tried to coordinate our arrival at the mess hall each night at the same time. We never had to wait very long for each other.

One night we started talking about the war, the undeclared war with millions of enemies but no enemy country. She had no experience in fighting and killing. I had much more than I wanted. She asked me how I felt about what I had done and what I might be assigned to do.

“This is not a world of my choosing, Anna,” I said. “I wish I could change it into a world where people are peaceful and loving and they don’t kill each other in stupid religious wars. I can’t. I’m just trying to do something to make this world a little better. I wish I could do it without killing but I know we’re fighting against something evil that is hell-bent on killing us. I don’t like what I do.”

“I know, David,” she said. “I don’t want to do what they’re training me for, either. I’ve never killed anybody but I will do it. If they send me...” she paused for a moment, “out, on a mission, wherever, I’ll do it. What’s it like?”

I didn’t really know what they were training her for. We weren’t supposed to talk about it. It was common knowledge I was in sniper training. I was pretty sure she didn’t know how special the training for me was.

I sat and looked at my mess tray. They had fed us prime rib and it had been perfect: tender and juicy and pink in the middle. I found another bite of lean and forked it to my mouth.

“It’s not as difficult as you might think,” I said, when I’d finished chewing. “Every time I’ve done it, I was either on an assigned mission or protecting the lives of the men under my command. I try not to look at the bad guys when they’re dead. Never look at the face of a dead man, Anna, especially one you’ve killed.”

She sat at the mess table across from me and looked at my face. “That sounds so cold and heartless. Are you really like that?”

“It’s good advice, Anna,” I said. “And I am not cold and heartless. When you get to know me, you’ll understand me and you’ll know what sort of man I am.”

“Did you really do what they say you did? I mean when they found out what you could do with a rifle and how you could stay in control of a bad situation?”

“I suppose. There’s a lot of talk about me. Some of it’s true.”

“All of the guys here have a lot of respect for you, you know. They’re in awe of you. They think you’re some kind of superman. They call you The Warrior.”

“Anna, I’m not a superman. I suppose I am a warrior but I’m just an ordinary man with some unusual talents.”

“Everybody says you are really cool in a crisis. What does that mean?”

“Could we take a walk again?” I asked. “I don’t want to talk about it here.”

“Where?”

“Perhaps we could go out toward that arroyo north of the base. The dirt road’s a little rough but that area’s not off limits. The moon’s out enough so we can see. We could walk a couple of miles and then come back.”

“I’ll have to put on my boots again. Can we go by my quarters first?”

I twisted around and looked under the table. She had on white sneakers and white socks. I couldn’t believe it. In the pervasive dust, how could she walk from her quarters to the mess hall and keep her sneakers white like that? She had very nice long legs, very beautiful legs. Her khaki shorts, the same thing we all wore in the evening, looked clean and fresh.

For the month or so before we became friends, I delighted in watching her. Every morning and night I looked for her in the mess hall. She

was always dressed the same, khaki shorts with some sort of shirt, often a loose over-sized man's shirt. Her legs, long and slender and beautiful, captivated me. I never tired of looking at them but I tried not to be caught at it. Every time I saw her, she had on a baseball cap with her hair pulled back on the sides and tumbling down below her shoulders in back. I loved to watch her as she talked to the women with whom she usually ate. Her hair, dark, curly, seemingly alive, was constantly in motion behind her. She fascinated me.

“Sure. You'd better piddle too. If you have to do it out there, a rattlesnake might bite you on the butt. We'd have a hard time explaining that.”

“Do I need to get a light jacket” she asked. “It's hard to believe it can be over a hundred at mid-afternoon and down in the fifties before daylight.”

“I don't think so. We can time it: an hour out and an hour back. You won't get cold. We should be back about ten o'clock. I've got a couple of small flashlights.”

I waited on the steps to her barracks while she went inside for a few minutes. I could hear women laughing and giggling somewhere inside. A loud burst of laughter poured out once and I wondered what could have caused it. The window near the door was open and the room was dark. I could see through the screen to a small TV tuned to a game show.

When she came out again, we didn't talk until we were away from the lights. The road, if it could be called that, led from the barracks area to a scenic spot on the arroyo. I gave her one of the flashlights but we didn't really need them as long as we followed the road.

“Why were the women in the barracks laughing so much?” I asked.

“Do you really want to know? It was just silly girl stuff, like teen-age girls. We have to be silly sometimes after what we do and study during the day.”

“I understand. Tell me.”

“They've played a new variation of their favorite game. I suppose it's funny.”

“What is it?”

“They told some guy that they’ve taken a vote and he won.”

“Well, what’s the vote about? How does he win?”

“You won this time. You got more votes than the next two runners-up combined.”

“What?”

“They decided you’ve got the most beautiful penis. They said it’s uncircumcised, perfectly straight, and just the right size, almost eight inches.”

I looked at her. In the moonlight I could see a little smile around her lips. I knew she was teasing me.

“It’s smaller than average,” I lied, and continued truthfully. “I’m not circumcised. It’s not straight. When it’s erect, it’s got a little curve. Not to the side. Just a little curve up.”

She laughed quietly. “Does it really? May I see it?”

“No, at least not yet. Why is it funny?”

“Because all the girls pick out a different guy and tell him he won. Usually it’s no time at all before he finds out another guy won too. Then they ask a few more guys and they find out they all won.”

“Lieutenant Conda, that’s a cruel joke.”

“I’m glad you like it, Lieutenant Blunderbuss.”

We walked on a little farther, side by side, holding hands, occasionally bumping each other. I suppose we were both wrapped up in our own thoughts. I was.

I was thinking about what I wanted with her. I liked to be with her and when I wasn’t it seemed that I was usually thinking about her. I wanted her sexually but I wanted her for so much more. If it were not for my impending mission, I would surrender to her and being with

her and maybe start learning to love her. I just couldn't see how it was the right thing to do, to lead her into any sort of relationship that could never develop into...into what? What did I want with her? I couldn't make up my mind.

"Why did you look under the table, David?" she asked.

"To look at your legs, of course," I said. "You have beautiful legs, Anna. You're a beautiful woman."

"My legs are all hairy and I hate it. I can't shave anywhere, not even under my arms."

"Their women aren't permitted to shave anywhere. You may have to pass for one of them. Why do you think I've got this silly mustache?"

"So you'll look like one of their women," she answered and then giggled.

"Be serious," I said.

"I like your mustache. It looks good on you. You're a very handsome man, David."

"I thought you just liked me because I'm one of the few men around here you can look up to," I said.

She was probably close to six feet tall in her bare feet. I was well over six feet. I was one of the few men at the base taller than her.

"Well, that certainly helps. How tall are you?" she asked.

"About two meters. Six feet six."

"I'm five eleven. That keeps most of the shorter guys away. What do you weigh?"

"One ninety-five. And you?"

"One forty-five. Am I too fat, David?"

"No, Anna, you're a woman. You're not a girl. You're a woman with a woman's body. You're perfect the way you are."

“Yeah, I’m a big tall woman who intimidates the hell out of most of the men she meets,” she answered. “Do I intimidate you?”

“No,” I said and decided to change the subject. “Anna, do you ever look up at the stars? Do you know there are billions of galaxies and we’re on a planet circling around one little obscure star in our galaxy?”

We were well beyond the few lights of the base and the stars were brilliant in the dry high-desert air. The moon, about half full, obscured some of the stars in its vicinity. The rest of the sky was full of sparkling diamonds. We stood there for a minute looking up.

When I put my arm around her shoulders, she put hers around my waist. When I turned, facing her, and pulled her against me, she didn’t resist. She tucked her head under my chin and her cheek against my throat. We stood there holding each other for a few minutes. I felt a sense of peace and contentment. I felt I was where I belonged. I wondered what she felt.

Maybe that was what I wanted with her, peace and contentment. Standing there under the night desert sky with her in my arms, I didn’t want to let her go. I could feel her breasts against my chest but it wasn’t sexually arousing, just warm and comforting. She pulled herself tighter against me and moved her head from side to side. What did she mean by that? I wanted to pull her into me or me into her and it didn’t matter which. Was that what she wanted?

The night was full of the noise of a thousand desert creatures. Some coyotes a long way off were serenading the moon. Close by, there was a strange noise, something moving for a few seconds, then standing still for a few more seconds, and then repeating. I turned to look where the noise was. For a minute or so, I listened but couldn’t see anything. I wasn’t afraid of the noise, just cautious and a little bit curious. I decided to try to be cool, to see if that would help.

It did. My hearing was suddenly enhanced so that I was able to home in on the sound. Then I saw it, a coyote, no, a fox, it was smaller, jumping around. It seemed to be playing with something on the ground. I tried to focus my eyes but all I could see was the fat rounded shape of something, maybe a Gila monster.

“What’s making that noise, David?” she asked.

“It’s a fox, playing with a Gila monster. I don’t know whether it’s just playing with it or maybe trying to make a meal of it. I don’t know what these desert foxes eat; do you?”

“You can really see it?” she asked.

“Yes, I can see the shape of it and the flashes of its eyes. I’m pretty sure it’s a fox. I’m not sure what it’s playing with but it’s something sort of fat and rounded, like a Gila monster. It hasn’t moved.”

“Are you cool, David?”

“Yes, just a little. Why?”

“I can’t see a thing. I can hear it but I can’t see it.”

“The fox is pouncing, probably just out of reach of the lizard, and then jumping back. It stands still for a moment and then pounces again. I just saw the lizard move its head. It is a Gila monster. I think the fox is just playing with it.”

“You scare me, David. I think I’m looking at the same place as you and I can’t see anything, not even movement. May I turn on my flashlight?”

“The fox will be gone before your eyes can focus. Let’s not disturb it.” I took her hand and we started walking again. “You asked me what it means when I’m cool. Would you like me to tell you now?”

“Yes, please.”

“It’s some sort of altered state of consciousness, I suppose. I really can’t control it very much,” I lied. “I usually can’t voluntarily become really cool. Something must trigger it, some sort of situation demanding me to become cool, like when my life or the life of someone else is at risk. It just comes over me then. It’s like time slows down and all my senses are greatly enhanced.”

“But you can’t control it? You just did it.”

“I’ve learned to do it just a little when I want to. But not like the way it is when someone’s life is in danger. Then it’s much more intense.”

“If you saw me about to step on a rattlesnake, do you think it would happen?”

“I hope so. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

I wanted to tell her the complete truth but I knew that would be unbelievable and I wanted her to believe me. I was slowly learning to control being cool. I knew that time didn’t really slow down. Rationally, I knew that my perception of an event accelerated and what I perceived seemed to slow down while my ability to react seemed normal to me but, in reality, was greatly accelerated. Seemingly, the world was moving in slow motion and I was moving at normal speed.

“It sounds like the sort of adrenaline rush we get when we’re afraid of something,” she said. “I think it’s called the fight or flight response.”

“I suppose it is like that,” I said. “But it’s really extreme with me. They tested me and said they’d never seen anything like it.”

I had been very careful in what I revealed to the doctors in all the tests. I knew they would probably keep studying me if I let them learn what it was like when I was really cool. I didn’t want that.

“Tell me about the first time it happened.”

I thought for a moment. When was the first time? I suppose the first time I knew I was really different from other guys was when I was eleven and I had a little trouble with a couple of football players.

“The first time...well, I suppose the first time I responded that way was when I was eleven and had just started into puberty and had to defend myself from a bigger kid. I didn’t call it being cool then. I didn’t understand it. I liked to wear my hair long, long enough so I could tie it up in back something like yours. Some friends and I were playing in the woods near our house when a guy, a football player from school, wandered upon us. I didn’t really know him because I was home schooled but I knew his reputation.”

“He started teasing all of us, calling us little pussies and worse. I felt just a little cool but I had no idea what being really cool felt like. I turned and was just about to walk away from him when he pulled my hair...very hard...hard enough to hurt me. I turned back to face him and I suppose my face reflected the anger I felt. I actually saw red and I don’t mean that figuratively. I saw him through a red haze and I felt really cool for the first time. I told him not to do it again and he called me a little cunt and asked what I was going to do about it. I didn’t answer him. I just glared at him. Then he slapped me. I still didn’t do anything but the cool feeling deepened. When I saw him drawing back to slap me again, it seemed he was moving in slow motion. When he swung his arm around again, I moved my head to one side, grabbed his thumb, and twisted his arm around behind his back. I learned later that I had broken the bone in his thumb, almost wrenched it from his hand, and almost dislocated his shoulder. He started screaming with pain and my friends and I ran like rabbits.”

“Of course the word got out about what I had done and the football player lied to try to make me the aggressor. My father was home then and, when the school called to talk to my parents, my father took the call. After he hung up, he told me the principal wanted to talk to him about me and what I had done. He wanted my parents to bring me to school so he could hear my side of the story. I told my father the honest truth about what had happened and the only thing he did was to pull me against him and hug me. I’ll always remember what he told me. ‘Son, when I have a problem with a bad guy like that, I do whatever is necessary to take him out immediately, maybe temporarily, maybe permanently. You should do the same. You’ll know which to do.’”

“My father took me to school the next day. I remember how he was dressed, in jeans and knit shirt, and I was proud of the way he looked, slim, hard, with his muscles showing. When we got out of the car, I held his hand while we were walking into the school. I thought nothing of it because I quite often held his hand or my grandfather’s hand when we walked. Sometimes, we all three went for a walk after supper and I held both their hands. Anyway, I saw the football player and another guy who also played sitting on a bench just behind a bicycle rack. He had a big cast on his hand and his arm was in a sling. I don’t think my father even saw him and I didn’t point him out. School had just turned out and there were lots of kids milling around and leaving on their bikes.”

“The principal seemed like a fair guy. He was polite to both my father and me and let me tell my story. I didn’t deny twisting the bully’s thumb but I didn’t say anything about being cool. I just made sure he saw the handprint still on my cheek three days later. He asked me to wait in the outer office while he talked to my father. I didn’t wait where he had told me; I went to the door to the school to see if the bully and his friend were still there. Bully was but his friend was gone.”

“Suddenly, I was shoved from behind, through the front door, and then to one side to where the bicycle racks were. The bully’s friend kept shoving me until I was at the bicycle racks with the two of them. I was angry, seeing red again, and as cool as I’ve ever been. The next time the guy tried to shove me, it seemed he was moving in slow motion. I dodged to one side, kicked his feet out from under him, and, when he went sprawling, kicked him between his legs. I knew what I was doing. I aimed my foot at his testicles and I got them. I heard a crunch and I knew I had really hurt him and I had meant to. I turned to see the bully coming at me, swinging his other hand in slow motion. I sidestepped him, tripped him, put my hand on his back and shoved him. He fell face first into the bicycle racks. I later learned I had caused the first one to lose a testicle and had caused the second one to break his nose and lose some of his front teeth.”

“When I turned around my father and the principle were both running toward me. I stood there and deliberately tried to look innocent and scared. My father did the same thing he had done when I told him my story. He grabbed me, hugged me against him, and stood there holding me so tightly I could hardly breathe.”

“The bully and his friend were both rolling on the ground holding their damaged parts and screaming and moaning with pain. The principal surveyed the damage I had done to two guys both much bigger than me and probably a lot stronger. Then he told my father to take me home. He said he saw it all and couldn’t believe what he saw but he’d make sure I didn’t have any more trouble from anybody at the school. I never did. I never had any trouble with any of the kids in the neighborhood when the word got around about how I had defended myself. On the way home, my father had just one thing to say to me. ‘Good job, David. Couldn’t have done it better myself.’ I was proud of what I had done to the two guys but my father’s words meant so much more to me.”

“Did it happen a lot after that, I mean, you being cool when there was some sort of danger?” Anna asked.

“No, nothing that bad happened again for years. The next time it happened, I had finished the Academy and been given my bars and sent to combat duty. I was on patrol with six other guys. We’d been told to check out some mud huts where some white pickup trucks had been spotted. I didn’t wear my lieutenant’s bars when we were on patrol, so I’d look like just another one of the guys. I didn’t want to give away my knowledge of their language. We had one guy who spoke a little Farsi and he tried to interrogate some old men. I listened when they started talking to each other.”

“Your Farsi is that good?” she asked.

I nodded yes. “One of them was squatted down on his haunches, not talking, and he kept his eyes on me. I don’t know how he knew I understood every word they said but he must have. He looked up at me and said ‘Allah will guide you if you look up to him.’ He cast his eyes upward and I understood. He was telling me that someone would be on a rooftop.”

“You really knew that he was telling you that?”

“Yes and I went cool. I didn’t understand what was happening. It just seemed like my vision was so good I could see the smallest details around me. I scanned the rooftops and didn’t see anything until I looked at the last building farther down the dirt road. I saw something rounded on the edge of a roof and I looked closer and saw eyes. It was maybe a quarter mile from me but I knew what it was. I braced myself against the side of a building, fired one round, and saw a head snap back. A couple of seconds later, another guy burst out of a side door and started running away. I fired one more round and he went down.”

Try as I might, I had been unable to rationalize the enhancement of my normal abilities. I couldn’t find a reason that made any sense for it. That first time, it was like my eyes were a camera with a zoom feature. When I saw the rounded image on the rooftop, I zoomed in and saw the whole face. It was a face consumed with hatred. I knew he was a bad guy. At the time, I didn’t realize that anything unusual was happening. Only later did I realize what I’d done in seeing his face and it bewildered me.

“But that’s not the incident that got you your reputation, is it?” she asked. “I’ve heard all sorts of stories about how you killed ten men with one shot each in less than a minute.”

“I killed seven men, Anna. Are you sure you want me to tell you about it?”

“Yes. Please.”

“I’d been cool on a few occasions before that time but nobody noticed it. They noticed it after word got back about what I’d done that time.”

We walked on, following the dirt road in the moonlight, hand and hand. I tried to decide how much of the truth I could tell her and still be believable.

“Go on, tell me all about it,” she said.

“I was just a young lieutenant, scared to death because I’d been assigned to take a patrol to a location where a bunch of jihadists had been seen. I had ten men with me. We were on foot, working our way through a cluster of huts when they hit us. A bunch of bad guys burst out of a gully that we didn’t spot. They hit us with all sorts of small arms fire and killed one of my guys and wounded two others.”

“I went cool and time slowed down and my vision was enhanced. I just stood there and did what I was trained to do. I shot each of them one time, six of them hit right in the center of their chest. The last guy saw what I was doing and almost scrambled back down in the gully for cover. I head shot him and his head exploded like a watermelon. One of my men said I killed all seven in less than a minute. I stood there, over my guys who’d been shot, guarding them, and took control.”

“I called for help - our helmets were equipped so we could communicate with each other and with our base - and then got a couple of my men to take care of the wounded. The others helped me watch. I stood there in the direct sunlight for about thirty minutes until the copters got there. I sweated my uniform through and didn’t even know it. I just felt cool.”

“What was it like when you shot them? How did they react?”

“The first six, the ones I shot in the chest, just looked surprised and then they sort of staggered backwards and folded up. I was using some ammo that had been altered a little. It makes just a little hole going in. When it comes back out, it leaves a hole you could stick your fist in. The blood spray behind them is what tells you they’re dead.”

“Were you supposed to be using ammo like that? Altered, I mean.”

“No, but we all did it.”

“I heard you were wounded,” she said. “You didn’t mention that.”

“One shot brushed the inside of my thigh,” I lied. “It bled a little. It didn’t hit anything important.”

She looked puzzled. “Like what?”

“Well, if it had been about six inches higher, it might have hit my family jewels.”

She laughed. “Well, I’m glad you weren’t hurt, at least not there.”

I didn’t dare tell her the truth about my injury. I knew I’d been wounded. I felt the blood running down my leg. I knew I had to protect my men. So I suppose I somehow told the injury not to bleed. When the medics examined me, they were amazed that the bullet passed through my leg with so little loss of blood. I couldn’t rationalize that at all. Thankfully, it hadn’t happened again.

I decided to take a chance on something. “Anna, do you think you could love me?”

She looked up at me in the moonlight, appraisingly, frowning.

“Sometimes you frighten me, David. I like you but....”

“I’ll never hurt you, Anna,” I interrupted. “Believe me; I’ll never do anything to hurt you. I’m not going to say I love you yet. I’m not sure what love is anyway. I just know I could never hurt you.”

“I believe you, David.”

“I’m not asking if you love me yet, Anna. I’m just asking you if there’s a possibility you could.”

“Do you want to have sex with me, David?” she asked.

“No, not really, at least not tonight,” I said. “I want to know whether you think you could love me; that’s all. If a man and woman love each other, they eventually have sex with each other; don’t they?”

“I like you, David,” she whispered. “I like you very much. In time, I think I could learn to love you.”

“I’m sick of death, Anna,” I said as earnestly and honestly as I could. “I’m so sick of it I feel like screaming. I want to embrace life. I want to stand on a mountain top and look at miles of trees and a sparkling blue sea. I want to go fishing in a mountain stream and catch a bunch of trout for supper. I want to run naked through the forest like a deer. I want to be free, Anna. And I want the love of a woman, especially that, her love. I want a wife and children and a home and all that stuff. I don’t want to keep on killing. I want life, Anna, not death.”

“We don’t have time for children, David,” she teased. “Perhaps we could love each other a little before we go.”

“I’m not asking for sex, Anna,” I said, seriously. “I’m talking about love. I want the possibility of a life with love and, yeah, I want sex. I want children. I want hope, Anna. I want life. I need it. I guess it’s hope I need most.”

“Then you’re like me, David,” she said. “I had about given up on all those things. You’ve made me want to believe in them again.”

“I’ll warn you, Anna. I’m plagued by demons. They visit me at night. There are things I can’t talk about. If I try, I go mute.”

“Would you try to talk to me about them? I’ll listen. I’ll try to understand.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” I said.

“Would you kiss me, David?” she whispered. “We’ll see where that leads.”

“Yes,” I said, and kissed her for the first time.

I put my arms around her and pulled her against me. I tried to be gentle. I didn’t want to reveal the hunger I felt for her. I didn’t want to frighten her. She held her face up to me and I bent down to her and just barely touched my lips to hers. I pulled away almost immediately.

Perhaps that wasn’t the sort of kiss she wanted. She took my head in her hands, pulled it back down to her, kissed me with an open mouth, and pushed her tongue into my mouth. I gave in and let go of all restraint and we stood locked together for what seemed like an eternity.

My penis tried to become erect and strained against my shorts. As usual, I’d gone commando so my testicles could hang down and there was nothing but the cloth of my khaki shorts to restrain my penis. I put my hands on her derriere and pulled her against my hardness. I didn’t want to alarm her. I just wanted her to know how much I desired her. She wasn’t alarmed. She put her hands on my butt, pulled me even harder against her, and rubbed her pelvis against me.

When we finally broke for breath, she leaned back and looked up at me. Our hands were still holding each other by our buttocks. We were both breathing heavily. I suppose we both wanted to let the beast loose. I know I did. I rubbed my hard-on around and around on her stomach and thighs. I wanted her to feel it. I wanted her to know how much I wanted and needed her.

“Wow,” she finally said, breathlessly.

“Perhaps we’d better continue our walk, Anna,” I said.

“I think you’re right, David,” she said. “Maybe we should start back. Can you walk with three legs?”

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Alone in bed that night, I lay there naked, propped up on pillows, with my hands behind my head, staring at nothing. The lights in the room were off except for a small nightlight. In the dim light I looked at my penis, resting on my thigh. It was soft but swollen, as though it still remembered the embrace with Anna. I reached down, pulled my

testicles up so they weren't caught between my thighs, and then crossed my ankles.

I lay there thinking about Anna and our relationship. Perhaps it would be possible for me to seduce her. Maybe she would give herself to me willingly, maybe eagerly, to judge from her kiss. Was it too early in our relationship? I didn't want to hurt her. I very much wanted to spare her the hurt she might feel if I pushed her into sex too soon and she felt I was like all the others and that sex was all I wanted.

I thought about the mission that I wanted so much and about my chance of coming back from it. I hadn't told her about it. I couldn't tell her about it, even though I wanted so much to be honest with her. How would it affect her if we made love and that made her want me to be with her for the rest of our lives and then I didn't come back from the mission? Perhaps it would be best if I kept our relationship from developing any further. But I wanted her. I knew I wanted her, but not just for sex. I wanted her for love and marriage and kids and all the wonderful things about family.

I thought about the demons that plagued my dreams. I had struggled for years to avoid thinking about the cause of the nightmares and I had largely succeeded. At night, however, I could not consciously repress the incident and I knew it was manifesting itself in my dreams, when I had no control. How would she react when or if I told her about it?

I struggled with deciding what the right thing to do was. I knew I was beginning to love her. I knew I didn't want to hurt her. I knew I needed her and wanted her. I finally decided that was all I knew for sure.

I wanted sex with Anna but I finally decided that my hand would have to be a poor substitute. From the nightstand, I took the container of crème I used to masturbate and rubbed a big glob over my penis and then over my testicles. I put my hand under my scrotum, lifted my balls, and lay there looking at them. I knew they were pouring out a river of testosterone. I knew they were producing millions of sperm each day. I knew how insistent was the need to find an outlet for all those sperm. Almost every night, I used my hand to find some relief so I could go to sleep. My balls were the cause of all my sexual problems and I knew it but I was glad I had them. I didn't want to be without them. I liked being a man.

Finally I wrapped my fingers around my penis and began to stroke it, slowly, lightly, watching as my foreskin uncovered the head and then recovered it. I was in no hurry to reach orgasm. I enjoyed the way it felt when I started slowly and gently. I wondered what Anna would have said if I had let her see it. Did she believe me when I said it was smaller than average? Would she like it? Would she have said something like Gabrielle had said? “Il ne casse rien.”

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Just after I turned sixteen, my French maternal grandparents sent me an invitation to spend the summer with them. Since they offered to pay for airfare, it was an offer I couldn't refuse. I flew into Bordeaux and rode the train down to Toulouse.

I spent the summer speaking nothing but French, eating grandmère L'Héritier's marvelous French food, drinking grandpère's good wine, and almost forgetting I was an American. I talked endlessly about my life in Les États-Unis and about my paternal grandparents. I was able to talk about my parents as long as I avoided anything that happened after I was twelve. I think they understood.

Midsummer, I spent a week with my mother's brother and his family in Perpignan, further south, on the Golfe du Lion. I'd never met my uncle, Bernard L'Héritier, his wife Michèle, or their two daughters, Gabrielle and Dannielle. When I arrived Saturday afternoon, the family gave me a warm reception at the train station and then things just got hotter after that.

Their home was an old stone building that looked strange; it had an extension without a roof to one side. The extension didn't need one. It was a completely-enclosed pool that was surrounded by a stone wall and hundreds of potted plants. From the tables and chairs and chaises scattered around, it was evident they almost lived there.

Gabi and Danni were both younger than me, fifteen and fourteen to my much-more mature sixteen. Danni had agreed to share Gabi's bed so I could have hers, if – her words - I didn't mess it up. They both delighted in teasing me and embarrassing me and making me feel ten years old, especially when we were with their friends.

I hadn't brought anything for swimming so the girls immediately insisted on going shopping for something for me to wear. The three of us rode bicycles through narrow streets to a shop. I chose the long shorts that I was used to at home but the girls insisted that I buy something that barely covered my butt in back and my genitals in front. It was a Speedo. I gave in to their wishes with trepidation.

Back at their house, my uncle told me the family usually had Saturday-night dinner beside the pool, wearing their swimming attire. I went to my room – Danni's room – and changed into my Speedo and then almost wished I'd insisted on longer shorts. The Speedo was too revealing for a sixteen year-old boy who wasn't accustomed to French preferences in swimwear.

My uncle was sitting at a table near the pool in something just as revealing. Then Danni came out, carrying a dish for our meal, and my eyes bugged out. She had forgotten the top to her bikini and her budding breasts had real nipples. I could hardly take my eyes off them. When Gabi came out dressed, or undressed, the same way, with larger breasts, beautiful, perfectly-rounded breasts, and carrying another dish, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. When my aunt came out, with even larger breasts, I knew I had.

For a boy who had seen the real breasts of only one female, three pairs in a few minutes were too much. I began to get an erection. My uncle must have noticed it. He invited me to sit down for dinner and handed me a napkin. The meal was more wonderful French food. I was embarrassed when I missed my mouth with my fork. I made an excuse that I wasn't accustomed to the European way of eating: knife always in right hand, fork always in left hand. In reality, their way was the way my French mother had taught me. The females all grinned when I offered my excuse. I think they knew the real reason.

On Monday, things got even hotter. My uncle went to work. My aunt went shopping. I was left at home with my two first cousins who were intent on driving me crazy.

They wanted to play in the pool so we did. They wanted to lie in the sun in three chaise-lounges side by side with me in the middle so we did. Imagine two beautiful young girls wearing little bikini bottoms and nothing else, with perfect little breasts. They wanted to talk about sex so we did. It was a subject they knew little about and, of course, I professed to be very knowledgeable.

I lay there in the sun, warm and relaxed, with my eyes shut and talked to them. I was proud of myself for keeping my penis under reasonable control. I had a big bulge in my Speedo but at least it was no longer trying to rip its way out.

Then I was attacked. That's the only to describe it. They both piled on me at the same time, tickling me, rubbing their breasts against me, and trying to pull my Speedo down. Finally I gave in and let them. A few seconds later, my penis was as hard as it ever gets and suspended above my belly, almost to my navel.

Danni looked at it, said, "Il est étonnant," and started giggling.

Gabi just shrugged, said "Il ne casse rien," and started giggling too.

Danni took a deep breath and said, "Il faut le voir pour le croire."

I lay there looking from Danni's face to Gabi's and didn't know what to say. Like all sixteen year-old boys, I was proud of my penis. I'd never heard it described as nothing special before. I liked Danni's response better: It has to be seen to be believed.

The next time we were left alone, Gabi and Danni wanted to swim again and I knew they wanted to do more than that. I refused to let them pull my Speedo down unless they pulled theirs down too. They were reluctant to do it but they finally yielded, Danni first and then Gabi. I looked at Danni first, at the little cleft in her mound, with a sparse growth of pubic hair, and then at Gabi. Gabi's dark pubic hair almost covered whatever was between her legs but I could see the slit in her mound too, this time with something like a little finger between the two soft halves. I suppose I'd expected to see some place where I could insert my penis but I didn't see anything like that. I was curious as to where their vaginas were.

"Il ne casse rien," I said, grinning as wide as I could. And that's when they attacked me again.

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"Il ne casse rien." Eight years later and I still remembered the way Gabi and Danni looked at me that afternoon, or rather, at my penis. I held it straight up and looked at it critically for a minute. It was bigger

than average but I thought it was fitting for a man my size. I pulled my foreskin down and looked at the red head of it. Nice and shiny and smooth. Good shape, kind of funny shaped, but I liked it. I slid the skin back up and looked at the shaft. Smooth skin with some hair down near the base. One big blood vessel up its length with faint ones branching off it. “Il ne casse rien.” What the hell! I liked it. I remembered that both of them had liked it too.

In fact, they loved it so much that they masturbated me to orgasm four times in one afternoon. The first time, they were on their knees on each side of me, looking down at what was in their hands. I put my hands under my head and offered no resistance. They masturbated me in turn and then squealed when I sprayed their faces with my semen. They pretended to be mad at me but I told them they should have known not to have their heads directly over it.

The second time, they lay on each side of me, well out of firing range, with Danni’s hand cupped under my testicles and Gabi’s hand flying up and down on the shaft of my penis. Danni counted the pulses when I came, all eight of them, the first flying over my head and the rest laying down a white trail from my face to my lower abdomen. Then she said: “C’est magnifique!” I managed a smile when Gabi agreed: “C’est vraiment magnifique!”

I thought about how their soft hands felt as they played with my penis and testicles and how much I loved every minute of it. I felt proud of the white strings and puddles of semen on my chest and stomach. I was astonished when first Gabi and then Danni stuck their fingers in a puddle, smelled the semen, and then stuck it in their mouths. It was Danni who said it this time: “Il ne casse rien.”

Somehow I knew that I shouldn’t try to have intercourse with them and I suppose I was afraid to try. I did coax them into spreading their legs and pulling everything there apart so I could see the pink flesh in their vulvas. I tried to get them to perform oral sex on me and Gabi did it for a few seconds before pulling away and announcing that it was too big. Danni wanted to try but, after holding my penis straight up for a while and moving her open mouth closer to it, she agreed with her sister that it was just too big. She licked it like an ice cream cone instead.

“Il ne casse rien.” I couldn’t help but smile, remembering Danni’s face. Her eyes looked as big as saucers.

I wondered what Anna's reaction would be when she saw it. I hoped she wouldn't say "Il ne casse rien." How would she feel about oral sex? I thought about how I felt and decided I'd love to do her even if she didn't reciprocate but I wanted her to do it to me.

I shut my eyes, stroked my penis a little faster, and pictured Gabi with her mouth covering the head of my penis and her soft hand moving up and down on the shaft. That image metamorphed into Anna and I held the image of her wild hair covering my stomach while her hidden mouth sucked on the head of my penis.

Within a minute of so, I came and the feeling was so intense that I groaned loudly and then immediately looked around, not remembering where I was, beside the pool with Gabi sucking me while Danni watched, or Anna sucking me while I came in her mouth. Instead I was in my room, in my bed, alone, with semen on my face and white puddles and drools of semen all over my stomach and chest.

I lay there looking down at the mess I had made, holding onto the muddled images of Gabi and Anna sucking me and then I wondered what either one of them would do if I did come in her mouth, or really, what would Anna do. I had seen Gabi and Danni only once more when their family visited in the United States but they were often in my imagination.

Why would a woman want to suck a man's penis until he comes in her mouth? I couldn't imagine she would find a mouth full of semen palatable. Would she swallow it? Would I? I didn't know.

I wiped my finger through the semen in my navel and stuck it in my mouth. I moved the semen around with my tongue and felt its viscosity. It seemed to stick to my tongue and I used my teeth to rake it off. I was salivating heavily and I let my saliva mix with the semen and then pulled it to the back of my mouth and swallowed. The taste was strange and unexpectedly arousing. I thought back to the first time I had tasted it when a buddy and I had dared each other to taste our own and then the other's. We had both agreed we had to swallow it. How old was I? Fourteen? What would Anna think of sucking me off and then swallowing it? I wanted her to do it.

I got up and went in the bathroom to the shower. A few minutes later I was back in bed and sleep came quickly.

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A few nights later, I was awakened twice, by two quite-different dreams. The first was another wet dream; the second was another nightmare.

The first time I was dreaming of sex with a woman. In my sleep-muddled state I couldn't tell whether she was sucking me or I was fucking her. I wanted the woman to be Anna but it could have been any woman. I had awakened with the orgasm already fading away, my shorts drenched with my semen, and my penis still hard. I lay there trying to hang onto the pleasure but knowing I had to leave my warm bed and go to the cold bathroom. When my erection finally subsided, I threw back the blankets and went to the bathroom to clean myself.

Anna had offered to lend me a hand. We had been in the darkened TV room at her barracks, wrapped up in each other, drowning in kissing, and both hot and sweaty from wanting. My penis had been hard for an hour or so and she had offered to masturbate me. But there were two other couples in darkened corners and I wouldn't let her. She said the other couples would probably do it but I just couldn't.

I wanted to love her and have sex with her and to release my semen at the entrance to her womb. I wanted to ejaculate where there was a possibility of creating life. I knew she'd had a contraceptive implant. It was common knowledge that all the women trainees had, since they wouldn't be able to rely on the pill when they went out on assignment. They all knew they might be raped if they were captured but at least they knew they wouldn't be impregnated.

When I got back to my barracks, I should have masturbated. It was a nightly ritual, usually in the shower, in bed on occasion. I had laid there with my hard penis in my hand, waiting for sleep. I didn't want to masturbate; I wanted to make love with Anna. My body compromised with a wet dream.

The second time I awoke with my heart pounding and my lungs struggling for breath. I was dreaming of something horrible happening to someone I loved. I tried to hang on to the fleeting remnants of the dream so I could understand it. The dream was

usually different in content but it was always the same in meaning: someone I loved was being killed or tortured or maimed and I was helpless to do anything about it.

The dream was a recurrent one I had been experiencing for years. I knew what it meant but I didn't know what to do about it. I knew I should talk with someone, probably a psychiatrist, but I was afraid to reveal the problem because I knew it could mean I would never get the mission I wanted so much.

I wanted to tell Anna everything but I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to. I didn't know how she would react, especially if I suddenly went mute while trying to talk to her. I was afraid I'd lose what little hope I had of a life with her.

I laid there in bed for the rest of the night thinking about Anna and what I wanted to do with her and what I should do about her and I finally decided I had to tell her.

Chapter Two

SIRAs soon as we pulled up to the barracks, the MPs came out, marched to the bus, and stood there, one on each side of the door, like two saguaros. I knew they had come for me. I held back and let the other guys get off first. The MPs carefully checked the name tag of each guy as he ran their little gauntlet.

Their dress uniforms were immaculate, shoes mirror-like in spite of all the dust, knife-edge creases on their blue pants, tailored white shirts with an impressive array of insignia, ribbons, and medals, and MP ball caps in regulation position on their heads. I knew they weren't based out in the dessert with us. I knew they had come with a group of officers who had a decision to make. I knew I had to persuade the officers to make the right decision.

When I exited, the older one checked my name tag, heaved a sign of relief, and then asked, "Lieutenant Blunderbuss, would you come with us, Sir?"

“Do I have time to take a quick shower and put on my uniform?” I asked.

“No, Sir,” he said, “our orders are to bring you the minute you step off the bus.”

I knew what that meant. They had heard of my shooting score for the day. A confirmed kill on each target in spite of heat mirages and blowing dust at the impossible distances they’d set for me had caused quite a buzz. I was glad I had been able to be cool every time I shot. The panel of officers wanted me yanked off the bus in my stinking dusty clothing and brought before them in their best dress uniforms. I knew it was part of the game they wanted to play, to see if I could be intimidated by the difference. I knew I had to take charge of the meeting and not let them gang up on me as they intended to do.

I decided to test the patience of the MPs just a little. “Well, you’ll have to wait another minute. I’ve got to piss.”

I walked over to their SUV and into the small space they’d left between it and our barracks. I took my time unzipping, pulling out my penis, and taking a much-needed piss. I’d probably drunk a couple of gallons of water during the day but I’d sweated out almost all of it. My camouflage uniform had salt-encrusted areas all over. I was tempted to piss on their right-rear tire but the parched bush some one had foolishly planted near the barracks looked like it would appreciate watering, even with dark-yellow urine.

When I finished, I shook my penis longer than needed, leisurely milked it down a few times, slid my foreskin back down, tucked it away, zipped, took a couple of deep breaths, and turned back to face them. The older one wasn’t pleased with my performance. He was definitely frowning. The younger one had just a little bit of a strained smile on his face.

“Well, let’s go, gentlemen,” I said. “What are you waiting for?”

The interview panel was about what I expected it to be: one colonel, one lieutenant colonel, two majors, and one captain. They were sitting in comfortable stuffed chairs behind a long table on a raised stage at one end of the room. There was a second lieutenant in a chair behind them. There was a single wooden chair on the floor in front of them. It was also what I expected. I decided I wouldn’t play their little game.

“Please be seated,” Lieutenant...” – The colonel looked at a manila folder in front of him. – “...Blunderbuss. We’ll begin in just a few minutes.”

They all opened manila folders and began to skim through them. I knew they knew my name. The business with the manila folders was just another little part of their game.

The lieutenant behind them smiled. Maybe he was amused by my nom de guerre or by their game. He’d probably played it more than once. I think he even winked at me.

“I’d rather stand, Sir,” I said, still at attention. “I had a rough ride coming back from the shooting range.”

All five of them looked up at me. My head was higher than theirs. They would have to look up at me, not down at me.

“As you wish, Lieutenant,” the colonel said, with just a touch of annoyance. “We’ll be with you in just a few minutes.”

They all looked back down at their folders. The lieutenant definitely nodded and smiled for a split second. I gave them about five seconds, not a few minutes.

“Sir, if you don’t mind, Sir,” I said, - Two sirs are always better than one. – “If you don’t mind I’d like to give you the answers to most of the questions you’re going to ask. It would speed up things. You can interrupt me if you don’t understand or if you need clarification on something. I’m starved and I don’t want to miss dinner tonight. It’s seafood night.”

They all looked up at me, eyes wide open, no smiles showing. I decided I might as well press on. It was seafood night but I could show up late and eat as much of the leftovers as I wished. The kitchen crew was accustomed to trainees doing that.

They looked around at each other, at me, and at each other. I expected them to look behind them at the lieutenant. He was barely shaking his head. One of the majors leaned over and whispered to the colonel. He leaned over to the lieutenant colonel, and they whispered. The colonel evidently decided it was time to take control again. He looked up at

me. I decided to push them a little by getting in their space. I took a couple of steps forward, still at attention, took some deep breaths, and waited. It was OK, I was cool.

“Are you having dinner with Lieutenant Anna Conda again?” the colonel asked.

“We’d planned on that, Sir.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he answered. “Maybe we’ll be through in time.”

I interpreted his maybe as an attempt to throw me off and to wrest control from me.

“If you don’t mind, Sir, may I stand at ease?” I asked. “I had it rough with today’s shooting trials. They threw a couple of difficult situations at me.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” the colonel said, with more than a little exasperation. “You may stand at ease.”

The major at the end of the row was definitely smiling and looking at me with more interest. He probably knew what I was doing. I didn’t care; I was in control.

“The answer to the most important question, Sir, is - Yes, Sir, I can kill Grand Ayatollah Muqtada al-Badr. When he comes out the door of the Imam al-Hussein Shrine in Mamoon after mid-day prayers, I can take him.”

They looked around at each other excitedly and I knew I’d reasoned it out correctly. The colonel looked bewildered.

“And how will you do that, Lieutenant?” one of the majors sneered. “That shrine is in the center of a huge plaza. They clear the plaza before he comes out. He’s surrounded by his retinue and they tuck him in a limousine in about ten seconds. The nearest building is so far away it’s well beyond the shooting range of a sniper. How are you going to do it?”

I told them more than they probably wanted to know about the weapon I’d use, the scope, the ammo, the heat mirage problems, and

the wind and dust problems. I described the weapon in detail, extrapolating from articles I'd read about the latest developments in sniper rifles. I described the way the built-in computer downloaded information from satellites, sensed the environment of the shooting trajectory, and interacted with the scope and the rifle. I told them about my eyesight, my shooting skills, and how much I wanted to do the job. I described the way I had been cool when I killed the seven bad guys. They listened attentively and asked me only a few questions. After almost half an hour, the colonel changed the subject.

“Lieutenant, I see you’re wearing something that’s not a regulation part of your uniform,” the colonel said. “Is that a knife?”

I looked down at my hip at Grandfather’s gift. Since when were they so particular about whether we were dressed according to regulations? On the base, all the trainees were permitted a great deal of leeway in how they dressed. We were too few and too precious as military weapons to worry about regulations.

“Yes, Sir. It’s two knives,” I said. “Grandfather gave them to me. One’s got a blade about six inches long. The other’s over a foot long. Little Boy and Big Boy.”

“May we see them?”

I interpreted that as another ploy to take control away from me. They were sitting there without weapons of any kind. I still had mine.

“I’d rather not, Sir,” I answered. “They’re both razor sharp. They’ll cut if you breathe on them. I wouldn’t want to be responsible for you injuring yourself.”

I knew I was pushing again by implying that he couldn’t responsibly handle a sharp knife. I didn’t care. I didn’t want him to put his hands on my knives.

“Would you put them on the table so we all may see them?” he persisted. “I promise nobody will touch them.”

I thought it wise to yield that much to them. I took Big Boy and Little Boy out of the scabbard, took a couple of steps forward, and put them on the table in front of him. He stood up and leaned over the table. The other officers followed suite and leaned over looking at my

knives. I stood just in front of the table, refusing to move back in my place.

“They’re over a hundred years old, made in a mountainous region between Russia and Iran,” I said, deliberately omitting any sir. “Many men have died when they felt the kiss of Big Boy or Little Boy.”

“And you say your grandfather gave them to you,” one of the majors said, leaning over too close to the knives and dangerously into the colonel’s space. “Did he use them in taking the lives of those men?”

“Yes, Sir, some of them. His father was the first one to use them to kill.”

“Perhaps you’d better put them back in their scabbard, Lieutenant,” the colonel said. “I don’t think the major wants to be one of Big Boy’s kills.”

I carefully slid my knives back in the scabbard on my hip and then stood waiting, still in their space.

One of the majors asked me, in Farsi, how good was my command of the language. His wasn’t very good. I replied in the same language, trying to be as casual and careless as if I were talking to a friend. He stopped me and asked the other lieutenant behind them to translate. I was beginning to wonder if the guy had a purpose in life. He told them I said that I’d learned most of it from my parents and grandparents, that I’d helped teach English to Iranian and Iraqi immigrants like the college professors and doctors who had left after the fundamentalists took over the whole area, and that I’d also learned from books and CDs and movies in Farsi. The Academy had merely broadened my knowledge of the language.

“So your command of Farsi comes primarily from what I’d characterize as educated sources,” the major said.

I thought it was a good point and I thought I knew where he was going with it.

“Yes, Sir, but I can also hold my own in street-talk Farsi. Grandfather made sure of that. I’m also quite good at profanity and insulting your ancestors. Grandfather was a soft-spoken respected gentleman but he could change completely when he wished. Like a lot of kids, I liked to

try to shock people with crude language. He decided he'd teach me how to do it in Arabic and Farsi. We had a lot of fun with it, especially when I was going through puberty. Grandmother pretended to be shocked but she always ended up laughing at us," I replied in Farsi, stopping after each sentence for translation.

"Would you like to insult my ancestors, Lieutenant?" the Colonel asked, in English.

"No, Sir," I replied in Farsi and then in English.

"Suppose I ordered you to do it," he said. "Will you hit me and my ancestors with your best effort?"

"Yes, Sir," I replied in Farsi and then in English.

"Then I'm giving you an order, Lieutenant," he said. "I want you to insult me and my ancestors. I want you to be as crude with it as you can be. Stop after each sentence so we can get a translation."

I followed his orders and gave him my best, or maybe my worst. The translator tended to stumble over some of it and it was easy to see he was embarrassed by my insults. I had to correct him a few times, giving him the English words, the Farsi words, and then what they meant in context.

The Colonel was unfazed and even laughed a couple of times. I suppose that gave permission to the other officers and they began to laugh too when I was at my most eloquent.

"So let me summarize this, Lieutenant," he said, when I finished. "My mother gave a dromedary camel a blowjob until both of his humps caved in. My father had sex with a flock of sheep and was charged with incest because they were his own children. And I'm the son of one of a pack of dogs who routinely serviced my mother. Is that about it?"

"Yes, Sir," I said in English, "unless you want me to insult your grandparents. Grandfather was quite good at it and he could go back a few generations without repeating himself."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Lieutenant" he said. "Can you do the same in Arabic? Are they about the same?"

“Yes, Sir,” I said. “My Arabic is not quite as good as my Farsi. Sometimes they both will use insults and curses which are poetic. Both languages can be quite expressive in poetry.”

“Like the Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam?” one of the majors asked, showing off. “Do you know of it?”

“Yes, Sir. Grandfather loved it. Sometimes he’d read it to me and then explain what it meant. I memorized some of his favorite quatrains and he liked for me to recite them for him.”

“Can you give us one?” the Colonel asked.

I had to think for a minute or so. In Farsi, I gave them one I knew Grandfather loved. I repeated it in English.

**“And that inverted bowl they call the sky,
Where under crawling, coop’d we live and die,
Lift not your hands to it for help,
For it as impotently rolls as you or I.”**

“Do you hate Islam and its followers, Lieutenant?” the captain asked. I could hardly believe he’d finally said something.

“No, Sir,” I answered, and quickly decided to give him my real opinion. “It’s a system of mind control based on myths purporting to be the divine word of a god as revealed to a prophet. It brutally oppresses women, makes normal sexuality into a sin, totally controls the lives of its followers, and says the faithful have a duty to kill infidels. It’s collective insanity, self-delusion, and it’s evil, completely evil. What is there to like about it?”

“What about Christianity?” he followed up.

“I don’t hate it, Sir,” I said earnestly. “I just think it’s pathetically childish and ridiculous. Does anyone really believe in a virgin birth? Does anyone really believe that Jesus was born of a woman who was fertilized by a god? Does anyone really believe we have something called a soul which lives on after death? Christianity doesn’t suppress women quite as much as Islam but it still equates sex with sin as a means of controlling its adherents. It’s just as imperialistic in treating all other religions as inferior but at least it tries to convert the

heathen before it kills them. It's collective insanity for those who choose to be ignorant. It's evil too. I see nothing good in it."

"Do you think the two religions will ever learn to get along?" he persisted.

"No, Sir. Christianity and Islam have been the basis for wars for hundreds of years. I think we'll be fighting as long as we have religions. In a world of my choosing, we'd have neither of them, or, at best, we'd treat religion as the mental illness which it most assuredly is."

"Are you an atheist, Lieutenant?" one of the majors asked.

"No, Sir," I answered. "I'm an antitheist. There's a difference."

"What's the difference?" he asked.

"An atheist is someone who doesn't believe in god, who views all religions as myths. An antitheist goes further. He views all religions as inherently evil and as the source of most human conflict and misery."

"It's said that there are no atheists in fox holes, Lieutenant," he said. "I know you've seen combat. Why don't you believe in God?"

"My lack of belief stems from my childhood, Sir," I answered. "My parents and grandparents, who home-schooled me, were all atheists. When I was about fifteen, I kept asking my grandfather about religion. One day he gave me a big box of books, all about religions, including the Bible and the Koran. On top of the box was a long rope. He told me to search the books for god and, when I found him, to drag him home with the rope around his neck. I read every one of the books, some of them more than once. The rope is still hanging on the wall in my bedroom at home."

"But when you were in combat, weren't you inclined to pray to God for your safety?" he continued.

"No, Sir," I answered. "That's just a useless cop-out. I relied on my weapon and my own abilities. That was enough."

“Why do you want this mission, Lieutenant Blunderbuss?” one of the majors asked.

Finally someone had asked the most important question of all. I knew I had to choose the words of my reply carefully. I knew I might go mute and freeze up if I said certain words and my chance at the mission would be gone.

“Sir, do you know what pashtunwali is?” I asked.

“No,” he answered. “What is it?”

“Pashtunwali is primarily a system of traditions which originated in the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan. One of the traditions calls for blood revenge for wrongs, especially murder, done against a person or his kinship group. Failure to seek revenge is deemed a sign of moral weakness. It implies that the whole kinship group is lacking in moral character.”

All the members of the board were leaning forward now, hanging on to every word I said. This was why I was standing in front of them.

“My father was Grandfather’s only son, just as I’m the only son of my father. When his son, my father, was killed, my grandfather was too old and infirm to be able to seek revenge. He had his wife, my grandmother, and me, a twelve-year old boy, to care for. I loved both my father and my grandfather and I knew that if revenge was to be exacted, it would be up to me. At age fifteen, I swore to Grandfather that I would seek revenge for Father’s death. Grandfather is with me only in spirit now but I still want that revenge for him and for myself. Now, almost ten years after I swore revenge to Grandfather, I stand before you asking you to let me go on that mission.”

After a minute or two of silence, the major at the end of the row spoke up. “Colonel...” He hesitated and I assumed he was about to ask me about religion again. The colonel probably thought so too. He scowled at the major.

“Yes, what is it, Major?” he said.

“Sir, may I tell the lieutenant something? It’s personal but I believe it will help him. I don’t think it will hurt his interview.”

“Your judgment is usually good, Major,” he said. “Go ahead.”

The major looked at me and smiled. “David, I knew your father. We served together for two years. We were very good friends. He often spoke lovingly of you.”

I stiffened into attention again. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to get into anything about my father. If I went too far in remembering, I was afraid I’d freeze up again and blow everything.”

“He was very proud of you,” the major continued. “He used to regale us with tales about his little blunderbuss – that’s what he called you – and your latest escapades.”

“Yes, Sir, that’s what he called me, my little blunderbuss. He had some other names for me but he always smiled when he called me that.”

“I never met your mother...” he started.

I couldn’t help it. I felt a stab of panic and almost gave in to it. I closed my eyes, swayed a little bit, breathed deeply a couple of times, and realized I’d lost my cool. I was no longer in control.

“Are you OK, Lieutenant?” the colonel asked. He stood up and the other officers followed him.

“Yes, Sir,” I said, still breathing deeply. “I’m OK. I wouldn’t mind a glass of cold water though. I just need something to eat. I haven’t had anything since breakfast.”

That was as much a distraction as I could think of so I could have a little time to make sure I was cool again.

The colonel looked at the lieutenant interpreter and nodded at me. He brought the carafe, stood directly in front of me, and poured me a glass of water. “Relax,” he whispered without moving his mouth. “You’re doing great.”

“Lieutenant, when you’re through talking to him, go get somebody to move this damn table down on the level with him,” the colonel ordered. “Give him your chair now and bring yourself back another one. Call the officers’ mess and tell them to bring us seafood dinners

for seven, no, eight, as soon as possible. Tell them to send somebody and get the table set up immediately.”

The lieutenant brought his stuffed chair off the stage, put it down in front of me, and picked up the wooden chair. He started to walk off with it.

“Lieutenant, bring that god damn chair back here,” the colonel yelled.

The lieutenant brought it back and stood holding it. He looked petrified. The colonel took the chair from his hands, told him, “Relax, you’re doing great,” and put the wooden chair in front of the other one. He whispered something to the lieutenant. The lieutenant smiled and left. The colonel sat down on the wooden chair.

“Sit down, David,” he said, gesturing to the upholstered chair. “I asked him to invite Lieutenant Anna Conda to have dinner with us.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I said, sitting at ease in the upholstered chair. “We’re just friends but I wouldn’t want to stand her up.”

“Now, Major, what were you going to tell David?” the colonel asked. “All of you stand at ease and relax. We’re about to cut out all the fucking bullshit.”

“David, I was saying that I never met your mother, but I saw her picture lots of times,” the major said. “She was a beautiful woman. Every time your father went home, he’d come back with tales about you. He’d keep us in stitches for days telling what you’d been doing. He said your grandfather was teaching you the art of cursing and your grandmother pretended not to approve. He told me about the big house where he was raised and how your grandparents begged your mother to move in with them when he was away. I think he felt you and your mother were in good hands with them.”

There was a knock on the door. The colonel yelled, “Come in, come in, damn it!” and two young privates came in. The colonel had the two men move the table so he was at one end and I was on one side next to him. The other officers took their seats at the table and left an empty chair next to me. The colonel started the small talk and the others took it up. They seemed unconcerned while I sat and listened for a few minutes. At one point they started another whispering session and it was evident the colonel was soliciting their input on something. I

assumed a decision had been reached when they all started talking about everyday things again.

A few minutes later, a crew from the mess arrived and efficiently changed the table into something entirely different. We always ate well but not with white tablecloths and napkins and tableware as good as a fine restaurant. The colonel saw me looking at the door.

“Relax, Lieutenant,” he said. “I sent two MP’s after her. Do you think they can handle her or should I have sent more?”

“I would have sent a platoon, Sir,” I said.

“Or maybe just yourself,” he said, grinning, and then added solemnly, “You can tell her you’ve got the mission, Lieutenant. It’s OK for her to know. Just don’t let anyone else know.”

Everyone at the table stood up when Anna arrived. She stopped, standing at the door, probably wondering why she had been summoned. I walked over to her, kissed her on the cheek, held her hand, pulled out a chair for her, and seated her. No one said anything about two lieutenants kissing or holding hands. One of the majors, the one who knew my father, grinned widely and the rest at least smiled a little.

During dinner, the talk was about nothing of importance. No one told Anna what had been decided. I assumed they knew I would prefer to tell her in private. The others waited patiently until I had finished my second serving of shrimp and grouper and cheese grits and hush puppies.

One our way back to her barracks, I told her that I had been selected for the mission I wanted. She hugged me and said she didn’t want me to go. I stood there patiently, holding her, without saying a word. What could I say? I didn’t want to go either, especially since I was just beginning to love her, but I knew I would go. I had wanted the mission for years and I could not abandon the opportunity to kill the man who killed my father and, indirectly, my mother. I knew I had to tell her why I wanted the mission. I knew that if I tried to tell her about their deaths I might become mute again

I didn’t know what to do. Was she beginning to love me too? Was it right for me to go any further in our relationship in view of my

impending mission, from which I might not return? I knew I couldn't hurt her and I was afraid that I would if I carried our relationship on until we made love. But I wanted her. I wanted her in every way imaginable. I wanted to let my beast loose with her. I wanted to be gentle with her, to show how much I was learning to love her. I wanted her beside me for the rest of my life. I knew I had to tell her. I hoped she would understand my dilemma and keep on loving me whether or not we could ever be together.

Chapter Three

“Anna, would you go somewhere with me tomorrow?” I asked. “I'd like to spend the day with you and maybe talk to you about something.”

We were having dinner together on Friday night. A week had passed since I was chosen for the mission and I knew my orders to go could come at any time. Before I left, I wanted to try to talk to her about an incident in my life, something so painful that I'd never been able to talk to anyone about it.

As usual, she had on a baseball cap with her hair protruding through the opening at the back and tumbling down behind her. I liked to see her that way but I wondered how she'd look if her hair was totally unrestrained. There wasn't a trace of makeup on her face, at least, none that I could see. In my eyes, she didn't need makeup. She was a beautiful woman without it.

“Of course, I'll go with you, David,” she answered. “But why can't we talk now? I'm too stuffed with shrimp to do anything else.”

We'd been surprised when we went to the mess hall for dinner. Somehow someone had managed to get fresh shrimp for us and the cooks had done a low-country shrimp boil. As far as I knew it was a first for our remote desert base. We'd both gorged ourselves. There was a huge pile of shrimp shells and red potato peels and corncobs in a plate between us. The potato peels were all hers; I ate mine peel and all.

“I want to go where there’s no one else around,” I said. “I know a place I think you’ll enjoy seeing. It’s about five miles from here so we’ll check out a jeep. Then we’ll have about thirty minutes of walking to get to the place so you’ll need to wear your boots. You can wear shorts but you probably should wear a long-sleeved shirt and your desert hat. That’s the way I’ll be dressed. We’ll be out in the sun part of the time.”

“Is it safe?” she asked. “You know we’ve been warned about wandering around in the desert without plenty of water.”

“We’ll be safe,” I answered. “The spot is on the base map and I have to tell the motor pool where I’m going with the jeep and when I’ll be back. Besides, there’s water there. I’ve been there before.”

“Now that sounds interesting. Water? In the middle of the desert? Tell me about it.”

“No, I want it to be a surprise. It’s a beautiful spot. It’s magical. I think you’ll like it.”

“Are you sure you’re not just trying to get me off somewhere and seduce me?” she asked, smiling.

“Anna, trust me,” I said. “You’re safe tomorrow. After tomorrow, I make you no promises.”

“Well, I make you no promises about tomorrow,” she said. “I have a mind of my own, you know.”

“I know,” I said. I really did know. She could be an assertive woman when she wanted to. I’d learned that the hard way a time or two.

“What time do you want to go?”

“Immediately after breakfast. I’ll take a backpack with water and something for lunch. We’ll be back for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Are we going on one of your mysterious trips?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Scuttlebutt has it that you go off by yourself on mysterious trips. Some guys tried to follow you once and they said you disappeared.”

“Do you believe in magic, Anna?”

She smiled at me. “No, not really.”

I shrugged and kept a straight face. “Well, I do. I knew they were following me. I decided to disappear. So I just cast a spell and became invisible. I saw them drive right past me.”

“David, be serious.”

“I am.”

“David, you must trust me. I’ve already agreed to go with you tomorrow. That proves I trust you.”

“Will you swear not to tell anybody what I tell you?” I asked.

“I swear.”

“I turned off my jeep once and heard another one back the way I’d come. I knew I was being followed. I saw an outcropping of reasonably-flat rock that looked like I could drive on it. I almost turned. Then I decided I’d play a trick on them.”

“What did you do?”

“I stayed in the sand for maybe a hundred yards farther and drove around a boulder. Then I stopped, backed up very carefully to the rock outcropping and drove on it until I knew they wouldn’t see the jeep. Then I went back and swept away the tracks where I turned onto the rock outcropping. I was behind a mesquite bush when they went past.”

She shook her head and grinned.

“I believe in magic, Anna,” I whispered. “I’ve believed in it since the first time I saw you.”

What else could explain the way I was drawn to her? I had lain awake at night more than once trying to understand what attraction she held

for me. She was a woman but I was attracted to many young women, even though I had not often yielded to that attraction. She was beautiful in my eyes but many men would have thought she was too big and too tall. She was a perfect size for me. I suppose magic was as good an explanation as any.

She looked at me with a serious look on her face. Finally she grinned and said, "Wow."

"There's more magic where I'm taking you, Anna," I said. "Trust me."

<><><>

When we met for breakfast, she had on a wide-brimmed desert hat with all her hair pulled up and completely hidden underneath it. It made her long neck stand out. She also had on a long-sleeved shirt with a white undershirt showing in the unbuttoned front and her usual khaki shorts. She had on desert boots with white socks. There were two stunning long legs between shorts and boots. She was beautiful as always.

Breakfast was our usual Saturday morning steak and eggs fare. I had steak with three fried eggs, hash-browns, Texas toast, and two big glasses of milk. I wasn't surprised when she had the same thing but with two eggs and one glass of milk. My training burned the calories out of me and I assumed hers did the same. Just like me, she had little body fat. I suppose she had more than me and it was all in the right places.

Before we left the mess hall, I went back to the serving area and grabbed a couple of navel oranges. I turned, saw her waiting, pitched the oranges to her, and took two more. I knew how good they were and I didn't have any fruit in my backpack.

There was no road leading to the place. I drove through the boulders and brush, keeping one mountain peak in sight. After a while, we entered a dry riverbed and I knew I was close. I drove up the riverbed for a short distance before I saw the rock formation I was looking for. I left the riverbed and headed for what appeared to be a long outcropping of solid rock. When I saw the opening in it, I knew I'd found the place again. I hid the jeep behind some bushes and we both got out.

“Do you mind if I take off my shirt,” I asked. “We won’t be in the sun as much in a few minutes.”

“Of course not,” she answered. “I’m going to take mine off too.”

I took off my long sleeve shirt and stuffed it in the straps of the backpack. When I looked up, she was standing there in just a white t-shirt, holding her long-sleeved shirt out to me. It was evident she wasn’t wearing a brassiere under her t-shirt. She didn’t need one. Her breasts were full and rounded and firm with dark areolas and pointed nipples showing through her shirt. I stood there, looking at them for a moment and then looked up at her face. She was grinning at me. She knew where I’d been looking. She handed me her long-sleeved shirt and I stuffed it under the backpack straps with mine.

“What’s the blanket for?” she asked.

I had rolled up an old army blanket, a hard wool one, and attached it to the bottom of the backpack. I hadn’t thought that she might wonder what it was for. I knew I’d intended it to be a place to sit while we talked.

“It’s just a blanket, Anna,” I said. “When we get there, it’s for us to sit on. That’s all.”

I decided to tease her a little. I took off my undershirt and stood there bare-chested while she looked at me and smiled mischievously.

“Uh, uh, I’m not taking mine off,” she finally said.

We stood there, looking at each other for a moment. To me, she was unbelievably beautiful, all woman, a big woman but all perfect, all desirable, almost too much woman. I could understand why some guys found her intimidating. She certainly didn’t intimidate me. I felt my penis begin to engorge and I didn’t try to hide it.

“I like to go commando once in a while too,” she said.

For a moment I wasn’t sure what she meant. I knew the guys referred to going without undershorts as going commando. I didn’t have on anything under my shorts. I preferred to let everything hang loose in the desert heat. Did she mean she wasn’t wearing any panties? Or simply that she wasn’t wearing a bra? I finally thought of what she

might be seeing in my shorts and looked down. The length of my penis was outlined down one leg of my shorts and the rim around the head was clearly defined.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It has a mind of its own.”

“Don’t say you’re sorry, David,” she said. “I think it’s a nice compliment. I’m glad to know you find me desirable.”

“Oh, you are,” I said, and then changed the subject. “We’re going through an opening in the rock. Animals of all kinds go through it at night to get water. You can see their tracks everywhere near the entrance. We’re not likely to encounter any of them during the daytime.”

“Are any of them dangerous to us?” she asked.

“Probably not,” I said. “Any animal can be dangerous if it’s threatened or cornered. I don’t think we’ll even see any in the daytime. Just let me go first and you stay about five or ten feet behind me. OK?”

I took my knives out of the backpack and unbelted my shorts enough to thread my belt through the scabbard so that the knives were at my right hip. I looked up to see her watching me.

“They’re called Big Boy and Little Boy,” I said. “My grandfather gave them to me when I left home for the Academy.”

“Have you killed anybody with them?” she asked.

I decided to be truthful. “Yes, Anna, I have. Just once. Now could we not talk about them? I don’t think I’ll really need them today but I always carry them when I’m out in the desert.”

She kept looking at the knives and then at my face. I smiled at her, put on the backpack, put on my desert hat again, and started looking for animal tracks to show to her. I didn’t want her thinking about what I had done with Big Boy. I didn’t want to think about it either.

When we were through looking at animal tracks, we walked single file through the narrow crack in the rocks. On each side, the walls were perhaps fifty feet high. The floor alternated between stretches of sand and stretches of boulders. The cloudless blue sky was always visible

above our heads. We walked in silence from alternating patches of dim light to, as the crevice turned, stretches of bright sunlight. Within the crevice we were walking slightly uphill and the height of the wall on each side gradually diminished.

I was leaving a patch of dim shadow and entering bright sunlight when I heard it, behind me and to my left side. The suddenness of the rattle startled me but I knew immediately what it was. I also went instantly cool.

Below the waist I froze. Above the waist, I turned to find the snake. Anna had heard it too. She had frozen and was standing a few feet away from the snake. It was turned toward her, tail upraised, body coiled, and head uplifted, ready to strike.

I cursed myself for my carelessness. I should have known that my eyes would take a moment to adjust from shadow to bright sunlight. The snake had probably been unmoving when I walked past it and it had shifted into strike position just in time to threaten Anna. I had promised her that she would be safe with me. I had meant that she would be safe from me. I had not thought that she might be threatened by something I carelessly overlooked.

“Anna, be still,” I said. “Don’t move.”

A memory from my childhood came back to me. We had been playing in the creek, a pack of boys, naked as the day we were born, in water that came part way up our thighs. A black runner, a long slim non-poisonous snake came swimming down the creek. I had caught it by the tail, swung it around and around my head, and then popped it like a whip.

I fainted with my left hand, the rattler struck, and I grabbed it by the tail with my right hand. I swung it around and around in a circle, gradually increased the speed, and then popped it like a whip, the same way I had done the black runner. It worked again. I saw the snake’s head go flying. I slowed down my circular swing, grabbed the snake’s body with my left hand near the tail, and slid my hand up close to where its head had been. I held the big rattler between my outstretched arms and looked at it. The result had been the same as with the black runner. The top of its head had been snapped off and the bottom jaw remained. I knew that with the fangs gone it was

harmless. In cool time, it seemed a minute might had passed; in real time, I knew it had been only seconds.

I looked up at Anna, standing with her mouth open and complete horror in her face. I smiled at her.

“There, it’s harmless now,” I said, nonchalantly. “I’m sorry I missed it.”

She couldn’t speak. She stood there shaking, still petrified by fear.

“It’s OK, Anna,” I said. “I’ve done it before. I knew what would happen when I swung it around my head. The centrifugal force kept it from coiling up again. When I snapped it like a whip, I knew the head would be popped off.”

She still couldn’t say anything for a minute or two longer. I threw the rattler back down the way we’d come and it began writhing mindlessly. I knew it could take a long time for the body to learn that it didn’t have a brain anymore.

“Are you cool, David?” she finally asked, breathlessly.

I smiled at her, and nodded. I shut my eyes, willed my breathing and my heart to slow, and felt the cool gradually fade. In a minute or so, I felt normal again and opened my eyes. She was watching me.

“I told you I wouldn’t hurt you, Anna, and I meant it. I’m not going to let anything else hurt you either.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that!” she exclaimed. “I thought you were nuts, grabbing it by the tail and swinging it around your head like a crazy cowboy. Everything happened so quickly it was like a blur.”

I encircled her with my arms, one hand behind her back, the other behind her head, and pulled her close to me so that her head was tucked under my chin. I held her, neither of us saying a word, until her breathing slowed. I felt the warmth of her breasts pressing against my chest but my penis didn’t respond. All I felt was love and caring for her and no desire or arousal.

“It’s just a little further,” I whispered. “It’s beautiful. It’s magic. Trust me.”

She pushed back from me a little and looked up in my eyes. I let my hands fall down to her hips and then pulled her tightly against me. She grinned at me and I grinned back. I suppose she knew I was trying to make her forget the snake and think of something more pleasant.

“David, I think I feel something pressed against my stomach,” she said. “Do you think it’s another big fat rattlesnake?”

“Whatever it is, you’re safe, Anna,” I said earnestly. “I didn’t bring you here to have sex with you. I meant it when I said I wanted to talk to you. I want to share something with you that I’ve never talked about with anyone else.”

“But maybe you’re not safe from me,” she said. “Did you even think of that?”

I held her hand and we started walking again. We encountered another stretch of boulders and then suddenly there was a small stream that disappeared down a whirlpool among the rocks. We stood and looked at it for a minute and then we started walking again. The stream hugged the rock wall on alternating sides of the crevice. We walked on sand on the other side. The walls on each side of us were not as high now, perhaps twenty feet.

We went around another turn in the crevice and there it was: a small valley completely encircled by rock walls except for the way we’d come. The stream was coming out of the rock wall at the far end of the valley. It trickled out of the rock in numerous crevices and at one place leapt out in a small waterfall into a pool. On that part of the wall there were masses of green ferns. All over the valley there were trees: pines, box elders, canyon oaks and one lone beech tree. There were all kinds of plants and shrubs, one of which was in flower with red spikes. In the dryness of the desert, it really was a magical place.

Most of the trees lined the small stream. The lowest limbs on the deciduous trees were more than head high so there was plenty of shade underneath the trees. I suppose the deer had eaten everything within their reach.

Further back away from the steam, there was a random assortment of desert plants, ranging from tall saguaros to little barrel cacti. I had already learned to be very careful in that area.

Where the stream cascaded down, there was a pool, about three feet deep at its deepest. The bottom was mostly sand with an occasional small rock. It was a great place to play and cool off. Every time I'd been here in the past I'd soaked in it for a while.

"I'll bet you've been skinny-dipping here; haven't you?" she asked.

"No, of course not," I lied. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Well, I'd like to but right now I need to pee," she said. "Where can I go?"

"Anywhere," I said. "I need to go too. Let me walk off a little ways and I'll turn my back. I'm sorry but I can't offer you much privacy."

I walked through the trees and, without turning around, pulled my penis out of my shorts and enjoyed a good piss. I stood there with my back to where I'd left her until she rejoined me.

We explored the valley from one end to the other. I tried to answer all her questions but my knowledge of trees and plants wasn't that good. Finally we ended up in the shade under the widespread beech tree. I knew it was very unusual in the desert environment. I couldn't imagine how it had gotten started in the valley.

There were empty shells from all the little beechnuts covering the ground underneath the tree. I used the side of my boot to sweep the shells to one side, creating a path to the shadiest area. Next I swept clean an area big enough for the blanket. She stood there smiling, waiting.

I took off the backpack, untied the blanket, and spread it on the ground. I sat down on the blanket, waited until she got settled too, and then took off my boots and socks. She did the same. Her toenails were painted bright red.

"You couldn't resist, could you?" I asked.

“David, you don’t know what it’s like to have to do without almost everything that’s feminine,” she said. “I hate it.”

“Would you like an orange?” I asked. “I’d like a mid-morning snack. Would you?”

“Yes, please. I’d love one,” she answered.

I used Little Boy to cut the peeling off an orange. Anna watched intently as Little Boy effortlessly removed one long strip of peeling.

“Little Boy’s never killed anyone, at least not while I’ve had it,” I said when I was through peeling the orange. I broke the orange in two parts and handed half to her. We sat there breaking off sections of orange and sticking them in our mouth. I grinned when she almost choked on too much juice from a section. She stuck out her tongue at me.

I offered another orange and Little Boy to her. I’d never trusted anyone else to handle my knives. I wanted to trust her.

“Be careful,” I said. “It’s sharper than a razor.”

She hesitated but she took the orange and my knife. She didn’t manage to remove all the peel in one strip like I’d done but she did a passable job of peeling the orange. She gave the knife back to me and then broke the orange and offered me half.

When we finished with our snack, I stood up, held out my hands to her, pulled her upright, and led her to the stream. We waded out in the pool until the water was up to mid-calf and then washed the sticky orange juice off our hands.

“Do you think it’s magical, Anna?” I asked, looking around.

“Yes, David, I agree. It’s magical,” she said.

“Would you lie down on the blanket with me so we can be comfortable? I’d like to talk to you about...” – I took a couple of deep breaths and resolved to talk to her. – “about some stuff I’ve never been able to....”

I suppose she saw how I was struggling. “Yes, David. I’ll get on the blanket with you but only to listen to you talk. That’s all.”

When we were back on the blanket, I put my boots under the blanket, soles apart in different directions. She looked at me and I could see she was puzzled.

“It’s for a pillow,” I said. “Sorry but it’s the best I can offer.”

“Do mine,” she said.

We lay there with our heads on our boot pillows, flat on our backs, hands on our stomachs, knees raised, and I started talking. I began by telling her about my childhood.

“My first memories are always about Mother and Father and Father’s parents,” I began. “I called them Grandfather and Grandmother and Father and Mother. I don’t think I ever knew why I was so formal about it. It’s just the way we were. We weren’t really so formal in living together. We were warm and comfortable with each other. I knew they all loved me and I loved them. I always felt secure. I was happy and full of mischief and pranks but I don’t ever remember being punished for anything.”

“My father was an army officer, a tall handsome man, especially when he came home in his uniform. He towered over me then but now I’m a little taller than he was. He was gone a lot of the time and he never talked to me about what he did when he was gone. Even when he put on jeans and a sweatshirt to work around the house, you could still see he was a man to be respected. I certainly respected him. But I loved him with all my heart. He and I had a very close loving relationship. We were very comfortable with each other. Did I say I loved him? I really did, you know.”

“My mother was one of the most beautiful women I ever saw. She was good-looking even when she was sweaty and dirty from working in the flowers she loved. She had been trained as a nurse, like you, and she was often called on to help someone in the community who’d been injured in something like a farming accident until they could be transported to the nearest hospital about thirty miles away. She never charged anybody so everybody around loved her. I never learned about her troubles until after...”

I wasn't ready to tell her after what yet. I had to work up the courage to tell her that. I pretended to yawn and then continued without telling after what.

"Am I boring you?" I asked. "Just tell me if I am and I'll shut up."

"No, David," she answered. "It's fascinating. You were saying you learned about your mother's troubles after something. What?"

"Oh, nothing," I tried to downplay the subject. "She had some trouble with alcohol and drugs for a while."

"I'm sorry," she said. "You don't have to talk about that unless you want to."

"I don't," I said and then continued by telling her about my grandparents. "Grandfather was an older and greyer version of Father, just as tall and just as slim. He always wore cardigan sweaters in cold weather and always smelled of pipe tobacco and cologne. Grandmother always fussed at him for smoking a pipe and he'd tell her, 'Hush, Woman,' when she did. She always smelled of whatever she was cooking that day. She loved to cook. I never saw her measure anything but everything was always delicious. She was big breasted and always complaining about her weight. One of my earliest memories is of her sitting on the front porch of our house in a rocking chair, with me in her lap and my head against her breasts. Are you listening, Anna?"

"Yes, David," she answered. "I'm listening. It seems like a wonderful way for a young boy to grow up."

"It was. We lived in a small town and I do mean small. I think we knew everybody and they knew us. Our house was one of the nicest ones, set on a rise close to the intersection of two highways. It was a big two-storied house, brick and stone, lots of dark wood inside, with a front porch. We had four big maples in a row on the front lawn and flowerbeds all around."

"That's really not the house my parents and I lived in. My grandparents lived there. Mother and Father and I lived in the carriage house in back. I never saw a carriage in it but that was what we called it. Grandfather parked his car in there. We lived in the

rooms upstairs in the carriage house. Two bedrooms, one bath, a large living room with a small kitchenette.”

“I always felt at home in either house. We ate with my grandparents most of the time and I even had a bed in their house where I slept when I wanted to. My parents always slept in the carriage house.”

“There were hills behind our house and a creek across the road in front of it. All the boys in the village ran wild in the woods and skinny-dipped in the creek. We had a swimming hole that was fairly deep and we had a rope swing hanging from a big sycamore. We practically lived there during the summer time. I suppose that’s one of my favorite memories, the summer days playing in the creek. Occasionally Grandfather walked down to the swimming hole and watched us playing. He called us his naked savages.”

“We weren’t angels or anything like that. We were just normal boys, always looking for something to do and most of it was pretty innocent. Occasionally we did things we shouldn’t have done, never bad stuff, just mischief. I can’t remember ever being punished for anything I did. I got grounded on occasion but that was no real punishment since I just lost myself in books. I don’t remember what girls did but I guess I wasn’t interested in them at that time.”

“I was home schooled until I was accepted into the Academy at seventeen. My grandparents and my mother loosely followed the state-mandated program for home-schooled kids but they didn’t really have to teach me. At an early age, they discovered that I had a voracious appetite for books and an insatiable desire for knowledge. They let me discipline myself and I usually mastered the mandated material for a year in just a few months. After that, I was free to explore any topic that interested me and I guess I was interested in everything. They guided me but they never made me pursue any topics.”

“They taught me four languages, most of the time without really teaching me, just using the different languages. My grandfather was Iranian and my grandmother was French. They were fluent in Farsi, Arabic, French, and English and they taught my father all four languages. My mother was French and she spoke French and English. They soon discovered that I had a natural ability with languages like they had and they all were diligent in guiding me to master all four languages.”

“That’s what got me into the Academy, you know. All their rules and regulations spelled out the academic credentials which applicants had to have. I was the first home-schooled applicant and they had quite an argument in deciding whether I could be admitted without the mandated school program. My language skills finally convinced them. They interviewed me and questioned me in all four languages. I was able to shift easily from one to another and answer most of the questions they asked me. After that they permitted me to take the entrance exam and I scored above the eightieth percentile in all the different subjects.”

I knew that I was avoiding the one thing I needed to talk about, the one thing I’d never been able to speak about. I decided to make an effort to tell her. I had to tell her. She had to know me for what I was. I knew it might ruin my chances with her but I had to be honest. I rose up on my elbow so I could look at her, took a couple of really deep breaths, and blurted it out.

“Anna, the last time I saw my father’s face was when a jihadist held up his severed head for the TV camera.”

I felt like I’d been tasered. The image came rushing back to me and I tried unsuccessfully to fight against it. My heart ran wild, my lungs couldn’t get enough air into them, and muscles all over my body were twitching one instant and frozen the next. I couldn’t say anything else and the fear of being mute again made everything even worse.

I wasn’t aware of Anna or even where I was. I saw the image of my father’s face in front of my eyes and the horror held me in its grip. I fought to banish it but it insisted on coming back. Anna slowly slid her hand over my face, perhaps trying to make me close my eyes. They were still open and I couldn’t close them. I stared into nothing, trying not to see the image. I tried to swallow and almost drowned on my own saliva. I tried to control my breathing. That sometimes worked. I counted breaths, in and out, and I slowly took control of my breathing. I willed my heart to slow down and gradually it did. Finally I took a couple of deep breaths, looked at Anna, and tried to smile. I couldn’t. She was on her knees in front of me.

“What happened afterwards?” she asked, and I knew she was trying to move me beyond the worst part.

I took some deep breaths and discovered I could talk again. “Grandfather found us, me and Mother, in the living room of the carriage house. He came looking for us because I didn’t bring Mother back to the big house for dinner. She was in shock and I suppose I was too. She was crying uncontrollably but I couldn’t cry. Anna, I couldn’t speak because I couldn’t cry. I didn’t speak for months afterwards. I wanted to cry but I couldn’t and so I couldn’t speak.”

“What saved you, David?” she asked. “How did you survive something like that?”

“Grandfather and Grandmother took control of everything. Somehow, they got Mother and me through the days afterwards when his body was found and sent back and it was buried. I was never told but I knew his head wasn’t with his body. Then Grandfather and Grandmother became the pillars of strength that supported the four of us. Mother seemed to recover at first but she must have been covering up what she really felt. It was the start of her descent into drugs and alcohol and madness but we didn’t know it until they had claimed her.”

“How old were you when it happened?”

“I was twelve, just starting into puberty.”

“How long was it before you spoke again, David?” she asked.

“Almost six months,” I answered. “One morning I decided I had to speak to Grandfather. I went in the kitchen where he was reading the newspaper and asked him if we could go for a walk. From then on I could talk about anything except my father.”

“Did you ever cry?” she asked.

“No, I never have,” I answered, looking at her. She had tears rolling down her cheeks.

On her knees, she moved closer to me, wrapped her arms around me, and pulled my head against her breasts. I put one arm around behind her and tried to bury myself in the softness of her.

“Then I’ll cry for you, David,” she whispered, and she did. After a minute or so I felt tears running down my own cheeks, the first tears

I'd shed since before Father's death. Somehow Anna's sobbing touched me and I knew I could cry too. I relaxed and let the tears flow and the moaning and the sobbing overpower me.

She held me with my head pressed against her breasts while the catharsis of crying for my father and mother ran its course. Finally I straightened up, looked at her, and tried to smile. I couldn't even smile.

"I feel like a damn fool," I said. "Here I am, a grown man, crying like a little boy."

"You are a little boy, David, a twelve-year-old boy," she said. "You needed to cry for your father. You've been holding it in for a dozen years and now you've been able to let it out. Don't you understand? It was good for you to cry!"

"I didn't just cry for my father, Anna," I said. "I cried for him but I cried for my mother too. She disappeared when I was fourteen and we've never been able to find her. I suppose I cried for myself too."

"What do you mean?"

"The last time I saw my father alive, when he was leaving, he told me to take care of my mother. He said I was a man and he wanted me to be sure no harm came to her. I said I would and then I said I'd take care of him too. I failed him on both counts, Anna."

"David, you were a twelve-year-old boy," she said. "You were an innocent child. You had no idea of the evil that exists in this world. He chose to fight against that evil. You didn't fail him or your mother."

"Do you understand why I want this mission so much?" I asked.

"Not really," she answered. "Why?"

"Because Mullah Muqtada al-Badr is the one who beheaded him! He's now the Grand Ayatollah. Our intelligence told Grandfather and he told me when I was sixteen. That's when I swore revenge. I stood there in front of my grandfather and swore I'd kill the Mullah some day. I've been dedicated to it since I learned who killed him, eight years now. I mean totally dedicated to it. I'm going to blow the bastard into hell! He's going to pay for killing my father and mother!"

“David, it doesn’t have to be you who kills him. Can’t you let someone else do it? I’m sure he’s at the top of our list. Maybe they can do it with a drone strike.”

“Do you know what Pashtunwali means?”

“I know that nearly all the Taliban are Pashtuns. That’s about all.”

“The Pashtuns follow an age-old code of conduct called Pashtunwali. One of the required duties under its rules is eye-for-an-eye revenge. I can understand how they feel, Anna. I feel the same way.”

“David, I can’t stop you from going on your mission but maybe I can give you a reason to come back. If you return to me, I’ll marry you. I’ll give you children. I’ll grow old with you. And I’ll love you with all my heart. Do you intend to come back or is this a suicide mission?”

“Oh, I intend to come back, all right,” I said, earnestly. “I want to come back to you. You’ve given me a new reason to come back. But I also want to tell the world about my father. I suppose I want to tell everybody about my mother too because my father’s death destroyed her. She didn’t start with drugs and alcohol until about a year after his death. I don’t blame her. I wish I had known how to save her.”

“I don’t understand why nobody else knows who killed him. Why has it been kept a secret?”

“Before I left for the Academy, Grandfather told me it was time for me to see something and took me into his study. He unlocked his safe, took out a small box and a sheet of paper. The paper was a letter from the President awarding my father the Medal of Honor. Do you know what the Medal of Honor is?”

“I think so. Tell me.”

“It’s the highest award for valor in action against an enemy force which can be bestowed upon an individual serving in the Armed Services of the United States. I’d never known about it. Grandfather told me it had been given to him by the President in a private ceremony about a year after Father’s death. He’d been asked to keep it a secret and he had agreed, except that he was going to tell me when I came of age. The President asked about me and then agreed and they

shook hands on it. When Grandfather asked me to keep it a secret, I agreed, and we shook hands on it.”

“Why would they want to keep it a secret?” she asked.

“My father was one of the first to accept an assignment to kill one of their top religious leaders. He didn’t succeed. Our government still pretends that they don’t assassinate the religious leaders of the jihadist movement. It’s not public knowledge but we have a specific program to do just that. I’m one of the ones trained to carry it out. I’ve been chosen to kill Mullah Muqtada al-Badr and I’ll do it! I’ll kill the mullah-fucker!”

She looked at me questioningly. “Why are you telling me now, David?”

“If I don’t come back, you’re free to tell the world about it. Whether I succeed in my mission or fail, tell everyone. Tell the whole world. I want the world to know about my father. Will you do that?”

“Yes, David,” she whispered. “I’ll do it. Now, will you tell me about something else?”

“What?”

“I want you to tell me about something from your childhood,” she said. “Some of the good memories from that time. Something involving your father or grandfather. Can you do that?”

Memories came rushing back at me. The memory of one incident alone was enough to make me smile. Her attempt to redirect my attention made me smile even more.

“Sure,” I said. “Once when my father came home, I begged him to go to the creek with me. It was the first summer when I was totally free to spend my time there and I wanted to show him our swimming hole. Grandfather, Father, and I walked down the hill to the creek and Father asked me if I wanted to play in the creek. He said he wanted to. We both stripped to our birthday suits but Grandfather begged off. Father and I played in the creek together and he taught me to get on his shoulders and stand up while he held my hands. Then I would dive off into the creek. I was probably nine or ten and I felt so loved when we were doing it. When we got out of the creek, Father and I stood

there letting the warm air dry us. I remember looking at him and then Grandfather and it was like I was looking into the past and the future at the same time. I was looking into the past at where I'd come from but at the same time I was looking at myself in Father as a grown man and in Grandfather as an old man. I felt so safe and secure and happy. We walked back to the house with both of them holding my hands. I can't ever forget that."

"Now tell me something about your grandfather, something that happened after your father's death. Can you do that?"

I understood what she was trying to do. She was trying to make me keep on talking but about good things.

"I remember something when I was fourteen. I was well into puberty and Grandfather was trying his best to help me to understand what was happening to my body. We'd take long walks together and talk and I'd ask him questions. I could tell he was uncomfortable answering sometimes but I suppose he knew he had to fill in for my father."

"Anyway, one October afternoon, I remember walking with Grandfather through all the fallen leaves. Sometimes he held my hand, like European men and Middle Eastern men do. Sometimes I'd carry his cane and he'd walk with his hand on my shoulder. He'd been struggling to tell me about what happened when a man and woman made love. Then out of the blue, he asked me to name my first son after Father. I can't ever forget that. I want to name our first son after him, Anna. I want to name our son Michael."

"What if our first child is a girl?"

"You name the girls. I name the boys. How's that?"

"Are you sure you want to bring children into this world?" she asked.

"I don't know. I'd rather bring them into a world of my choosing. I'd love to have lots of kids with you. Maybe we can teach them all to love life and each other so much they don't want to fight stupid religious wars."

"David, do you think we could go skinny-dipping in the pool, like little children? We could pretend that you're twelve and I'm eleven. We're

both just about to start into puberty. I'd like to go skinny-dipping with you."

She looked at me, all serious and unsmiling and her dark eyes held me to her gaze. Her nose, with just a little upturn at the end, was perfect for her. Her full lips were a perfect bow on top with another on bottom. Her mouth was so enticingly kissable. I wanted so much to feel her lips against mine again.

Her arms were long and slim, seemingly hairless from her shoulders down to her smooth fingers. Her legs also seemed to be hairless until I looked closer and saw that her calves had a light covering of hair on them. I remembered she had complained about not being able to shave her legs. She didn't really need to.

She took off her desert hat and shook her head and her dark hair fell down all around her shoulders. It was long, a little wavy, and reached down to her breasts in front, almost hiding them. I thought I'd never seen anything more beautiful than her hair. Then she took off her shirt and I saw her breasts.

She didn't need a brassiere. Her breasts were not large at all, almost small on a woman her size. They were firm with almost no droop, and her nipples pointed slightly upward. What held my eyes were the areolas of her breasts. They were a little darker than her skin with nipples even darker. The areolas were little mounds on top of her breasts and the nipples stuck out another quarter inch or so.

Then she stood up, released her shorts, and pulled them and her panties down at the same time. I was awe struck at the sight of her. Again, I knew I'd never seen anything more beautiful. Between her legs, there was a patch of dark curly pubic hair, just a neat patch centered on her mound, almost as though she had trimmed it but I knew she had said she couldn't shave anywhere.

She was the second woman I'd ever seen completely naked. Gabi and Danni had been girls, not women, and their sexuality was just coming into blossom. Anna was in the full bloom of her feminine sexuality and she was so beautiful that my heart ached for her, not just for sex once and then never again but to join myself with her forever. I wanted to possess her, to love her, to make her mine for the rest of my life. She was woman. Not a woman. Not any woman. Woman! A goddess. An earth mother. I was speechless.

“Well, are you going to take your shorts off?” she asked, grinning at me and my inability to do anything but stare at her.

I stood up, unbelted my shorts, let the weight of my knives drag them down to my feet, and stepped out of them. She looked me over once and then I saw her gaze center on my genitals.

“Damn! You lied to me, David,” she said.

What was she talking about? I couldn’t think of any way I had lied to her. I had deliberately withheld the truth about what happened to me when I was cool. But how had I lied to her?

I suppose she saw the puzzlement on my face. She grinned and shook her head.

“Smaller than average, David?” she said. “You said your penis was smaller than average.”

I looked down at my penis. It was distended as it always is when I’m warm but it was soft. I tried to think of when I’d said it was smaller than average. Then I remembered and I smiled back at her.

“It’s just a penis, Anna,” I said. “I’m a big guy. It just goes with the rest of me.”

“Well, it’s definitely not smaller. I think it’s quite a bit bigger than average. I’ve seen quite a few and yours is definitely bigger than any I’ve seen. I like it.”

“I’m glad,” I said. “Maybe someday you’ll let me share it with you.”

“Oh, I will, David. I certainly will. I see you’re not circumcised. I’ve only seen a few like that, left natural, I mean.”

I looked down at my penis again. No, I wasn’t circumcised. My parents had been living in France when I was born and most Europeans don’t circumcise their boys. I knew my father had not been circumcised and I assumed my grandfather wasn’t either. Just like my father, my foreskin completely covered the head of my penis and then extended a little bit further.

“My parents were living in France when I was born.” I assumed she would know that Europeans generally don’t circumcise their boy babies.

“Well, I’m glad,” she said. “I’ve seen lots of circumcised penises and they usually looked mutilated.”

I suppose she saw the expression of surprise on my face.

“I’m a nurse, an Army nurse, David. Remember? I was working as an operating room nurse in a hospital for wounded troops when they found out about my language abilities and recruited me. I’ve seen everything outside and most of what’s inside on lots of guys. I guess that’s what made me volunteer for this. You lied to me about something else; didn’t you?”

I couldn’t think of anything else about which I’d lied to her. “What?”

“The wound on your leg, David. You said a bullet just grazed your leg. I can see where the bullet went in and came out. I’ve seen lots of wounds like that.”

I decided to see how she would handle the truth. “You’re right, Anna. It went through my leg but I was cool and I willed it not to bleed. Maybe I succeeded. It didn’t bleed much.”

She just shook her head and grinned at me.

“Well, quit lying to me. I’m a big girl. I can handle the truth. After what you did with the snake, nothing’s too farfetched.”

“OK.”

“Have you been with lots of girls, David? The truth now,” she said, still grinning at me.

“No, Anna, except for playing with two first cousins when I was sixteen, I’ve only been with four women. I’m afraid I wasn’t very good with most of them.”

“What do you mean?”

“They didn’t seem to enjoy it very much. I had an orgasm, of course. But I don’t know whether they did.”

“What do you mean; you played with two first cousins? I assume you mean girls.”

“Yes. Gabi and Danni were girls, fifteen and fourteen. The summer after I was sixteen, I visited my maternal grandparents in France. They had another daughter and a son both living on the Mediterranean Coast. The girls belonged to the son and his wife.”

“You didn’t answer my question. What did you do with them?”

I couldn’t help but grin at the memory. “I spent a week with them and they masturbated me so much my dick was raw for another week, four times in one afternoon. That’s as far as we went. I suppose we were too young to do much else but I really wanted to. I talked the older one into taking my penis into her mouth but the younger one said it was too big and she wouldn’t. I still remember how Danni looked at my penis, said, ‘Il est étonnant,’ and started giggling, then Gabi – she was the older one - shrugged, said ‘Il ne casse rien,’ and started giggling too.”

Anna broke out in a big grin at my description. “So Gabi thought it was nothing much. Maybe she’d seen lots of big ones.”

“I don’t think so. They were both virgins. I was too scared to try to change that.”

She laughed. “I would have thought you’d have left a trail of heartbroken women behind you,” she said. “Anyway, Dani should have said ‘*c’est vraiment magnifique!*’”

“She did, and that’s just what every sixteen-year old boy should be told by a girl. Now quit kidding me. I’ve been fixated on one thing for most of my life and you know what that is: Pashtunwali, getting revenge for the deaths of my mother and father. I’ve been pursuing that, not women. Have you been with lots of men?”

“Sure. Nurses are always with lots of men. You wouldn’t believe how many I’ve jacked off.”

“Oh, come on, Anna. That’s a guy’s fantasy; isn’t it?”

“No, David. Our patients were almost all young men. When I wasn’t in surgery, I liked to go with one of the room nurses when they made their rounds. We would tend to their wounds and sometimes we’d bathe them. If one was well enough to get an erection, we’d lock the door and then we’d masturbate him. We wanted them to realize that part of their body still worked OK. We always complimented them on something about their genitals, so they would know they were still men in spite of something like the loss of part of a leg. I’ll never apologize for doing that.”

“And you shouldn’t, Anna. But I was asking about men who have had sex with you? Have you had many lovers?”

“No, David, I suppose we’re both alike when it comes to the opposite sex. I’ve been with three guys, if you count just the ones who got their dick in me. Most guys are intimidated by me. I think they pursue me just for the challenge of making it with a big woman.”

“I want to be good for you, Anna,” I said. “I want to love you and I want you to enjoy it as much as I do. Will you help me?”

“Yes, David. Just don’t get in a hurry; see if you can get me aroused. Those three guys seemed like they were in a rush to get it in me and it wasn’t very good for me. You’ve got something I like so maybe you can help me too.”

“What?” Was she referring to my penis?

She grinned again and I knew she was going to tease me. “I like your chest hair, David. You’ve got just enough to tickle me. When you make love to me and it rubs against my breasts, I’ll know I’m in bed with a real man. Now will you turn around?”

“Why?”

“I’ve already seen your back. I hope your butt is just as smooth. When you’re on top of me and I’m rubbing your back, I want to feel smooth skin, not a lot of hair. When you’re fucking me so fast the bed is shaking and I’m trying to hold onto your ass, I want to feel skin, not hair.”

I turned around and let her look. My back was hairless. So was my butt except for the hair that crept out between my ass cheeks. I knew her words were intended to arouse me and she had succeeded. I felt the beginning of an erection and looked back at her. I started to try to hide it but there was no way I could without looking like a fool. I suppose I really wanted her to see it, to see how she affected me. I turned around again and stood there, without saying another word, and let my penis harden and then lift up. My foreskin gradually pulled back as my penis hardened until most of the head was exposed. I kept my eyes on Anna's face. She kept her eyes on my penis until it was fully erect and curving upward at about a forty-five degree.

“Wow!” she said looking at my penis. “Il est étonnant. *Il est vraiment magnifique!* You had better be slow with that thing when you fuck me. My pussy's aching to swallow it up to your balls but I want a good bed under my butt when it does. Are we going skinny-dipping, David?”

I swallowed hard and answered. “Yeah, I think that would be a good idea. Believe it or not, the water's a little cold.”

“Cold? I hope so,” she answered, still looking at my penis.

I held out my hand to her and then led her to the pool at the base of the little waterfall. Back the way we came, through the crack in the rocks, the stream was little more than ankle deep. In the pool, it was almost three feet deep, enough for me to sit in with my head sticking out. I'd spent a few quiet moments cooling off in it on my previous visits. I turned loose of her hand and started wading out into the pool, assuming she would follow. I hadn't gone far when she got me.

Cold water splashed against my back. I turned around just in time to see her squatting down with both hands cupped together and then another splash of water hit me from my face down to my knees.

I squatted down, scooped my hands full of water, and threw it at her. I was about to do it again when she attacked me. I didn't even have time to straighten up when she was on top of me. She came at me, put her hands against my shoulders, and shoved me backward into the pool. My head went under the water and I caught my breath. I tried to push myself up but I was held down by a naked squirming woman. I finally managed to get my head out of the water. She was sitting astride my stomach, on top of my erection, grinning down at me. Her head must have gone under too because her hair was all wet. She stuck her

tongue out at me and just sat there. My hands were on the bottom of the pool, holding me up slightly. I quit struggling and gave in to feeling her astride me. She was still beautiful, even with wet and tangled hair.

“Nya, nya, nya. David’s a little sissy,” she said. “Letting a little girl get the best of him.”

My thoughts were about how it felt to have her sitting on my erection but then I remembered that we were supposedly twelve and eleven years old. I wanted to be a kid again, playing in the creek with her.

“I’m not a sissy and you haven’t got the best of me,” I said, trying to imitate a little boy. “You just surprised me.”

She rolled off me and sat down in the pool beside me. I straightened up, sat on the sandy bottom, and found that the water was about in the middle of my chest. I looked at her and saw that it was a little higher on her. It almost covered her breasts. I could see the hard pointed nipples just under the water.

“David, why do you keep looking at me,” she asked, like a little girl and I knew I was supposed to answer like a little boy.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I’ve never seen a girl before. I mean, not without anything on, I mean...”

“Well, quit looking,” she said, cutting me off with a grin.

We sat there side by side in the water for probably a half hour, talking like little kids. We didn’t say anything about the present, about what we were doing or going to do or anything about how we had come to be trainees for a war we wished would go away. I told her about some more of my antics when all of us kids played in the creek and some of the things we did in the woods that we didn’t want our parents to know about. She told me about growing up in a small town in Washington and how much she liked walking in the woods behind her house where all the trees were covered with moss and all the animals knew her.

“I’m hungry,” she finally said. “What did you bring for lunch?”

Chapter Four

“I’m hungry,” she finally said. “What did you bring for lunch?”

I had brought the simplest of fare: bread and cheese and olives. The bread was a round loaf that the cook called an Italian bull. To go with it I had a piece of Bûchette Cendrée fromage and a wedge of Camembert fromage. With the bread and cheese I had two more navel oranges and bottled water. The cheeses and olives had been part of a care package from my L'Héritier relatives in France. The bread came from our mess hall. I knew that what the cook was calling a bull was really a boule. In a café in France, I'd eaten bread something like the bull that was called pan de horno. She looked at me with raised eyebrows, smiled, and then shook her head when I told her what I'd heard it called. I just smiled back.

“Where did you get cheese like this?” Anna asked with her first bite of the Bûchette Cendrée.

“Magic,” I said. “I’m trying to impress you.”

“Well, I’m certainly impressed.”

“I almost brought some wine but I’ve sworn off until I come back.”

She looked at me, unsmiling, and I looked back. We both knew I was going and we knew where.

We sat there on the blanket, in the shade of the beech tree, naked as the day we were born, and ate our lunch. We ate all the Bûchette Cendrée and the Camembert, all the olives, and most of the bread. Again, I peeled one orange and let her peel the other. From the orange juice, we both ended up with sticky hands and mouths. I licked my mouth clean while watching her. She did the same and I watched in fascination as her pink tongue circled her lips again and again. I licked my fingers clean while she watched and then leaned forward toward her with my mouth open. She held out her fingers one by one and I sucked them clean. I tried to tell my penis not to think about it.

While we were eating, I sat Indian-fashion with my legs crossed, letting it all hang out. After they recovered from the cold water, my testicles hung down on the blanket and my penis drooped down

almost as far. I caught her more than once looking at my display but I didn't mind since she was sitting the same way and I kept looking between her legs. Her pubic hair was almost all I could see. There was a little ridge or something in the middle of all the hair and I wanted to see where it led but I couldn't.

After I sucked the orange juice off her fingers, I slowly and deliberately raised my legs, knees bent and slightly apart, and rested my arms on my knees. I knew my penis and testicles would be prominently displayed for her to see and I wanted her to see them. She watched me change position, looked down between my legs, looked back up at my face, and then smiled. Oh, so slowly, she changed position too, until she was sitting in exactly the same way, displaying herself for me. Her pubic hair thinned out where her mound extended back between her legs and I could see the closed lips between the plump mounds on each side. She kept her eyes directed between my legs. I suppose she knew I wanted to see her hidden sex. I suppose she was also watching to see what effect the sight of it had on me. When my penis began to lift in a salute to her, she watched, grinning, until it was standing up proud. Then she stood up and held out her hand to me.

"You're being bad, David. I think you need to go back to the pool," she said.

We made another trip to the pool where we splashed each other with more cold water and, when my penis lost its stiffness, we returned to the blanket. We sat there, a few feet apart, while she ran her fingers through her wet hair. I watched in enthrallment the way her breasts changed shape as she lifted her arms. Her nipples looked hard and at least a half-inch long. I wanted them in my mouth.

I had no idea what she wanted to do or would allow me to do except that I had promised her that she would be safe with me. Her response that I might not be safe from her left me wondering what she wanted. I knew I would willingly do anything except for perhaps one thing. If I kept my promise, I wouldn't try to get my penis in her vagina. I wasn't sure I could keep it.

We sat there for a minute or so and then she lay down on the blanket and put her head on her boot pillow again. Her knees were bent upward and I could see between her legs two tightly-closed lips, nothing more but it was enough to make me hunger for her again. I

sat there looking at her and I wanted her so much it was almost painful.

“Quit looking at me, David,” she said, smiling at me. “Lay down here with me and let’s talk.”

I knew she didn’t mean it because she was displaying herself so provocatively. I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to will my thoughts away from the image of her, and just sat there beside her. I wanted to lay down with her, even on top of her, between her legs, with my penis in her vagina, but I knew I couldn’t. I just sat there, looking at her.

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked.

“David, would you like to take me to the Heartache Hotel next weekend?” she asked, out of the blue.

The Heartache Hotel wasn’t really named that. It was called that by the trainees at our base. It was just a hotel owned by one of many hotel chains but it was the closest really nice one, only forty miles away. Supposedly, the base commander had developed a relationship with the hotel management and as a result all trainees who went there received good care.

My heart leaped at her question but my head made me calm down before I answered.

“I’d like to take you, Anna, but I’m not sure that’s the right thing to do.”

Before I could continue, she sat up and turned on me angrily.

“Well, if you don’t want to take me, maybe I’ll find someone who will.”

I didn’t want to make her angrier so I sat there for a minute or so, trying to think of how to answer her.

“Well, will you take me?” she asked again. “I’m not going to beg you.”

I could tell that her flame was past simmer and almost on boil.

“Anna, will you let me tell you why I answered that way, without getting angry at me?”

She sat there frowning and looked at me for a minute.

“Please,” I said. “Just let me explain.”

The magic word seemed to calm her down a little.

“OK, but just remember, I’m not some little thing you can make decisions for and I’ll keep my mouth shut,” she said. “I know I’m a bitch sometimes but I have a mind of my own and I don’t need a guy thinking for me.”

“I know that, Anna,” I said. “And I wouldn’t change you.”

“Well, just don’t forget it,” she said and smiled at me. Perhaps her anger had faded already.

“The reason I said that is simple, Anna. I told you I wouldn’t hurt you and I won’t let anybody or anything hurt you if I can help it. Maybe I’m beginning to love you. I don’t understand what I’m feeling but I know I don’t want to hurt you. I’ve got to think about it before I make love with you. I don’t want to hurt you by making love to you.”

“Your dick’s not that big, David,” she said, and smiled again.

“I’m not talking about my penis, I mean, my dick.”

“Why do you always refer to it as your penis?” she asked, still smiling at me. “Why don’t you call it your dick or your willy or something like that?”

“It’s just habit, Anna, maybe something I learned from Grandfather. I called it my dick once around him and he corrected me. He said a dick was a guy named Richard and a Willy was a guy named William but a penis was always a penis because nobody ever named their son Penis. I almost wet my pants laughing when he told me that.”

She laughed and said, “Well, call it your penis then.”

“Sometimes I call it Dog.”

“Dog?”

I curled my fingers around in a circle and moved my hand up and down.

“Yeah, when I call it, it always comes.”

That got a giggle out of her.

She suddenly got serious again. “What do you mean when you say you don’t want to hurt me?”

“I’m talking about the way you’re going to feel about me if we make love and then I go on my mission and I don’t come back.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Anna, isn’t it true that, if a woman yields herself to a man, if she lets him make love to her...isn’t it true that a woman wants a man to be with her after that and care for her and provide for her and protect her? Doesn’t she especially want the man to help care for any child she might have as a result of what they do?”

“Yes, David, I suppose that’s true but you can’t get me pregnant. I’ve had an implant. I hate the thing but they require all female trainees to have one.”

“I know that and I’m not worried about you getting pregnant. I’m worried about you and your feelings. Evolution has shaped women in ways that can’t be changed just because we’re beginning to use contraceptives. What will it do to you if I don’t come back, if we’ve had a weekend when we make love with each other? I warn you I’m not going to do it just once and then be satisfied. I’m going to make up for years of wanting. If we go to the hotel, we’d better take something to eat because I’m not going to let you out of the room until we come back. I’m going...damn, I don’t know anything except that I want you and I’m not going to be easily satisfied.”

“That’s fine with me but we don’t have to take anything to eat. They have room service. Some of the girls say it’s quite good. We can do room service if you can stop fucking me long enough.”

“Say that again!” I said.

“What?”

“The last part of what you just said.”

“You mean about you fucking me.”

“Yeah, that’s it. I’m going to fuck you, Anna. I’m going to fuck you and then make love to you and then fuck you again and then make love to you some more and then fuck you until finally I can’t get it up. I want to fuck you for the rest of your life. I want to make love to you for the rest of my life. I want to fuck you when that implant is gone so I can get you pregnant with our child. Then I want to fuck you so we can have our next child and the next and the next. I don’t ever want to grow old and not want to fuck you.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?”

“It’s a promise, Anna, but I told you: I need to think about it before we do it. Are you doing it just because you feel sorry for me...about my life and what I told you this afternoon? I don’t want that.”

“I don’t know, David. Maybe that’s part of it but it’s not the real reason. I just want you to make love to me. I want to feel you come inside me. I want you to come back to me. I want to give you a reason to live. I want you to want me so much you’ll crawl through hell to get back to me. I want to tie you to me so there’s something pulling you back to me. I don’t want you to die. Is that so bad? I’m sure lots of women have let a man make love to her so he’ll have something to hold on to, something that makes him want to return.”

“There’s something else I’ve got to think about,” I said. “If I go on my mission and you go on yours, whatever it is, how is it going to affect you in your mission if you know I’m not coming back? Will you give up and...and let them kill you too?”

“David, missions for women aren’t like those for men,” she said. “We’re mainly trained to be eyes and ears. We have training on killing too but we’re not really expected to do that. We’re usually assigned somewhere for three months and then we’re brought back out and we unload everything we’ve learned. I’ll have no communication with anybody for those three months. I probably won’t know what happened to you until I come back.”

“Anna, you’ve got to understand something about me,” I said. “For most of my life, I’ve struggled with knowing what’s right and what’s wrong, without a father to help me. Grandfather helped me but he always left it up to me to determine the right thing to do. I can’t yield that decision to you. I can’t let you talk me into doing something, even though it’s what I want more than anything else in the world. I’m the one who has to decide if it’s the right thing for us to go to the Heartache Hotel. I can’t hurt you. Is that love? I won’t hurt you. I think I’m beginning to love you. I want to care for you and protect you from hurt. Can you live with that?”

She looked at me without any expression on her face. Finally she gave me her answer.

“Yes, David, I can live with it. You make the decision and I’ll know you’re doing the right thing either way and it’s because you love me.”

We both sat and looked at each other for a minute or so. Finally she broke the silence.

“David, I want you to know one thing before you decide. I want you to go with me to the Heartache Hotel. I want to know what it’s like to be loved by you. I want you to know what it’s like to be loved by me. We’re going to be good together, so fucking good fucking each other. No matter what happens to us, I’ll be strong. I’m a stubborn, tough, determined woman. I can be a real bitch sometimes! I’ll be OK!”

“May I give you an answer tomorrow morning at breakfast? I can’t think clearly about it when I’m near you.”

“Yes, but David, there’s one more thing I want to say,” she said.

“What?”

She lay back down with her head on her boot pillow and held out her arms to me.

“I love you,” she whispered, smiling at me.

At first I couldn’t say anything. I’d wanted so much to hear those words. I knew I was no good at being romantic but I knew what I wanted to say.

“I love you too, Anna. I love you. I love you...”

“Shut up, David,” she said, interrupting me, grinning at me. “You only need to say it once. Now come here!”

I lay down beside her, leaned over her, and looked in her eyes for a minute or so, both of us solemn and unsmiling. Slowly I brought my face down until my lips touched her and I closed my eyes. We kissed at first with closed lips, like a twelve-year boy and an eleven-year old girl might do. That wasn't enough for me and I suppose it wasn't enough for her. She opened her lips and I felt her tongue touch my lips and I opened to her and began to drown in her.

After a while, she put her hands against my chest and pushed me slightly away from her.

“David, there are lots of things we can do with each other without going all the way,” she whispered. “Do you want to?”

“Yeah,” I whispered back and put my hand on her breast.

“I'm trusting you to hold back, David,” she whispered. “When you're on top of me ramming that big dick of yours in me, I want a good mattress under my back.”

“OK,” I whispered back. “You'll have it.”

I really didn't know how to pleasure her. Except for the first woman I had made love with when I was fourteen, I'd fleetingly had my hand on the breasts of a couple of other women before I hungrily moved on to the parts that would give me the relief that I needed so much. But I wanted to make it good for her and I knew I should be slow and gentle. I kept kissing her while I played with her breasts, cupping my hand underneath them, catching the hard nipple between my thumb and forefinger, stroking them. She moaned so I assumed she liked what I was doing.

I felt my penis grow even harder and I moved closer to her until it pressed against her side. She wiggled one arm between us and took it in her hand. She started moving her hand back and forth on it and I was afraid I'd come much too early. I reached down and held her hand still.

“Just hold it,” I whispered into her open mouth. “Don’t make me come yet.”

I returned my hand to her breast but she caught it and moved it down between her legs. She bent her legs, knees raised, and spread them wide, giving me easy access to her. I cupped my hand over her mound and held it for a minute or so before I began to explore.

We kept kissing each other, open mouths and moving tongues, while I used my middle finger to seek out the way into her. I parted her labia, moved my finger down to her vagina, and let it slowly slide into her. She moaned again. I pushed my finger in as deep as I could and moved it around and around. She kept moaning. It had been years since my first sexual experiences and I had forgotten how it felt to get my finger in a woman’s vagina. The heat and wet silken smoothness of it amazed me.

I moved down so that my face was above her breasts, looked at them for a second, and then took the nipple of her left breast in my mouth. I sucked on it while I explored her vagina with first one finger and then two. Within a minute or so, my fingers were totally wet from her and I moved them up a little to where I knew her clitoris was supposed to be.

In most of my previous encounters with a woman, I’d been in a hurry to get my penis in her vagina. I’d never tried to find her clitoris so I could bring her to orgasm. It never entered my mind that she might not be satisfied by simple fucking.

However, I wanted Anna to come first. I wanted to satisfy her before I reached my own release. I wanted to please her, to bring her to orgasm, while I waited for my turn and I didn’t mind waiting. At first, I couldn’t find her clitoris. I knew it was where her inner labia joined together. Then I felt a hard bump there and I knew I’d found it.

I alternated between kissing her and loving her breasts and at the same time switched between inserting two fingers in her vagina and rubbing her clitoris with the same fingers. I didn’t know what I was doing and whether or not I was doing it right. Then she started groaning, almost whining, and I knew I was. When she started moving her pelvis against my hand, I guessed that she was probably close. Then she reached down, caught my hand, and pushed it down

so that my fingers were deep within her. I felt something contracting and relaxing on my fingers and I knew I'd succeeded. Like a twelve-year-old boy, I was proud of myself. I had made her come.

I didn't want to take my fingers out of her but I didn't know whether she wanted me to or not. I held my hand still and just lay there beside her looking down at her. Her hair was damp and tangled and her face was devoid of makeup but she was still beautiful to me. I watched her face as she gradually relaxed, her eyes opened, and she smiled at me.

"You lied to me again, David," she whispered.

"What now?"

"You said you didn't know anything about women. It seems to me you know enough. You knew enough to be slow and gentle with me. You made me come and it was a good orgasm, David. Of course, I was a little bit horny and that helped."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," I said.

"Oh, I did, David. I really enjoyed it. Now are you ready for your turn?"

"What do you have in mind?" I asked.

She sat up suddenly, pushed me down flat on my back, and straddled my legs. She tugged my legs together and then sat down on my thighs just above my knees.

"Oh, I'll think of something," she said, as she put one hand on my testicles and wrapped the other around my penis.

"Just be slow and gentle with me," I said, and she looked back at my face and saw me grinning.

She grinned back at me and then looked down at my groin. She sat and looked for a minute, leaning to one side and then the other.

"Doesn't it hurt?" she asked.

"What?"

“Your balls,” she answered “One’s caught down between your legs and the others on top of it. It looks like you’ve just got one.”

I put my hands behind my head, like I was going to do a crunch, rose up, and looked down. My penis was in the way. I rose up a little higher, held my penis down to one side and against my stomach, and looked again. It looked like I had just one testicle and my scrotum was stretched tightly over it.

“It’s a little uncomfortable,” I said “It doesn’t really hurt. Pull the other one out. Like I told you, be gentle.”

I watched as she pushed her fingers down between my legs, and then brought them up under my scrotum. I couldn’t help but smile. She was so intent on rescuing the other testicle and the tip of her tongue was sticking out between her lips. She pushed up from below, pulled gently from above, and succeeded in getting both of my testicles free.

“Of course, you could have just moved your legs apart a little and I wouldn’t have had so much trouble,” she said.

“I know but I wouldn’t have had so much fun,” I said.

She cupped her hand under my scrotum and lifted my testicles, pushed them to one side and then the other, all the while intently looking at what she was doing.

“Why do you have hair all around your balls but there’s not much on them?”

“I never thought about it,” I said. “They’re just the ones I was issued.”

“Well, they’re big too. I guess everything about you is big. I’m glad. I think you’re man enough for me.”

“I hope so. I really want to be your man. I want it so much, Anna.”

“Oh, you will be,” she said, looking at me and grinning. “For the rest of your life, you’re going to be my man.”

She leaned over suddenly, held my penis straight up, and took the head in her mouth. I shut my eyes, put my head back down on my boot pillow, and let her have her way with me. She moved her head up and

down, short strokes, so that her lips slid up and down on just the head, not down on the shaft. One hand cupping my testicles, the other holding my penis, her lips and tongue just barely moving up and down on the head, I couldn't believe it. I wondered if I was about to get a blow job, as all the guys call it, but I don't know why since she certainly wasn't blowing on it and it didn't seem that much like a job to me. She used her mouth on me for a minute or two and then stopped, straightened up, and just used her hand on me. I opened my eyes, did a good crunch with my hands behind my head, lifted up off the blanket, and watched.

"Do you like that?" she asked. From the grin on her face, she knew the answer.

I just nodded. She was moving her hand up and down on my penis, slowly all the way up until my foreskin covered the head and then down until the head was uncovered and the skin on the shaft was stretched tightly down.

"You've got a six pack," she said. "I guess it looks more like an eight-pack, the way the muscles on your stomach stand out. How can you hold yourself up like that?"

"I'm just doing a crunch," I answered. "It's easy when you're sitting on my legs. I do forty every day plus some other good exercises. It's all part of my training."

"When we were in the pool, I could feel your dick between my legs, sort of pressed up against my pussy," she said.

"Yeah, I felt it too, I mean, I felt your pussy on my dick."

"Wow, you can say dick and pussy. You just said them in the same sentence."

"Anna, it's just habit. It doesn't bother me to use other names."

"I wonder what it would feel like, you know, me sitting on your dick. I don't mean with it in me, just with it pressed down against your stomach and me sitting on it."

"Why don't you find out?"

She moved upward on me until her mound was directly above my penis, and then settled down with her hands on my chest, sort of like a hen settling on eggs. I looked down and saw just the head of my penis sticking out from under her. I felt the heat and wetness of her on the under shaft of my penis and on my scrotum. I put my head back down and watched her.

She started moving on me, sliding back and forth along the length of my penis, shifting her weight from hip to hip, bending her back or rolling her pelvis, all the while watching intently. She slid her hands around on my chest from the hair in the center up and down on my stomach, palms sliding up over my nipples to my shoulders and then sliding back down toward my navel. I suppose she was trying different movements to learn what felt good. I lay there and watched what she was doing in amazement.

She must have found some combination of movements that felt good to her because she started sliding back and forth with a pelvic twist when she started moving back. My penis and balls were almost dripping from the secretions she smeared all over me and she slid easily.

I don't suppose she knew it but she had discovered something I liked too. She slid forward until my penis was out of sight under her and I felt the hard bump of her clitoris rubbing just under the head of my penis. At first I couldn't believe she could make me come that way but, as she continued riding me, I began to believe. After a short while, I knew I was going to come without having my penis in her vagina and without anybody's helping hand. In another minute or so, I shut my eyes and let it happen. I squirted out one stream after another of hot semen on my stomach.

She must have felt the contractions in my penis because she went into what can only be described as a frenzy. Her eyes were closed and her face looked like she was in agony. Her fingers were trying to rip the skin off my chest and her pussy seemed to be grasping at my penis. I expected her to make one too many wild movements, catch my penis with her vagina, and shove herself down on it. I wanted her to.

But she didn't. She just rode me at a hard gallop and then slowed down to a trot and then stopped. I did another crunch and looked down at my stomach. The head of my penis was barely peeking out of her pubic hair and semen was running off on both sides of my

stomach. I couldn't believe I came like that. I'd never imagined anything like it.

She sat there on me, breathing deeply, for a minute or so. Then she opened her eyes, smiled wickedly at me, and looked down.

"I think you've got to go back to the pool, David," she said. "You've made a mess all over yourself."

"The pool's out in the direct sunlight now," I said. "You've got to go with me. I wouldn't want you to get overheated."

"Well, the water's cold. You can just hurry and get in. I think I'll let you go by yourself."

I grabbed her arms, pulled her down on me, then wrapped my arms around her and held her tightly against me. When I raised my head, she met me in a kiss.

"I think you'd better get in too. You've got semen smeared all over your stomach," I said.

After another trip to the pool, we returned to the blanket. This time she lay against me with her head on my shoulder and one leg thrown over both of mine. She played with the hair on my chest while we talked.

"You've got to come back to me, David," she said. "We're going to be good together. That's the first time I've ever come with a man and you haven't even gotten your dick in me yet. The second time was just as good as the first."

"You came again? I couldn't tell."

"Well, your dick wasn't in my pussy. If it had been, I'd have pinched it off."

"I'm not through, Anna," I said. "Maybe you'll come another time or two."

"If I do, I'm going to make sure you do too."

"May I say 'I love you' if I just say it once?"

“You may say it a million times if you want to,” she said. “Once is enough. I wish you could know how happy I am to hear you say it.”

“I want to come back to you, Anna. You’ve given me hope and made me believe I can have a life with you. That makes me happy too.”

I turned over facing her, put my right leg over hers, and she put her left leg over my hip. We finally figured out where to put our arms to be comfortable. She put her hand back on my chest and played with the hair. I put my hand on her breast and played with the nipple. I liked what I was playing with better.

We talked for while, just lying there, in no hurry to go anywhere or do anything. We didn’t talk about the missions we might go on or the undeclared war. We talked about the future and what we wanted our life to be like when we were together. She seemed enthusiastic about the possibility of having my children, our children, and I was just as enthusiastic about giving them to her. When she moved her hand down between us and played with my testicles and brought my penis back to another erection, I was ready to give her one immediately.

I thought about what we had done and what we might still do. I remembered something I had heard at breakfast with her, something I’d never done and had never wanted to do until now. I wanted to do it with Anna.

“Anna, did you hear what the women behind me at the table this morning were talking about?” I asked.

“Who?”

“I don’t know. They were behind me and I didn’t want to take my eyes off you to look.”

“Wow! Are you sure you’re not Irish and you’ve been kissing the blarney stone?”

“No but I heard them talking about kissing, I guess you’d call it that.”

She thought for a minute and I could see from the puzzled look on her face that she didn’t know what I was talking about.

“The one right behind me, the one with a high-pitched voice. She said ‘He ate me until I couldn’t think and then I sucked his brains out through his dick.’”

“Oh, that’s Christine,” she said. “She can’t keep her mouth shut.”

I wondered if there was a double entendre there. “How do you mean that?”

“Both ways,” she said. “All the girls call her a cum-slut. She always talks about it after she does it.”

“A cum-slut? What’s’ that?”

“A girl who sucks off lots of guys and swallows and then tells everybody. I feel so sorry for her.”

“Why?”

“Well, she’s not very attractive and she’s a little overweight. I think she does it because she wants somebody to love her and she knows a guy likes to see a girl swallow his come.”

“Have you ever done it, I mean, suck some guy off and then swallow?”

“No, have you?” she answered and then giggled.

“No. I did something once...I was about fifteen...it was after my mother left...promise me you won’t laugh at me.”

“OK, I promise.”

“I was in the carriage house by myself, jacking off. I guess I was curious. I was laying in my bed and I put my legs back over my head so my penis...I mean, my dick...was right above my face. I had my mouth open and when I came some of it went in my mouth. I tasted it and then swallowed it and almost threw up.”

“I guess it’s an acquired taste too.”

“Yeah, anyway, I was talking about the first thing Christine said, not the second. Would you let me do that to you?”

She didn't answer for a minute or so. "I thought you didn't know much about women."

I remembered doing it at fourteen, almost half a lifetime ago, how I had learned to do it to please a grown woman and how much I liked doing it, and how she had disappeared at the end of that summer and I had no idea where she was now. Still I had learned that it was something women liked and I especially wanted to do it with Anna.

"I don't but I want to do it with you."

"Are you sure? It's probably an acquired taste," she said and then giggled.

"Anna, it makes me horny just to think about it. Will you let me?"

"David, you don't have to be so polite. Don't ask me. Just do it."

"OK."

I pushed her down on her back, waited while she put her head on her boot pillow, then rose up on my knees, and knee-walked until I was between her ankles. I pulled one of her legs up, then the other, knees bent, and spread them. Then I sat back on my heels and looked at her.

Her hair was nearly dry and it was tangled and almost covering one breast. On her back, her breasts were slightly flattened and leaned off to both sides. Below her rib cage, her stomach was drawn in flat, just about concave. A neat little patch of pubic hair crowned her mound. Then back between her legs, her mound curved around and split. Between the two halves I saw the slightly-opened lips of her pussy, with a little opening into her vagina, just a little dark opening surrounded by red flesh. I didn't want to eat her. I wanted to taste her and smell her and drown myself in her and crawl up in her pussy and stay there.

"Do you see something you like," she asked. I looked up and saw her smiling at me.

On my hands and knees, I moved over her and kissed her. She wrapped one arm around my chest, put a hand behind my head, and pulled me down so that my mouth was against hers and my chest was pressed against her breasts. I kept my ass in the air, trying to hold my

dick up so that it wasn't pressed against her stomach or down between her thighs. I didn't think I could resist the urge to shove it in her if I let it touch her.

I moved downward on her, still supporting myself on my hands and knees, and took the nipple of one breast in my mouth. She cupped her hands under her breasts and held them for me. I moved from one to the other and sucked the nipples into erections like little penises.

I moved downward again and licked her belly button clean. It was already clean but I made her squirm when I licked it.

Finally, I moved downward again, caught her legs behind her knees, pushed them back and to the sides, dropped down on my stomach so my face was only inches from her, and then moved upward a little and stuck my face in her pussy. I shut my eyes, turned my face from side to side, and rubbed my cheeks and nose and mouth and chin on the soft smooth skin of her inner thighs and in the hair on each side and in the soft outer lips and the little inner lips of her pussy. I breathed deeply and smelled what a woman's bouquet is like when she is aroused. I liked the way she smelled, like nothing else smelled but so damned arousing. I knew that getting my face between her legs was going to be one of my favorite ways of enjoying sex with her.

After a minute or so, I pulled back, reached down under my stomach, and pulled my foreskin so it covered the head of my dick and the wool blanket didn't keep irritating it. Then I took one more deep breath and stuck out my tongue.

I licked her slit for a while and then took another look at her pussy. I kept licking her and then looking until the inner lips separated and I could see the pink and coral and red of her vulva. I studied it a little, figuring out where her vagina was, back farthest between her legs, to where her clitoris was, up top where the little lips came together, and where she peed, from a little protrusion between the two good parts. It was fascinating. Damn, I liked it.

I had been uncertain whether I'd want to lick her pussy or not but I wanted to please her and after I'd licked her for a minute or so I found myself really wanting to do it. The taste and smell of her seemed to go in through my nose and mouth and straight down to my dick.

She put her feet on my back, turned in opposite directions with her legs splayed, knees wide apart. I used the thumbs of both hands to open her wider so I'd have more to lick. She put both hands on the sides of my head and held me so that my mouth was on her clitoris. I guessed that meant she wanted me to pay attention to it so I did. I decided to be easy and gentle in licking her but I intended to be persistent until she came.

After a minute or so longer, she put her hands behind my head and pulled me against her and at the same time she started just barely groaning and moaning and whining. I kept licking for a little longer and then decided to see if I could suck her clitoris into my mouth. At the same time, I slid two fingers in her pussy and curled them around.

It didn't take a minute more of sucking and licking and finger fucking before she started saying things, like "Oh, shit" and "Oh, fuck." I felt her internal muscles grasping and relaxing on my fingers and I knew she had come again. From what I felt on my fingers, it seemed like she'd had a good orgasm. I tried not to laugh at what she was saying. I guess I was like a twelve-year-old boy again, proud of doing something to please a girl or woman. I knew it was something I liked, in fact, loved, and I was going to do it with her often in the future.

When I crawled back up beside her, she was lying there with one arm over her eyes, gasping for breath. I moved as close to her as I could and held her and waited for her to come down. After a minute or so, she moved her arm, looked at me, and smiled.

"Boy, you're going to get it," she whispered. "I'm going to suck your brains out through your dick."

We lay there on the blanket under the beech tree, me holding her, her holding my still-erect penis, me kissing her, her holding my head above hers and refusing to let our kiss end, me holding her breast and playing with the nipple with my thumb, just playing and in no hurry to do anything else. I knew my turn would come. Finally she pushed me slightly away from her.

"What was it I said I was going to do?" she whispered, grinning up at me. "I've forgotten."

"Suce moi et fais moi jouir," I answered, grinning down at her. "Suck me and make me come."

That's what she did. She pushed me down on my back, kneed my legs apart and crawled between them, leaned over and wrapped her hand around my penis and took the head into her mouth. Sometimes she just used her hand, sometimes her mouth, and sometimes but not often enough both hand and mouth. I lay there and let the rest of the world go away and I was nothing but hard penis ready to spurt out a gallon of semen. Somehow I retained the presence of mind to warn her. "I'm about to come, Anna," I whispered. When she didn't stop, I assumed she knew what she was about to get. When my orgasm hit, it felt like I was emptying my balls into her mouth.

When I opened my eyes, Anna was sitting back on her heels with her lips tightly closed. When she saw my eyes open, she tilted her head back and swallowed once, almost gagged, and then leaned over and spit the rest of my semen out on my stomach.

"You've got to go back to the pool, David," she whispered. "You've made another mess."

I could tell she was trying to round up a little more elusive semen in her mouth. I grabbed her arms, pulled her over me, put one arm around her, the other behind her head, and brought her face down to mine. We kissed with open mouths, our tongues moving in and out, and I tasted my semen again.

I rolled over on top of her, she spread her legs wide, and my penis nestled against her vulva. I looked down at her, breathing deeply, feeling her hard nipples against my chest and the wetness of her pussy against the shaft of my penis, and I made up my mind.

"Would you go with me to the Heartache Hotel next weekend, Anna?" I whispered.

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Monday morning, I checked the bulletin board for my orders for the week. I wasn't assigned to either the shooting range or the training area. When I saw what I was to do, I knew everything was about to change and my wished-for mission was imminent.

At 9:00 AM I reported to Building 41 as ordered. From the outside, the building was like so many others on the base, a weathered

building that had probably been sitting there for 30 years. When I went inside, there was a small reception room with one door leading deeper into the building. I rung the buzzer beside the inside door and was immediately asked to identify myself.

After a cute female lieutenant subjected me to a thorough security check, I was assigned to a private who escorted me to Room 15. The private told me I would be locked in but there was a buzzer for me to ring if I wanted to leave the room temporarily. He asked if I wanted anything such as something to drink and I asked for a large orange juice with lots of ice. Inside the room, I saw a comfortable-looking couch, two chairs, and a table. The table was covered and I decided to wait for my juice before I uncovered it.

The private was back in a few minutes with a half-gallon of orange juice, two glasses, and a big thermal carafe full of ice. When I was locked in the room again, I uncovered the table and saw an old much-used suitcase.

I pushed the right catch release three times – the wrong way – and I was rewarded with three faint clicks. I knew the explosive device in the suitcase had been temporarily disabled. If I had opened the suitcase without disabling it, someone would have had to scrape me off the walls, if there were any walls left standing. The bottom, sides, and top of the suitcase were going to be padded with one of our most powerful explosives.

I pushed the right and left catch releases simultaneously – the right way – and lifted the lid of the suitcase. The first thing I saw was a foam rubber cover with a handle on each side. I lifted the cover and saw the components for my rifle. It looked strange to see a weapon with all the parts camouflaged in a rustic sand color. I lifted the components out, laid them on the table in the order I wanted, closed the suitcase, and set it under the table.

I stood there without doing anything, checking over the parts to see if they conformed to my requests. As far as I could see, they did. There was a manual, of course, but I wanted to look at the rifle before I read it.

There was a bipod that looked like the ones I'd been using. Nothing remarkable there.

There was a scope that looked somewhat like the ultra-high magnification ones I'd been using. I knew it would be sighted in at about 2,300 meters, the maximum range for me when I wasn't cool. I was depending on being cool to get me the extra kick to extend the range to almost two miles, the distance between the temple doors and my hiding place.

The CARD – Computer Assisted Rifle Device – looked like some sort of electronic device with the small array of prongs to connect it to the rifle. I knew it would fit beneath the barrel and the scope. It interacted with the sight to help correct for distortions caused by heat and it communicated with a satellite that fed it information about heat and wind and distance. The rifle was inoperable without it.

The rifle was bolt action, as I had requested. I studied the trigger for a moment but I knew I would be able to determine if it broke cleanly without any creep only by using it. I looked at the bedding between the action and the stock and saw nothing notable except for the sandstone color.

With the silencer, the barrel was four and a half feet long, six inches longer than the usual sniper rifle, to give it extra carrying power and punch. The silencer was the newest development about the rifle. It gave the bullet extra carrying power instead of slowing it down. I had thoroughly tested it and it seemed to work well for longer-range shots.

Overall, the rifle appeared to be what I had designed with the manufacturer's rep. He had asked me more than once for what target the rifle was intended and I had refused to tell him, in spite of his security clearance.

I poured myself a glass of orange juice, picked up the manual, and then laid down on the couch. I knew I had almost to memorize the manual before they'd be satisfied.

The manual wasn't very long and I read it through three times. The manual was adamant in its instruction that I should destroy the CARD after I had made my kill. I knew I could do that either by stomping it or by putting the rifle back in the booby-trapped suitcase.

I buzzed for the private and told him I wanted a pit stop. He accompanied me and stood behind me and to one side as I pissed. I

asked if he had to accompany me everywhere and he answered that his orders were never to let me out of his sight when I was out of the room. I was about to go back in the room with my rifle when he asked me a question.

“Sir, is it really true that you killed ten bad guys in less than a minute?”

I looked at him and saw that he was just a kid. “No, that’s not true. I shot seven of them in about a minute. They ambushed us and we fought back. I just did what I was trained to do. They were just unlucky.”

“Well, whatever you did, could I shake your hand?” he asked.

I shook his hand, slapped him on the shoulder, and went back to my rifle.

Locked in the room again, I stood next to the table and mentally rehearsed the process of putting the rifle together. When I was ready, I timed myself and put it together without hurrying. It took me almost two minutes. I wasn’t satisfied.

I took it apart and put it back together again in about a minute and a half. Still not good enough. I took it apart again and assembled it again. Just over a minute. When I did it a fourth time, my time was under a minute and I was satisfied for the moment.

I disassembled the rifle again, putting the parts back in their original positions. I closed my eyes and put it together again. I opened my eyes and took it apart. I closed my eyes and assembled it again in a little over a minute. I took it apart, scrambled the parts, closed my eyes, and assembled it again in about a minute and a half.

I saw that it was past noon so I buzzed for the private and asked him to go to lunch with me. He smiled and consented. I’d even say he was eager to go. I could hardly eat because he asked me so many questions. He seemed to think I was some sort of superhero. I tried to convince him that I was just a soldier with good training. I don’t think he believed me.

That afternoon, I took the rifle apart and put it together eight more times, four of them with my eyes closed. I was satisfied so I buzzed for the private. I shook his hand again as I left.

Tuesday morning, I found one of the majors from the interview board waiting for me in Building 41, the one who had known my father. He watched me as I took the rifle apart and re-assembled it four times, two of them with my eyes closed. We sat around the table and talked until noon. When he mentioned my father, I found that I could talk about him. I knew the major knew the circumstances of my father's death, as did the other members of the board, but I told him anyway.

We went to lunch together and I talked about my relationship with Anna and what I wanted when I came back from the mission. He didn't seem surprised that I wanted to be discharged from the military. I was pleasantly surprised when I was told that I was free for the afternoon.

Wednesday morning, my orders were to report to the firing range. When I got there, I was issued my rifle – I thought of it as mine – and one hundred rounds of standard ammunition. I knew it was time for me to become acquainted with my rifle. During the day, I fired at various targets, all of them over a mile away, and took notes of where I was aiming each time. When I turned in the rifle and my notes, I assumed that the rifle would be recalibrated. I quit in time to meet Anna for dinner.

Thursday morning, my orders were to report to the long-range firing line. I knew that this was the ultimate test. When I arrived, I was driven by jeep to another area separate from the regular firing range. The major was there waiting for me with my rifle. We climbed up a ladder about a dozen feet to a platform. On the platform, two-by-fours outlined a window. In front of the window, there was a table and a single chair. We both used binoculars to look at the mock-up of the temple doors with the Mullah and his retinue standing in front. He was easy to locate; he always dressed completely in black.

I assembled my rifle, sat down in the chair, inserted my ammo, and closed my eyes. Within a minute or so I was cool, as cool as I had been the day I head-shot the bad guy as he scrambled for the gully. I thought of Grandfather and what he had told me once. Revenge is a dish that is best eaten cold. Well, Grandfather, this is for your son and for my father. I'm not cold; I'm just cool.

I sighted and fired and waited for the call to tell me where I'd hit. A minute or so later, a disembodied voice told us that my shot was high about two feet and that I had hit the Mullah-fucker in the head, not in the chest. When the major heard the report he yelled "Son of a bitch, you did it!" And then he looked at me.

I sat there in the chair, unsmiling, without any reaction. The Major looked at the target through his binoculars, and then looked at me again.

"Your shot wasn't high, was it?" he asked. "You wanted to shoot him in the head, didn't you?"

I didn't answer him. I just smiled. I could do it. I could kill the son of a bitch. I was cool.

And then I thought of Anna. I didn't want to leave her.

Chapter Five

Wednesday, eight guys, all of us in the final stages of our training, were ordered to have an early breakfast, a big one, and to board the waiting bus by seven o'clock. To test our endurance in desert conditions, we were taken to a remote area of the base for a series of challenges. I was confident that I could do anything that was asked of me.

As a warm-up, we started with simple routine exercises like pushups and I did my usual fifty with no difficulty. After that, we were confronted with the obstacle course from hell. We had to cooperate to complete the course and we had to ensure that all eight of us finished it or else we all failed. I was chosen to be team leader. We managed to get all eight of us through the course.

As the day wore on, my confidence began to wane, especially since we did not have any lunch and my stomach was growling like a bear.

During the afternoon, we were pushed even harder, culminating at last in a run over rough terrain with a fifty-pound backpack. Only five of us made it to the finish point; three collapsed from exhaustion. The

five of us were examined by a medic and then we waited in the air-conditioned bus for the other three to join us when they recovered. Nobody said a word or even moved on the ride back to our barracks.

I knew Anna was waiting for me for dinner at the mess hall. I wanted a cold shower and clean clothes before I joined her but, when some of the other trainees asked to be taken straight to the mess hall, I didn't object. I hoped she loved me enough to have dinner with me even though I was filthy and stinking.

She was sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of the mess hall, waiting for me, fresh-from-the-shower-looking and beautiful as always. She took one look at me, made me sit down in her chair, and then checked me out as best she could. I suppose my temperature and heart and breathing rates were close enough to normal. The feel of her palm on my forehead made the day's ordeal almost worth it.

"David, are you OK?" she asked. I could hear the very real concern in her voice.

"Yeah, I'm OK," I answered, barely able to force the words out. "I've just been through the endurance test from hell and I haven't eaten since breakfast and I'm totally exhausted and hungry enough to eat a horse, but, yeah, I'm OK."

She stood looking at me for a minute while I slumped down in the chair, looking up at her. I suppose she was trying to decide what to do.

"I love you, David," she whispered. "Will you let me take care of you?"

All I was able to say was "Yeah." I wanted her to care for me. I wanted her to love me. I suppose the big grin on my face showed her how much I wanted her to take care of me.

She would not even let me go through the chow line with her. She made me sit at a small table while she got food for me. I watched her as she piled the food on a tray. When she put the tray down in front of me, I wondered if I would be able to hold it all.

She sat in front of me, watching me eat, until I began to slow down. Only then did she go back through the chow line for her own dinner. By the time we finished eating - and I ate everything - I felt a slight resurgence of energy.

“Let’s go back to your quarters,” she finally said. “I’m going to give you a bath. You stink.”

“I’m sorry,” I answered. “They put eight of us through some rough challenges today, without any lunch. I suppose we all wanted to eat more than we wanted to bathe.”

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “I’ve smelled worse. I’m going to give you a bath and then put you to bed. I think I’ll even give you something to help you sleep.”

“You don’t have to bathe me, Anna. I can do it myself.”

“David, don’t argue with me,” she said, in a tone of voice that sounded like an order. “A woman wants to take care of her man. You’re my man now, damn it! You hear me; you’re my man from now on! Tonight, you will do what I tell you!”

“Yes, ma’am,” I surrendered. I was happy to surrender to her.

As we were leaving the mess hall, another of the female trainees pulled Anna to one side for a moment and whispered something to her. Then, as we were walking to my barracks, I asked her what she had said.

“She asked if you had told me you came in first in the endurance run,” Anna answered. “She said you ran off and left the other guys. Why do you always have to be like that?”

“Like what?”

“The Warrior! That’s what some of the girls call you. Some of the trainees refer to you as the fucking warrior and some as the goddamn warrior. You don’t have to be the leader in everything, David. Did you think of how the other guys felt to see you running ahead of them all the way to the finish?”

“Anna, I’ve just got long legs.”

“Don’t give me that crap, David. Did you even think of the other guys?”

I stopped for a minute and turned her around facing me.

“Yes, I did, Anna. I was very much aware of the other guys all the time we were running. They chose me to be their leader and I always want to be responsible for my men. I wanted them to see me out in front of them. I wanted them to know I was going to complete the run and they could too. I deliberately slowed down a couple of times so I wouldn’t get too far ahead of them. As far as me being a leader, well, that’s just the way I am. I guess I’ll always be that way. As far as me being the fucking warrior, well, maybe not yet but...”

She gave a big sigh, smiled at me, and shook her head. “Well, I suppose I’ll just have to take you the way you are.”

“I hope so,” I said, and grinned back at her.

In my room, she made me sit on the edge of the bed while she took off my boots. Then she unbuttoned my shirt, pulled it off, ordered me to stand up, unbelted and unzipped my pants, and took them off. I’d gone commando again but she didn’t say anything about it. My penis was hanging down and swollen but as limp as I felt. My testicles were hanging down even lower. She slowly ran her hand over the scratches and bruises on my stomach and chest and ignored everything lower down.

I sat there and watched intently while she undressed. She had worn her usual evening outfit: buttoned shirt with a white undershirt, no bra, khaki shorts with white panties, and white socks and sneakers. She stuck her tongue out at me when she pulled her undershirt over her head and saw me looking at her breasts, her perfect beautiful breasts. Then she watched me and smiled when she hooked her thumbs in her panties and slowly, tantalizingly slowly, pulled them down her long legs. As tired as I was, I felt a little surge of desire when she revealed her naked body to me. She was just so damn beautiful. She was such a big beautiful woman. I couldn’t help but feel I wasn’t worthy of her.

I looked down at my own body, encrusted in places with dirt, half-clean in others from sweating, scratches on my legs, scrapes and bruises on my stomach and chest from hanging on top of a twelve-foot obstacle wall and pulling the other guys up and over, and stinking from sweating all day. I was proud of the physical condition in which I kept my body but I hated to let her see me so filthy and sweaty.

She held out her hand to me, expecting me to stand up and follow her, but instead I pulled her in front of me. I moved to the edge of the bed, pulled her between my spread knees, and wrapped my arms around her with my face just even with her breasts. I shut my eyes, turned my head slightly, and leaned forward until the side of my face was pressed against the softness of her breasts. I took a few deep breaths and inhaled the clean womanly smell of her. I didn't care whether I ever moved again.

For a minute or so, she held my head against her breasts with one hand and played with my hair with the other. I turned my head, sought out the nipple of one of her breasts, caught the hard little knob between my lips, and sucked gently on it. I turned loose of that nipple, kissed the other one briefly, put my face between her breasts, breathed deeply a few times, and relaxed.

“Don't go to sleep on me, David,” she said after a while. “You've still got to have a bath first. Even your scalp is dirty. I'm going to have to shampoo my little boy's hair before I bathe him. Why is it so long? Isn't it a lot of trouble?”

A sudden urge to do something came to me and, as tired as I was, I decided to show her. I reached up with both hands and tousled my hair into a tangled mess, wiped dirt off my body and smeared it on my face, and stirred up the scent of my armpits and blew it at her. Then I stood up, pretending the greatest difficulty, and walked around my small bedroom holding my right leg stiff and straight.

“I see,” she said. “It's part of your disguise, your camouflage, when you go on your mission.”

“Yeah,” I croaked, still walking.

“And something is going to happen to your leg so that you have to walk stiff-legged?”

I mimicked someone reading from a book in his left hand and trying to walk with one bad leg.

“You're going to be...an Islamic scholar, some sort of dirty crippled fanatic who's always reading from the Koran.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I hope you can carry it off. But you’ve still got to have a bath before you go to bed.”

Again, she held out her hand to me. I took it this time. We had never really bathed together but I had fantasized about it. I never imagined we would do it while I was too exhausted to play with her.

I turned loose of her hand long enough to lock the door to the adjoining room. The guy in the room next to mine was another trainee. We weren’t usually concerned with privacy when we used our shared bathroom but tonight I didn’t want anybody interrupting whatever Anna had in mind. As we went in the small bathroom, she turned and grinned at me.

“For a minute there I thought you were trying to imitate one of the Three Stooges.”

She got in the shower first and adjusted the water. The shower was a small one and not intended for two at once but I didn’t mind when we bumped into each other. She turned me around and around while the warm water cascaded down on us. I felt her breasts against me more than once but my penis just wasn’t interested. She started to shampoo my hair while we were standing up but I was too tall for her to do it comfortably.

“You’re too tall. Can you kneel down?” she asked.

Could I? Of course I could, especially since that would put my eyes just about even with her belly button. I knelt in front of her, my hands on her hips and my knees between her spread legs. I shut my eyes, leaned forward, kissed her on her stomach, and let her scrub my head.

“Tilt your head up,” she said, all too soon. “Keep your eyes closed until I’ve washed your face and rinsed you off.”

I knelt there, face uplifted, while she scrubbed my face with a soapy cloth. She got soap up my nose when she washed my mustache and I turned my head to one side and blew it out. Then she made me stand up and she washed me the same way I always wash myself: from the top down. She scrubbed my arms and shoulders, chest and back,

genitals and butt. She pushed my foreskin back and lingered longer than necessary on the head of my penis. I could tell it was about to respond when she stopped and made me turn around. I even bent over when she told me to so she could wash the crack of my ass. She squatted down and washed my legs and then made me lift my feet so she could do them too. I washed myself the same way but it was a lot more fun letting her do it.

She almost took off my skin drying me. I just stood there, arms out to the sides as she commanded, while she rubbed me. When she got below the waist, drying my penis and testicles, I suppose she was a little gentler. When she finished, she wrapped her hand around my penis and slowly stroked it, uncovering and recovering the head. It finally responded appropriately and began to swell and lift a little.

“Well, I’m glad to see there’s some life left in you, David,” she said. “When I was washing it, I thought it was dead for a while.”

As we left the bathroom, she picked up my hairbrush from the sink. In the bedroom, she pushed me toward the bed and said “Sit! I’m going to brush your hair.”

I sat there staring at her flat stomach and then down at the little dark hairy patch between her thighs and then up at the underside of her beautiful breasts while she brushed my hair. She carefully parted my long hair in the center of my head and brushed it down over my ears.

“I don’t part it,” I said. “Just brush it straight back.”

“I know. I think maybe I like the way you look better with it parted and then brushed back on each side. When you come back, will you let me experiment with your hair a little, to see which way I like best?”

“Sure. I’ll let you shave it bald if you want to.”

“No. I like you with long hair. You’re quite a handsome man, David. I was afraid of you when you asked to eat dinner with me. I was sure you must have a long list of conquests and you just wanted to add one more.”

“Anna, I’ve told you why I don’t have much experience with women,” I said, lifting my head to look her in the face. “For years, I’ve had a goal

that didn't leave me much time for women. Anyway, I didn't think a woman would be willing to give me what I wanted."

"And what's that?"

"It's what you've given me, Anna. Your love. From the first time I saw you, I had a feeling that you could love me if I just gave you a chance. I'm so glad I did."

"Well, I'm about to give you something else," she said. "I want you to stretch out on the bed on your stomach."

She straddled me, sitting on my butt. I didn't know what she was going to do but it didn't matter.

"Would you scratch my back?" I whispered. "Between my shoulder blades, a little to my right?"

"I was going to give you a massage but I can do that first," she answered.

She scratched me where my back was itching and then gradually used her nails in a bigger area. I moaned a couple of times.

"Do you like that?" she whispered.

"Yeah! Do me all over."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yeah!"

She scratched my shoulders, my arms, my back, then moved down, and used her nails on my butt and legs. I'd never dreamed that being scratched could be such an intensely pleasurable, even erotic, experience. I didn't complain even when she tugged on the hair that crept out of the crack of my ass.

"Turn over," she said, all too soon.

I did and then, when she didn't resume scratching me, I opened my eyes and looked up at her. On my stomach, my penis had been pressed

downwards and had become swollen but not erect. She sat there on it, ignoring it, and so I tried to ignore it too.

“Do you have an antibiotic ointment?” she asked. “I think I should put something on the scratches on your chest and stomach.”

I turned as much as I could with her sitting astride me, pulled open the drawer of the bedside chest, and let her look in it. She lifted off me to retrieve the ointment and, when she sat back down, she looked between her legs and then carefully positioned my penis underneath her vulva. I lay there with my eyes open, looking at her beautiful face, so aware of the heat and moistness of her vulva against the underside of my penis, while she played nurse with me.

“I’m not going to scratch you on your chest and stomach,” she said. “You’ve got enough scratches and bruises there already. I’ll just do your shoulders on this side. ”

I shut my eyes and let her do her magic. She scratched me on my shoulders first and then made me squirm when she did my sides. Finally she moved downward so her butt was below my knees and scratched my thighs. My penis swelled into an almost-full erection but not stiff enough to raise it over my stomach. I opened my eyes slightly and saw that she was looking down at it, smiling slightly.

“Have you got any lotion?” she asked. Did I? Of course I did. In the dry desert climate, everybody used lotion. There was even a shelf in the mess hall where we could get a free bottle. The lotion may have been generic Army-issue but it did a good job of relieving dry skin.

“Yeah, there’s a bottle in the bathroom. It’s good stuff.”

“OK. Turn over on your stomach again,” she said. “I want to do your back first.”

She put some muscle into rubbing my shoulders and back with lotion and made me groan but it was a pleasurable groan. Then she turned around and rubbed my thighs and calves until I was limp. Finally she sat astride my back and rubbed my butt. My penis had been bent back between my legs when I lay down but, as she rubbed me, it became too uncomfortable to ignore it any longer. She didn’t say anything when I raised my hips, reached under, and turned it to point upward.

Suddenly she goosed me in my ribs on both sides and made me squirm. She held on while I bucked like a horse trying to throw its rider. She giggled like a schoolgirl when I finally relaxed.

"Anna, I'm a very happy man," I whispered. "I guess I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life."

"What's made you so happy, David?" she asked.

"Just being with you like this. You goosing me. Rubbing my back. Your pussy drooling a river down the crack of my ass. I like being with you like this."

"My pussy's not drooling. It's bone dry."

"Yeah, sure it is. I've got a bone that might make it a lot wetter."

"Are you going to give it to me?"

"Yeah! Friday night! I'm going to give it to you maybe a half dozen times."

"Well, every time you do, I'm going to take the bone out of it."

I relaxed again, closed my eyes, and let her rub my thighs and calves. She even bent my knees upward and rubbed lotion on my feet. I felt like the luckiest man alive.

"Je t'aime, ma chérie," I whispered.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Je t'aime, ma Mimi,"

"Is that all I am to you, your pussycat?" she giggled.

"Man asheqet hastam," I whispered.

"Your Farsi isn't very good, David. I can't understand you."

"Dooset daram!" I growled.

"I can't understand you when you speak Farsi, David. Did you just say I bomb you?"

"I love you, Anna," I said loudly. "Can you understand that?"

"Oh, yes, I understand you now," she said, and giggled again.

When she told me to turn over, she still didn't say anything when she saw my penis now fully erect and lifted over my stomach and drooling a clear drop. She just straddled it, sat on it, and began to rub my chest and shoulders. I lay there with my eyes almost closed, feeling the heat and wetness of her vulva on my penis, while she rubbed my chest and stomach and tried to pretend she wasn't sitting on something that was as hard as it gets.

"Do a crunch," she whispered.

I put my hands behind my head, lifted, tightened my stomach muscles, and held it. She ran her hands up and down on my stomach so I kept holding it, letting her play. She seemed to be counting something and running one finger up and down. After a minute or so, I relaxed and put my head back down.

"What were you doing?" I asked.

"Nothing. Just counting your six-pack. You really do have one, you know."

"Yeah, I work at it. What were you doing with your finger, running it up and down on my stomach?"

"You've got some big blood vessels running down toward your legs, the left and right iliac arteries, at least that's what I learned in nursing school. I think yours must have some really big branches connecting to your dick"

"Naah, there's one big special artery that goes directly from my heart to my penis. It's called the penis heartisimus expanderosa. When my heart's full of love for you, it makes my penis swell up." I answered her with a straight face but, when she looked at me and grinned, I couldn't help but grin back.

"Bullshit, David! Don't try to get smart with me."

“Yes, ma’am.”

Finally she moved backward a little, sitting on my thighs, and looked down at my penis.

“I’m going to have that damn thing in me Friday night, David,” she whispered. “I’m going to fuck you until it’s as limp as a wet noodle.”

“That’ll never happen,” I whispered back. “I want to fuck you so bad I’ll still be going strong at daylight on Saturday.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” she whispered, grinning down at me. “When we make love, will you let me do something I’ve been dreaming about since you took me to your magic valley?”

“What?”

“I want you to lay there like you are now and let me ride you again, but I want your dick inside me instead of under me. I want to feel this damn thing buried to your balls inside me. Will you let me?”

“Yeah, you can go for a ride just as soon as I get my face out from between your legs.”

“Why is your face going to be between my legs?”

“I want to explore your magic valley.” I stuck out my tongue and wiggled it.

She grinned so wide two dimples appeared on her cheeks. “And then you’ll let me go for a long ride?”

“Yeah.”

I thought for a minute about what she had just asked me. I didn’t want our relationship to be one where she had to ask my permission about anything, especially sex. I wanted her to know that she would always be free to do what she wanted, especially when we were making love.

“Anna, I had a dream one night,” I said. “We were together somewhere and you were standing beside me. We were naked and I had my arm around your shoulders and you had yours around my

waist. We were somewhere on a mountain looking out over the ocean or maybe it was a sea like the Mediterranean. I don't know why I dreamed it or what it meant but I want us to be like that."

"What do you mean?"

"Anna, you don't have to ask my permission to do something. I don't want a woman who walks a few paces behind me. I don't want to be your master, especially when it comes to sex. I want a partner, not a mistress. I want you standing beside me facing the world with me. I don't want always to be on top when we're making love. Sometimes, I want you on top of me, riding me."

"That's good, David," she whispered, smiling, "because that's what I want too. Now, specifically what do you want to do Friday night?"

"I want to lick your pussy 'til you can't talk and then I want to fuck you 'til you can't walk," I said.

"That'll never happen!"

"I love you, Anna," I whispered softly. "I love you and I want to fuck you and make love to you and be with you and hold you forever. We're going to have a lifetime of loving each other and then fucking and loving each other and fucking and never grow tired of it."

"Well, that I can agree on," she answered, looking down at my penis again.

"Don't you want rub it with lotion too?" I asked.

"No, I don't," she answered, looking at my face. "I don't want lotion in my mouth."

"You don't have to do that, Anna," I said, but I wanted her to do it.

"I know I don't, David," she said. "I want to. The girls have been asking me whether I've given you a blowjob and swallowed. They said you'd love me forever if I did."

"I'll love you forever whether you do it or not, and I really mean that."

She pushed my legs apart, knelt between them, wrapped one hand around my penis, cupped the other hand under my testicles, and looked down at what she had in her hands.

“Do you really not know how fucking sexy you are, David?” she asked. “I look at your body, all hard and muscular and slim and so damn masculine. I see your big balls hanging down between your legs, all hot and heavy and making all that fucking testosterone and sperm, and your big dick standing up over your belly, just waiting to squirt out a load of semen. I want to have that damn thing all the way in me, ‘til your balls keep it from going any farther. It makes me so damn horny I could scream.”

“I think I’m just as horny as you are, Anna. Do you still want to wait ‘til Friday night?”

“Yeah, I want to wait. I want you all rested and ready. I want a king-size bed under me. Now shut up and let me make love to your penis...I mean your dick. Now you’ve got me saying penis.”

She leaned over me and that glorious dark hair obscured my view of what she was about to do.

I lay there flat on my back with my eyes closed, hands on my stomach, with Anna kneeling between my spread legs, one hand cupped under my testicles, the other wrapped around the shaft of my penis, her mouth moving up and down on the head. I lay there in heaven and let her suck me. I knew I wasn’t going to last long.

She moved so that she was straddling my right leg and, at the same time, I felt her hand turn loose of my testicles. I did another crunch and rose up to see what she was doing. At first I couldn’t see anything different. I could feel her hand still stroking up and down on my penis and her mouth still alternating between sucking on the head and sliding up and down on it. Then I saw that her left arm was extended back under her body.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

She didn’t answer.

“Anna, what are you doing?” I whispered again.

She took her mouth off me long enough to answer.

“I’m sucking your dick, stupid,” she said. “What the hell do you think I’m doing?”

“What else?”

“I’m doing me at the same time I’m doing you, damn it,” she said. “Now shut up!”

I put my head back down on the pillow and tried to picture how she was doing herself. A fleeting memory of a summer afternoon in France came back to me, when I watched in fascination while fifteen year-old Gabrielle rubbed the top area of her vulva in a circular motion while she watched twelve year-old Danielle stroke my penis. At the time, I didn’t know that was where her clitoris was located and I had wondered why she was doing it.

Now I wondered how Anna was doing it. Moving her head and her hand up and down on my penis and at the same time rubbing her clitoris round and round? I usually couldn’t rub my stomach and pat my head at the same time.

“This weekend, will you show me how you do yourself?” I whispered. “Teach me how to do it for you. I want to learn.”

She grunted once. I took that as a yes. I figured a no would have taken two grunts.

I wanted her to suck me off and then swallow my semen but at the same time I didn’t want her to do anything she didn’t want to do. I decided just to leave it up to her but to warn her when I was about to come. Time stood still and the rest of the world faded away except for what she was doing to me. Nothing existed except for my penis and the feeling of her hand and mouth on it. I could feel my orgasm building and I knew I was almost to the point where it was inevitable. I had just opened my mouth to warn her when something strange happened.

I felt like I was sliding or maybe dissolving or melting but I knew I wasn’t moving. I felt dizzy and disoriented. Then my body gave a quick lurch, the same sort of jerk that happens occasionally when I

fall asleep. At the same instant, I felt the first agonizing spurt of semen leaping from my penis into her mouth and then...

Suddenly, I was between a man's legs, kneeling and bent over with my eyes still closed. My hands weren't clutching the sheet on each side of me anymore. One was between my legs with my longest finger rubbing my clitoris, another hand was moving up and down on the shaft of his penis, and my mouth was around the big head. I felt it throbbing in orgasm and a hot spurt flew out on the back of my tongue. At the same time, the first wrenching convulsion of my own orgasm grabbed me. I panicked and opened my eyes.

I wasn't me any more. I was in Anna. No, I *was* Anna. I was looking down at me, at David's hard stomach and brown pubic hair. And I...she...was sucking my...his...dick. In a split second, the sliding started again, the moving feeling resumed, and I somehow jerked out of her and back into myself and I was again flat on my back watching her. All I could see was the screen of her dark hair shielding what she was doing to my penis with her mouth. She held her head and hand still while my body spurted out the rest of my semen.

Finally, she looked up at me with eyes as big as saucers, sat back on her heels, and just stared at me. She was breathing just as deeply as I was. She blinked rapidly, shook her head from side to side, and moved so that she was on her hands and knees over me, looking down at my face. She swallowed, once, twice, three times, and then stared down at me for a moment.

"What just happened, David?" she whispered.

"I don't know, Anna," I whispered back. "I was you for a split second!"

"And I was you! I don't believe it but I know how it feels when a man comes! It was so good, David, almost as good as when I come! We came at the same time and we weren't even fucking! When you squirted in my mouth, I came and it was as good as I've ever felt and then, for a second, I couldn't tell whether it was me coming or you!"

"Yeah, I don't believe it either but it happened! I felt your semen squirt out on my tongue and then I was back in me. I suppose it was my semen squirting out on your tongue but I felt it, Anna. I really did!"

“Are we crazy, David? Just for split second, I was in you when you started coming and then I was back in me and I was still coming.”

“I don’t know what it was, Anna, but we shared something that was real. We’re not crazy. Maybe I came in your mouth but I was in you when I did and I can still taste it in my mouth.”

She smiled at that and shook her head.

“Well, I can still taste it too. The taste isn’t too bad but it took some will power to swallow that glop. I’ve still got some in my mouth.”

“Anna, when a woman comes, what does it feel like on the inside, kind of low down in your abdomen? I felt something when I was in you, kind of like something in my lower belly gasping. I know it wasn’t me because I’ve never felt that before when I come.”

She laughed. “David, when a woman has an orgasm, her cervix convulses and the external os dilates. That’s probably what you felt. I suppose it’s comparable to the epididymis in your balls contracting to send all that semen out of your penis.”

“I knew what a cervix is. What’s an os?”

“Os me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

“Well, you’re a nurse. I’m just a fucking warrior. How am I supposed to know such things?”

“The os is the opening in the cervix that goes from the vagina to the uterus, David. Some researchers think, when the os dilates, it sucks the sperm from the vagina into the womb. They think it helps a woman get pregnant. They called it the upsuck theory of female orgasm. When I read about that in college, I got a really big laugh. Damn male researchers and their fantasies. Now, shut up for a minute.”

“Do you think it could suck the head of my penis into your womb? I’ll bet that would help you get pregnant.”

“If you don’t shut up...”

She leaned over me with her face a foot or so from mine, her brows scrunched up in a curious frown. Her lips were moving but tightly closed. I saw her cheek bulge out from her tongue. Then she caught my chin between her thumb and a finger and pulled my mouth open. I held it open and watched her while she moved her head slightly so her mouth was directly above mine. When she spit out what I knew was some more of my semen, directly into my waiting mouth, I didn't object. She was looking intently in my eyes so I closed my mouth, swirled her saliva and my semen around, and then swallowed noisily.

She stayed there, her face a foot or so above mine, looking into my eyes, grinning slightly, for a moment. Then she slid down, partly on me, with her head on my shoulder, her arm across my chest, one of her legs over one of mine. I didn't know what to say and I don't suppose she did either.

"It's impossible, David," she whispered after a while. "It didn't really happen; did it?"

She straightened my penis so that it was pointing toward my navel and then cupped one soft hand around my testicles and held them.

"Impossible or not, it happened, Anna," I answered. "I was you for a split second and I guess you were me."

"David, do you...do you think we could ever become one when we're doing it? I mean, do you suppose we could merge into each other when we're making love so we're not separate anymore and you're not just you and I'm not just me but we're the same...the same something or other?"

I didn't have to think about that for more than a second. "Anna, maybe that's what we're both trying to do. Maybe it's what we both want and need. Maybe we can really join together this weekend. I'd love that. I'd love to be one with you, even if it's just for a few seconds."

"Me too, David," she whispered.

We lay there in the darkened room, quietly holding each other close, and I suppose we were both still thinking of what we had experienced. I had never heard of anything like it – swapping places while having sex or maybe merging into one. I wanted it to happen again, even if

there did seem to be a faint taste of semen, my own semen, on the back of my tongue and it was there before Anna spit in my mouth. I wanted to know what Anna felt when I made love to her. I wanted to know what she was experiencing so that I could love her the way she wanted to be loved. I wanted to be one with her.

She pressed closer to me, moved her leg so that it was over both of mine, and brought her hand up against my cheek. She rubbed her fingers against my cheek, feeling my almost two-day beard.

“Did you shave this morning?” she asked.

“No, I haven’t shaved since yesterday morning. We had to be on the bus by seven o’clock and I didn’t think it mattered. Why?”

“I’m glad you didn’t try to get your face between my thighs tonight,” she answered.

“Friday night, I’ll shave again after we get to...the hotel?” I almost said Flagstaff.

“I like to feel your face like this, David,” she said. “It’s so damn male. I just don’t want to feel it rubbing my thighs. Of course, there’s no good reason for your face to be between my legs, is there?”

I didn’t have a good answer to her teasing. I just took a deep breath or two and relaxed even more. She turned her face up, kissed me on the other cheek, and then squirmed again, trying to get closer to me.

“This is so good,” I whispered.

“What?”

“Just laying here, being close to you, thinking about sleeping with you this weekend...it’s so good, Anna. I want to sleep with you and hold you close for the rest of my life. Would you sleep naked with me?”

“I’d love to but wouldn’t you like to sleep with me in a flannel nightgown when it’s cold and you can get your hand under it and....?”

“Yeah, that would be nice. Maybe I could have a nightshirt. Men don’t wear nightgowns, do they? And you could get your hand under it and...”

“I wonder what I’d find.”

“Anna, I wasn’t entirely truthful with you about something,” I whispered. “About why I don’t have much experience with women.”

“And you’re going to tell me the truth now?” she whispered back.

“I told you I didn’t have time for women because I was so dedicated to one thing – getting revenge for my father and mother. Well, that’s true but it’s not the only reason. My first year at the Academy, when I was seventeen, a bunch of guys decided we all needed to get laid. They just didn’t tell me until they found the whorehouse. I didn’t want to do it and I didn’t want them to think I was gay so I invented a girl friend as an excuse. They all went to rooms with different women while I sat there in the reception room and got teased to death by a group of half-naked prostitutes.”

“Why didn’t you want to do it?”

“I didn’t want to pay a woman to have sex with me, Anna. I wanted sex but I wanted it on my terms. I wanted a woman who cared at least a little about me and wanted to have sex with me. I wanted love to go along with sex, Anna. I suppose I was brought up to have an old-fashioned attitude toward love and sex by my parents and grandparents. I still feel the same way and I guess I always will.”

“I feel the same way, David,” she said. “Don’t you think a lot of guys are just like you?”

“I don’t know. I suppose they just hide it if they feel like I do. We’re supposed to be able to fuck at the drop of a pair of panties.”

“Yeah, some guys are in such a hurry they just push the panties to one side.”

“Anna, I remember something my father told me when I was about ten or eleven years old. It was warm weather and we were all sleeping in the carriage house. I had gone to bed before my parents did and then sometime during the night I was awakened by noise from their bedroom.”

“And you laid there and listened to them making love, didn’t you?” she interrupted me.

“Yeah, and I tried to imagine what they were doing and I masturbated,” I said. “The next morning I was awakened by sounds from the kitchen and, when I went in there, my mother was preparing breakfast and singing while she did it. She told me to go to their bedroom and drag my father out of bed. In their bedroom, my father was sleeping on his side, naked with nothing over him. He had a huge erection; at least it was huge to me then.”

“And now you’ve got one just like it.”

“Yeah. Quit interrupting. I’m almost to the good part. I went around behind him and shook him by the shoulder. He rolled on his back and stretched and then opened his eyes and said ‘Oh, it’s you. I thought you were your mother.’ Then he laid there with his big penis pointing at his navel and told me that he and my mother had made love the previous night. I told him I’d heard them. Then he told me, and this is the good part, that he felt like the luckiest man in the world because he and my mother really loved each other and they really enjoyed good sex with each other. He said I shouldn’t settle for anything less when I was grown: a good woman to love and then years of good sex with her. He said that was as good as life gets.”

“Did you really jack off? When you were only ten or eleven?”

I reached my hand around to her breast and kissed the top of her head before I answered her.

“Yeah, my dick was already long enough to stick out when my hand was wrapped around it and I could have orgasms even if I couldn’t ejaculate anything.”

“I wish I could have seen you.”

“Anna, do you know what I mean when I talk about letting the beast loose?”

“I think so. I’ve never experienced it but I hear some of the other girls talk like they have.”

“One of the girls I was with...I was in a hurry and I guess I let the beast loose too soon. She got angry with me. She said I hurt her. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Don’t worry about it, David. You’ve got a big dick but it’s not that big. You probably just fucked her before she was ready. Just be slow and patient with me and make sure my pussy is all wet before you try to get your dick in me. You won’t hurt me. Anyway, just as soon as you let your beast loose, I’m going to let mine loose too.”

“Do you have a beast too? I thought all you had was a little pussycat, a petit mimi.”

“Don’t get smart with me, David. Why do you want to tell me this now?”

“Anna, I love you and I know you love me. I’ve found the woman for me. When I come back, will you marry me?” I whispered.

She was silent for a moment and then she whispered, “Yes, David, I’ll marry you. I want to marry you!”

“I want so much to spend my life loving you. I want us to have children together. I want us to grow old fucking and loving each other. I want to watch our kids grow up. Am I being ridiculous, even thinking of bringing kids into this crazy world? I don’t want them to have to do the things we’re doing.”

“They won’t, David. We’ll do our best to make sure they don’t. I don’t know how but we will.”

“When I come back, could we go away somewhere by ourselves?” I asked. “I’d like to go somewhere in the mountains where we would be alone with each other. No TV, no telephones, just us, maybe trout fishing, maybe long walks exploring the woods. We could get naked and play in mountain streams and freeze our butts off. We could fuck ourselves into exhaustion. Would you go with me?”

“Yes, David. If that’s what you want, I want it too. I’ll go anywhere with you.”

“If you want to go somewhere or do something else for a honeymoon, just let me know. I’ll go with you and I won’t complain no matter what it is or where it is. We can go off by ourselves later.”

“I’ll think about it but right now your idea sounds good to me.”

“How much do they weigh?”

“What?”

“My testicles. You’ve been cupping them in your hand and sort of lifting them like you’re trying to see how much they weigh.”

“Oh, I don’t know. About five pounds apiece, I suppose. Do you want me to stop?”

“Don’t ever stop!” I said. “I love to feel your hands on me.”

“I love it too, David,” she said. “I love fooling around with your play things. I like your balls but I think I like your dick more. I like being able to make it get hard.”

She moved her hand from underneath my testicles and wrapped it around my penis. It had lost all its stiffness after I came but it was still engorged. I didn’t know what else she wanted to do but I knew I could come again if she wanted to do something else. But first I needed to get rid of some of the glasses of tea I’d had with dinner.”

“I’ve got to pee,” I said.

“Yeah, me too,” she responded.

She pushed away from me and ran in the bathroom before I could get out of bed. She didn’t shut the door so I stood there in the doorway while she sat on the commode, knees spread, and peed down into the water. It was the first time I’d ever seen a woman do it. She wrapped paper around her hand, reached back between her legs, and wiped herself dry.

When she relinquished the throne, I took my turn. She watched intently while I stood there and pissed and pissed and pissed and then shuddered in relief. She grabbed a damp towel and washcloth off the shower door and I knew she had something else in store for me.

Back in my bed, she made me lay down on my back and she again curled up against me on her side, her head on my chest, one leg over both of mine. When she wrapped her hand around my penis, I shut my eyes and surrendered. I soon had another hard-on for her to play with.

She stopped for a moment and took my right hand in hers. I raised my head to see what she was doing.

“Bend your fingers and try to touch your wrist,” she said.

I didn’t know why but I did what she told me. She bent my two middle fingers a little further and then pressed them against the heel of my hand. “Hold that for a minute,” she instructed, and leaned over toward my bedside chest. I felt the touch of something just at the end of my fingers and raised my head again. She had a felt-tip pin and was drawing a line across the heel of my hand.

“What are you doing?” I asked, mystified.

“I’m conducting a scientific experiment,” she answered, and then giggled. “I’m going to see if there’s any correlation between how long your dick is when it’s hard and how far your fingertips can extend toward your wrist.”

She took my hand in hers and held it so that it was extended beside my penis. I waited for the verdict.

“Well?” I said, when she didn’t seem to reach a conclusion.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to measure it,” she said. “Your dick actually goes back between your legs and the root extends almost to your asshole. At least that’s how far back it’s hard. Maybe I’m supposed to measure how far it sticks straight out from your belly. Do you think that’s the right way to do it?”

“Damned if I know,” I answered.

She held my penis straight up, pressed my hand against one side of it, and then sat there looking at it. I lay there looking at her, loving her for being silly with me. I’d never heard of any correlation like she

said. She wiggled my hand around, pressed it against my penis, and looked at it from a couple of different angles.

“Well?” I questioned again.

“They’re not the same,” she finally said. “Your dick is actually about a quarter inch longer than your hand. How long is it? Do you know?”

“No, I haven’t measured it since I was a kid. Mine’s a little bigger than most guys’. Is it too big? I’ll cut some off for you if it is. Maybe I’ll get circumcised.”

She looked at me again and then laughed. “Don’t your dare! Anyway, I wasn’t measuring your foreskin. I had that pushed back when I measured it.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I love every inch of my penis, even my foreskin. I can’t imagine going through life with the head always exposed.”

“A big love-drop is oozing out of your urethra,” she whispered. “May I have it?”

“Love drop?”

“You know, David. It’s the secretion from your Cowper’s glands.”

“My what?”

“Your Cowper’s glands. They’re two little glands located below your prostate. They discharge a component of the seminal fluid into your urethra. They’re homologous to the Bartholin’s glands in a female.”

“Damn, I love it when you talk dirty to me, Anna. Did you learn that in nursing school?”

“Of course, David. You guys don’t have any secrets from nurses.”

“I’ve just never heard it called love drops. I don’t guess I’ve ever heard it called anything, except maybe pre-cum. I figured it just happened for lubrication.”

“I think love-drops is a good name for it,” she said. “That’s what most of the girls call it.”

“Well, you can have it but you don’t have to give me another blow-job, Anna,” I said. “I’ll love you forever after just one good one.”

“I’m not going to do that again, David” she said. “I’m going to jack you off this time. I want to see you squirt.”

“OK, I guess I can do that for you, if you really want me to.”

She moved down so that her head was blocking my view and I felt her take just the head of my penis in her mouth. I was content to lie there and let her play. She wasn’t trying to bring me to orgasm this time. It was like she was just loving the head of my penis, licking it, sucking on it, and sliding her lips up and down on it, all slowly and gently. After a few minutes, she moved back up with head on my shoulder.

“Your love drops taste sweet, David. It’s not like semen at all. I think I rather like sucking your dick. Are your ready for me to jack you off this time?”

“Yeah, I suppose so. If that’s really what you want to do,” I said, pretending that I didn’t really care whether she did or not.

She squirted lotion on my penis and testicles, then rubbed it all over, and then started stroking my penis again, slowly at first, gradually getting faster and faster. I cooperated by tensing my stomach and leg muscles. It didn’t take long before I was squirting out another load of semen. I heard her grunt and I raised my head and looked at her. She was looking up at me with a string of semen across her right cheek, grinning so wide that she had two dimples again. I put my head back down and closed my eyes again. She wiped my stomach and chest clean with the cloth and then dried me with the towel. She had really given me something to help me sleep. After coming twice, I was totally relaxed and ready for sleep.

“Are you ready to go to sleep, David?” she whispered.

My body jerked involuntarily and I realized that I was about to lose myself in sleep.

“Not quite. There’s one more thing I want to do.”

“What?”

“Promise me you won’t laugh.”

“I won’t.”

I turned on my side facing her and slid down on the bed, interlacing my long legs with her long legs, my right hand on her hip. Her breasts were right in front of my face.

“I want you to nurse me like you would a baby. I want you to sing me a lullaby. I want to go to sleep with my mouth on your breast.”

“Is it OK if I just hum you a lullaby?” she whispered softly.

Chapter Six

Friday, I had no assignment so I had the rare treat of sleeping late. When I finally crawled out of bed the time was almost nine o’clock. I had plenty of time to bathe and shave and finish packing before I met Anna at the mess hall for lunch. I wondered how she was going to react when I told her we couldn’t go to Heartache Hotel for the weekend.

I stood under the steamy shower, eyes closed, with the water beating down on my head, thinking of my plans for the next few days. Then I stood at the sink, looking at myself in the mirror, scrubbing my face with a hot soapy washcloth and remembering how Anna had scrubbed it a few days earlier.

I wet the soapy washcloth one more time and held it against my chin and cheeks where the stiffest hair grew. Finally I judged that the hair had softened so I rubbed on the gel and picked up the razor. I wanted to get a really close shave. I looked at myself in the mirror and smiled.

There was something I wanted to do with Anna, something I had been thinking about doing for the last few days, something I had already learned that I liked doing to her. I stood there shaving my face, thinking about our trip to the magic valley, how smooth the inside of Anna’s thighs had felt on my cheeks, how she smelled and tasted when

I licked her, and how much I had wanted her. Now I wanted her even more and tonight I was going to have her.

From somewhere in the deep recesses of my memory, something that happened when I was about ten or eleven came back to me. Father had taken me with him when he helped a neighbor breed a mare. She had been tied to a post in the barnyard when a man drove up with a horse trailer behind his car. As soon as the stallion was unloaded, he had seen the mare and had immediately gone to her. Father told me the mare was in heat and the stallion could smell her. The big horse stuck his nose in the mare's vulva, rolled his top lip up, and whinnied over and over again, like he was laughing. I thought that was hilarious.

Then I watched what he did when he mounted her and I couldn't believe she could possibly take the stallion's long penis inside her. My penis was stiff and causing a bulge in my shorts and I was embarrassed from reacting that way to the horses mating. When I looked at Father, he was looking down at me and smiling. When I looked down at his pants, I saw a big bulge there and I smiled too. I looked back up at his face, smiling down at me, and I knew we shared something natural and good.

Perhaps my wanting to stick my face in Anna's vulva was just as primitive a response as that of the horse. Before I met her, I had never imagined myself wanting to do that with a woman. Now, I wanted to do it with her and to stay there with my mouth on her pussy, my tongue licking up between her labia, tasting the juices that flowed from her, and smelling the scent that comes only from an aroused woman who wants to be fucked. I wanted her to have at least one good orgasm before I even got my penis in her. I wanted to do it and I was going to do it tonight! Before anything else, I was going to do it!

I carefully chose the clothes I intended to wear for the trip: ribbed-knit boxer undershorts with a matching undershirt, khaki cargo shorts, a blue shirt with small green and yellow stripes, and my good sneakers with white socks. I usually paid little attention to what I wore but I wanted to look good for Anna.

While I dressed, I thought about how she might respond when I told her we weren't going to Heartache Hotel. Knowing how quickly she came to anger sometimes, I decided I had better not drag out the

suspense more than a few seconds. I hoped she would be pleased when I told her we were going to Flagstaff instead.

At the mess hall, where we planned to meet for lunch, Anna was standing on the front porch talking to some guys and girls sitting in the rocking chairs. She didn't see me come up behind her but she saw some of the others looking in my direction. She turned and saw me and smiled at me.

I stopped in my tracks, just looking at her, struck by her beauty. She didn't have on her usual baseball cap and her hair was totally unrestrained. She had cut it! It cascaded down in curls and tangles as usual but not quite to her shoulders. For the first time, I saw that she had on lipstick.

She was wearing her usual khaki shorts but this time she had her shirt tucked into them and her womanly shape was revealed. I hoped she didn't ask me if her butt was too big. How could I convince her that it was just right for her? I'd never noticed her waist before; it looked small compared to her hips and breasts. And her breasts: her shirt was just tight enough to reveal them. I couldn't understand why she thought they were too small. They were just right for her too. To me, she was a perfect woman, bigger than most, maybe too big for most guys, but just right for me.

The other guys and girls immediately started teasing us. I suppose they thought we were going to Heartache Hotel. I didn't care what they thought. So far, only two people knew that Anna and I were going to Flagstaff: the Major and me. He'd gone out of his way to help me make plans for the next four days.

We went through the chow line together and then looked around for an empty table. I didn't want to sit with anyone else. I wanted to be alone with Anna so I could tell her about my plans. A small table was vacated and I rushed Anna to it.

As soon as we put our trays down on the table, I had a sudden impulse and immediately gave in to it. I pulled Anna to me, wrapped my arms around her, and kissed her. She resisted for only an instant and then yielded her mouth to me. When we finally broke the kiss, I looked around at the people in the mess hall. They were all quietly watching. I bowed to them, held Anna's chair so she could sit, and then I sat down. A cacophony of catcalls and crude suggestions erupted. I heard

one guy yell, "Get a room," and I smiled because I already had reserved one for four nights.

As soon as we finished eating, I told her.

"Anna, we can't go to Heartache Hotel tonight," I said, straight-faced.

She looked at me and her face gradually changed into a look that I recognized as anger.

"And why not, damn it?" she blurted out.

I waited a few seconds before answering. "Because we've got reservations at the Ponderosa Inn in Flagstaff for four nights."

A few seconds elapsed before she realized the implications of that.

"David, I can't go," she said. "I've got to be back by Monday morning."

I waited a little longer than necessary to answer and saw a hint of anger creeping back in her face.

"Yes, you can," I answered. "You don't have to be back before Wednesday morning. You have a four-day pass, not counting today."

"And just how did you arrange that?" she asked, and I could tell that her anger had quickly faded and she was beginning to believe me.

"A certain major helped me," I answered, smiling at her. "You sat next to him at dinner with the review board. He arranged it for us."

She sat looking at me for a minute or so longer.

"And we have reservations for dinner tonight at Napoleon's in Flagstaff at seven," I added, grinning even broader. "I think you'll like the food there. It's the closest to good French cooking that I've had in this country. Jean-Claude's a great chef."

"Who?"

"Jean-Claude Thierry. He's the owner. He does a lot of the cooking."

"Then why do they call it Napoleon's?"

“Because he’s only five six.”

That finally got a big smile out of her. I relaxed. I knew she was eager to go.

“And just how are we going to get to Flagstaff by seven? Have you got a car?”

“Yeah, it’s just a little one but I think we’ll make it all the way. It’s parked behind my barracks. I’m all packed. Let’s go get it and pick up your stuff.”

“David, I’ve got to get some more clothes. I didn’t pack enough for four days. And I expected to be naked most of the time.”

“Well, you are going to be naked most of the time. We’re just going to play tourist the rest of the time. That is, if you can walk.”

“And what’s going to happen to cause me problems in walking?”

“I don’t know. I’ll think of something. I didn’t pack much either. I thought we might go shopping together in Flagstaff. Would you like that?”

She grinned at me so wide that her cute dimples appeared on both her cheeks. I took that as meaning she wanted us to shop for clothes together.

“The major asked me to wear my uniform just one time while we’re gone. I’m going to wear my dress blues tonight when we go to Napoleon’s. Have you got something sort of nice?”

“Yes. I brought something a little dressy like you suggested. Do you want me to wear my uniform too?”

“I don’t think so. After the major offered the use of his car, I couldn’t turn down his request. Are you ready to go?”

The major had been more than kind in helping me arrange for my few days with Anna. He had even loaned me his little car: a blue almost-new Mercedes sports car. I’d already tried on for size; I could drive it with the seat all the way back.

I didn't tell her about the advice the major had given me. Sitting in his office, talking with him about my plans for the few days I would have with Anna, I finally got up the courage to admit I was scared.

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"You scared?" he said, laughing. "I don't believe that, coming from a man who killed seven bad guys in about a minute."

"Yeah, but they were seven guys who just wanted to kill me. She's a woman who wants me to make love to her."

"And quite a woman too!" he said, still laughing. "But I never thought I'd hear you admit you're scared."

"Don't laugh, Major," I pleaded. "I'm serious. I don't have that much experience with women. When I'm making love to her, I want it to be as good for her as it is for me. I don't want her to be...I mean, I want her to be satisfied when we do it. What if I mess it up?"

He sat and looked at me for a minute or so.

"So you want some advice from an old man about how to satisfy a woman, huh?" he finally said.

"Yeah, I just want her to be happy with me."

"OK. Two suggestions. One: Don't get in a hurry with her. Especially, don't be in a hurry to get your dick in her. Play with her. Tease her. Give her some time to become receptive. Make her want you. If you can, make her beg you to put it in."

"OK. What's two?"

"Go down on her before you try to fuck her. You think you could do oral sex with her?"

"Yeah, I know I can. I already have. I want to." I said, smiling, and remembering what we had already done and my plans for the night.

"I'm serious, David," he said. "Most men don't have any difficulty in having an orgasm from straight fucking. Women do. Learn your way

around her pussy, especially her clitoris. Give her an orgasm with your tongue; hell, give her more than one. Maybe keep doing it until she begs you to fuck her. If she's already come a couple of times before you fuck her, she won't mind if she doesn't come again when you do. You won't regret it."

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Anna squealed like a young girl when she saw the Major's little car. She squealed even louder when she saw the doors open upward like gull wings instead of to the side of the car.

Within a few minutes of leaving the base, she reclined her seat, kicked off her sandals, put her bare feet on the dashboard, and pulled up her shorts so that her thighs were exposed. I took one swift glance at her beautiful long legs and then forced myself to look back where I was driving.

"Did you notice anything different?" she asked.

I glanced quickly at her legs again. She had shaved her legs and they were smooth and hairless and tanned and, I'll admit, even more beautiful. I pretended not to know what she was talking about.

"Your toenails are painted again," I said.

"David!" she groaned.

"What?"

"Perhaps we'd better turn around right now," she threatened.

I knew when to give in. "You've also shaved your legs."

"That's better."

"Tonight, I'm going to run my tongue all the way from your toes, up behind your knee, up the inside of your thighs to...I wonder how far you'll let me go?"

"All the way, Dummy. All the way up."

"Both legs?"

“You promise?”

“Yeah!”

“And then what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to stop in the middle and lick you to your first orgasm!”

She squirmed in her seat, put her head back, closed her eyes, and smiled. I didn’t need to ask her what she was thinking about. For a few miles, I was able to concentrate on the road.

“David, I’ve got something I need to tell you,” she whispered, after a while. She raised her seat and sat upright beside me.

“Another surprise?” I answered.

“Well, I guess it might be called that. You remember I told you I had a birth-control implant? It was right here on my left arm.”

She held her arm over toward me and I glanced at it. There was a small wound on the inside of her arm, just beginning to heal.

“What do you mean – was?”

“I removed it last Sunday, after we came back from your magic valley.”

“Yourself?”

“David, I’m a nurse, remember? I was an operating-room nurse before I came here. I can do it as well as any doctor.”

I couldn’t decide whether to be elated, knowing there was a chance I could impregnate her, or scared and worried, knowing there was a chance I’d leave her pregnant and perhaps never know our child.

“Does that mean you could get pregnant during the next few days?”

“Well, it depends on how quickly the estrogen and progestin from the implant are cleared from my body and how good your sperm are at swimming.”

“They’re Olympic champions. Why does it matter?”

“The hormones in the implant work by keeping a woman’s ovaries from releasing eggs and they thicken her cervical mucus. If your little sperm can’t swim through my cervix and find my egg, they’ll have lived their little lives in vain. Poor little sperm. I feel so sorry for them, all eighteen million of them.”

I looked over at her and saw her grinning at me.

“Why did you have one in the first place?” I asked.

“Because they always give the women trainees an implant before they go out. They give us one when we come in to see how we tolerate it. It’s supposed to be effective for three months.”

“Well, why did you remove it?”

She had a serious look on her face. “Because I wanted to, damn it!”

“So you could get pregnant?”

“No, David,” she said. “My body can’t adjust in just a few days. I just wanted to remove it; that’s all. There’s not much chance I’ll get pregnant, that is, unless you fuck me too much.”

I looked over at her and saw her grinning at me again. I knew she was teasing me.

“I don’t think I could ever fuck, I mean, make love to you enough, Anna,” I said. “But I don’t want to go off and leave you pregnant. I want children with you but just not right now.”

“Well, don’t worry about it. There’s not much chance I’ll get pregnant. But if I do, I’m going to have the baby and keep it. If you want to see your child, you’ll have to come back to me.”

I thought about what all of this meant. Maybe she wanted me to know there was a chance, however remote, she could be pregnant when I left. Maybe she thought that would give me another reason for coming back to her.

“Well, if it’s a boy, just remember we’re going to name him Michael.” I said, still wondering about the ways of a woman. “Now, could I tell you something?”

"Sure. What is it?"

"Anna, when we make love, I know I'll be satisfied. When a man gets started, he can't stop 'til he has an orgasm. I don't know how you will be when we do it but I want you to be satisfied too. You're going to have to talk to me, tell me what you want, so it's just as good for you as it is for me. Can you do that?"

"Yes, David, I'll tell you what I want. You do the same thing. Let's both try to be open and honest with each other. After a while, you'll probably want to tell me to shut up."

"Never. I love you and I like talking to you. I feel like I can talk to you about anything. I just hope you feel the same way."

"I do, David. For the first time in my life, I feel that way."

She reclined her seat, pulled her shorts up, and put her bare feet on the dashboard again. I gave her long beautiful legs another glance and I couldn't help but smile at her display.

"I wonder what the major is going to say when he sees footprints on the dashboard," I said.

"He'll probably wonder how we managed to do it in the car," she giggled.

Once we stopped at a scenic overlook to take in the beauty of the desert and the hills and mountains. She stood in front of me, holding my hands just under her breasts, her derriere pressed back against me. I was thinking about what I was going to be doing with her later that night. Evidently she was thinking of something else.

“David, what will you do if you get sick while you’re over there,” she asked. “Your Farsi is very good but you might not fool anybody who takes a really close look at you. Have you thought about that?”

“I’m not going to get sick,” I answered. I moved my hands up just a little and she put her hands over mine and pressed them against her breasts.

“How do you know you won’t? Everybody gets sick once in a while. Since the fundamentalists took over and so many of the doctors have fled, there are all sorts of problems with food and water and disease in that region. That new type of swine flu is going around again. It’s widespread over there. What if you get it?”

“I told you I’m not going to get sick, Anna,” I insisted. “I’ve never been sick a day in my life. Maybe I’ve just got a good immune system.”

She turned around so that her stomach was against mine, put her arms around my waist, and looked up at me, frowning. I wondered what she was thinking.

“David, do you mean you’ve never even had the common cold? I assume you’ve been immunized against measles and mumps and diseases like that. There’s no immunization against the common cold.”

“Anna, when I was admitted to the Academy, I had to give a history of my health. They couldn’t believe me when I said I’d never been sick. It’s unusual but it’s not rare to find individuals who’ve never caught anything. I’m just lucky. And I’ve been immunized against all sorts of things I might catch over there. You will be too before you go.”

She was quiet for a minute and I wondered what she was thinking.

“David, you frighten me sometimes. I’ve seen what you can do with a rattlesnake when you’re cool. You told me you were cool when you killed seven jihadists in less than a minute. Now you tell me you’ve never had the slightest illness. What are you? Some sort of superman? That’s what some of the other trainees say about you.”

“Anna, forget that crap,” I answered, as earnestly as I could. “I’ve been injured. I broke my arm when I was a kid, a bad break. It hurt like hell. When I was shot in the leg, it took two weeks before it felt OK again. I’m just lucky when it comes to diseases.”

“Well, I just hope our children inherit your immune system.”

“I hope so too but please don’t be frightened of me. I swear I’ll never hurt you. I’ll do anything to keep anybody from hurting you.”

She reached her hands down between our bodies and cupped them between my legs. "Do you really think we’ll have children together?"

“Yeah!” I answered, as enthusiastically as I could. “Now come on. Let’s hit the road again. Next stop, Flagstaff!”

She goosed me in my ribs on both sides and ran for the car. I ran right behind her, trying not to catch her, just looking at her derriere in motion.

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When we checked in at the Ponderosa Inn, the staff had evidently been well briefed on how to treat us. The clerk at the front desk welcomed us as Mr. and Mrs. Blunderbuss, as though he knew who we were, and didn’t even comment on our last name. I had told the woman manager to watch for a man who was six and a half feet tall and a woman who was six feet.

When I made the reservations, I asked the manager to make our rooms for the four-day stay a little nicer than usual. I made a few suggestions and then gave her carte blanche to do whatever she wanted. She must have been accustomed to such requests. The two-room suite was everything I could have wanted.

Our rooms had fresh flowers in both rooms, boxes of chocolates, a stack of fluffy towels beside the bed topped by a bottle of massage oil, some lubricants for sex which I hoped we wouldn’t need, a large mirror behind the headboard of the bed that was tilted enough to reflect whatever was happening in the bed, two large white robes, a mini-refrigerator well-stocked with snacks and drinks, and, the thing I liked most, a Jacuzzi easily big enough for two, with candles around the tub just waiting to be lit.

Anna wanted to dress in the bedroom and didn't want me around while she was changing. She made me take my clothes into the other room and then shut the door. I didn't understand why I couldn't enjoy watching her change clothes but I had already learned not to question the ways of a woman, especially not one like Anna.

While I dressed in my uniform, I tried to will my penis not to think about what it was going to be doing later that night. I barely succeeded. It wanted to be stuffed up Anna, not stuffed down in my pants. I'd chosen a long-sleeved dress shirt for the evening and a bow tie. I'd never worn one so I stood there looking in the mirror at it trying to decide if I had it on right. I was glad I didn't have to wear any headgear; I'd always hated the cock-eyed beret. I shook out my uniform coat, put it on, and brushed a few specks of lint away. I still had my medals on my coat and I wondered if anybody would even know what they were. I had promised the Major I would wear them. I finally decided I looked OK even if I did feel out of place in a dress uniform.

The door to the bedroom was still shut so I sat down on the loveseat and reviewed my plans for the evening and night and the next four days. I waited patiently and finally looked at my watch. The time was just six-thirty. Napoleon's was just a few miles away. I decided I'd leave her alone for another ten minutes and then I'd knock on the door. I didn't have to wait that long.

When she opened the door, I stood up. She walked into the room, stopped a few feet from me, and slowly turned around.

"Is this OK, David?" she asked.

I looked down at her feet - she had on copper-colored high heels; up her legs - she had on brown pants; and up to her shoulders and chest - she had a white something or other on her arms and shoulders which was almost transparent with what looked like a green vest underneath. The green thing was open all the way down between her breasts. Around her neck was a gold chain with a dangling gold something that hung down just below her breasts. I finally looked at her face. Her hair was carelessly parted in the middle, framing her beautiful face with waves and curls. I saw she had something on her earlobes that was a shorter version of the dangler between her breasts. I couldn't see any make-up on her face, maybe a little gloss on her red lips. She was an unbelievably beautiful woman. I loved her and wanted her.

"I asked you if this is OK, David?" she asked again, grinning at me. "I brought a dress too and I'll change if you want me to."

I still didn't know what to say. She shrugged the white thing off her shoulders and it slid part way down her arms. Her shoulders and arms were bare and she was even more beautiful.

"Yeah, I like that white thing," I finally managed to say. "It looks good on you."

She grinned even wider. "You don't know much about women's clothes, do you, David?"

"I don't know anything," I admitted and then hastened to add, "But I like what you're wearing."

"Well, the white thing is called a wrap. It's to keep the goose bumps off my shoulders if I get under an air-conditioning vent. Under that, I have a green halter that's got enough cleavage to give you something to look at. I have on brown pants, silk and cotton, that are almost wrinkle proof. You can't see any panty lines because I've got on a thong. On my feet, I have high-heel copper pumps."

"I didn't look at your derriere. What's the gold thingy between your breasts?"

"Oh, is that where you're looking? It's just a bangle, David. That's all. It's meant to draw attention to something I want to accentuate."

"Well, it works," I admitted.

At Napoleon's, the maitre d' escorted us through the restaurant to the patio at the rear. The two times I'd been at Napoleon's in the past, the mountains to the west had blocked the late afternoon sun. Tonight, our table was already in the shade. When I made our reservations, I had requested a table that was away from the small orchestra that played every Friday night. Ours was on the outer perimeter of the patio seating area. I was pleased that, so far, all my plans had worked out.

I suppose Anna was confused when the waiter began to serve us without giving us a menu. I explained that I had planned our dinner with Jean-Claude. I had told him about eating the cooking of my grandmère L'Héritier in Toulouse. He had said he would try his best to give us a meal that was just as good. He succeeded and gave us a

meal that was probably the best I'd ever had. Maybe it was the company.

We sat there and watched the Arizona sky slowly fade from light blue through darker blue to almost purple, listening to the four Mexican musicians. As the night wore on, the music changed into slower tunes and a few couples ventured out on the patio to dance. I wanted to dance with Anna but I didn't want everybody looking at us. Finally, I decided that, this magic night, it didn't matter who watched us. I stood up and held out my hand to her. She smiled at me and we began to dance.

"I'm not very good at this," I said. "If I step on your toes, will you forgive me?"

"I'm not very good at it either, David," she answered, "but together we'll be wonderful."

And we were. We seemed to melt into each other and move as one and I wasn't conscious of leading her. At first, there were a few inches between our bodies but, as one tune slowly changed into another, we moved closer and closer to each other. I felt her breasts against my chest, her thighs against mine, and her hair against my cheek. And I began to get an erection.

"Anna, my mother made me take dancing lessons when I was thirteen," I whispered. "Then, at home, she made me practice with her. I resisted but tonight I'm glad she did."

"I'm glad too, David," she whispered back. "You're a very good dancer."

"I had a problem with some of the young girls at the dance lessons and I tried to talk my mother into letting me stop. She just made me dance with her until the problem arose with her. She bought me something and just made me keep on taking lessons."

"What was the problem?" she asked.

"I kept getting erections."

She slid her hand between our bodies and over the hard bulge down the leg of my pants. I stopped dancing for a second until she put her hand back on my waist.

“Like the one you’re getting now,” she said, giggling.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

“What did she buy you?”

“A jock strap,” I answered. “I wish I had one now.”

“I don’t,” she whispered. “I like it. It makes dancing more fun.”

We danced for a few more minutes and gradually came to a stop.

"Are you ready?" I asked. I didn't think it was necessary to ask what she was ready for.

"Yes," she whispered.

On the ride back to our hotel, she teased me again.

"You were very handsome in your dress uniform, David," she said. "I was proud to be with you. I think every woman at Napoleon's was watching you, especially when we were dancing."

"Well, I saw quite a few men watching us and I don't think they were looking at me. I may not know much about women's clothes but I know a beautiful woman when I see one. I was proud of you too. I'm so glad you're mine. You're so beautiful, Anna."

"I'm not yours yet, David," she said. "There's something we've got to do first."

I looked over at her and smiled. "What have we got to do? I don't know."

"Maybe you can figure it out."

As soon as we were back in our hotel room, without a word being said, we started undressing. She kicked off her high heels and removed her necklace and earrings. I followed her example by toe-heeling my dress

shoes off unlaced. I held her hand for support while I stood on first one leg and the other and pulled my socks off. She stood behind me, helped me out of my coat, folded it neatly, and laid it over the back of a chair. I helped her remove her wrap, no big deal, and laid it over my coat. She took off my bow tie, then my shirt, and laid them on the chair. I fumbled my way through removing her halter and her blouse and then forgot what I was supposed to do with them, struck by how beautiful her breasts were in her light blue bra. She pulled my undershirt over my head and I stood there unmoving, bare-chested, looking at her breasts. I was breathing heavier than normal and my heart rate was faster. I couldn't tell if she was reacting the same way. She tugged on the hair in the center of my chest and shook her head.

She took her halter and blouse out of my hand, laid them over our other clothes, smiled at me until I saw her dimples again, and then undid my belt. I sucked in my stomach and she unzipped my pants, pushed them down my thighs, and I pulled one leg out and then the other and kicked my pants off. She started to pick them up and I caught her wrist and pulled her back in front of me. I saw that her pants zipped on the side, so I unzipped them and pushed them down. She kicked them to one side.

I stood for a moment, just looking at her light blue panties and brassiere until she turned around and showed me that she did have on a thong. Her woman's ass was beautiful and, if she ever asked me, not too big. She turned around again, did some sort of magic with her hands in back of her, and held out her brassiere to me. I looked at her uncovered breasts long enough to see that her nipples were already erect. Then I threw her bra in the corner of the room and we both were down to one piece of underwear.

She caught her thong on both sides, slowly peeled it down her hips, and stopped when her pubic hair began to show. I pushed my under shorts down just as far, until the shaft of my penis was barely showing, and then stopped. We stood there, grinning at each other, looking up and down, mostly down.

She held the back of her hand to her mouth, pretended to yawn, and then said "I'm sleepy. Are you ready to go to bed?" I decided I'd had enough teasing. I tugged my shorts the rest of the way down, tossed them somewhere, dropped down on one knee, and stripped her of her last little bit of blue. My penis had been engorged but bent down in my

undershorts and, now released, it was erect and pointing upward when I stood up again.

I wrapped my arms around her with my hands on her big woman's ass, pressed my hard-on against her stomach, and lowered my head to kiss her. She wrapped her arms around me, cupped them under my ass cheeks, tilted her head up, and met me half way. We stood there in the middle of the bedroom lost in each other and trying to get closer together.

My penis was pressed to one side until she bent it down, spread her legs, and released it between them. It was uncomfortably bent down until I stooped slightly. I slid both hands over her ass and used my fingers to press the shaft against her vulva. We stood there, naked, straining to get closer, mouths open to each other, and drowning in desire. I was about to take her to the bed and ravish her until I remembered what the Major had told me and what I wanted to do first.

I picked her up under her arms, lifted her up until my arms were straight up, and her belly button was in front of my face. She squealed; that's the only way to describe the sound. I kissed her stomach, lowered her a little, sucked on first one nipple and then the other, lowered her until her face was in front of mine, gave her a quick kiss on the lips, and then, still holding her feet off the floor, walked over to the foot of the bed. I let her down and pushed her back on the bed with her calves hanging off. She knew what I wanted. She spread her legs, looking at me, all serious now, not smiling, and I knew she wanted the same thing I did. I walked around the bed, picked up two pillows, put one under her head and put the other on the floor so I could kneel on it. Finally, I got down on my knees between her legs and looked at her pussy. I couldn't help but smile.

“What have you done?” I asked her.

“Nothing much,” she answered. “I just thought you might like to see what you're getting into.”

The last time I had seen her naked, she had a dark patch that slightly obscured the lips to her pussy and crept out on her thighs. Now her thighs were smooth and hairless, the hair above her vulva was short and neat, and her rounded outer lips were just as smooth as her legs. I could clearly see her inner lips and they were already glistening, just

barely closed at the top and open further back so I could see the dark red inside.

"I like your cunt," I said. "It's beautiful."

"My what?" she asked.

"Your cunt," I answered. "Vulva's too scientific. Pussy's just too ordinary. Tonight, it's your cunt. It's perfect. It's beautiful. It makes me want to fuck the hell out of you. It makes me want to bury my face in it. It's a cunt. Damn, it's a perfect beautiful edible fuckable cunt!"

She laughed. "Well, I don't care if you call it my cunt, just as long as you like it."

I was about to go down on her when I remembered what I had said I was going to do. I lifted one of her legs, slowly kissed and licked my way from her foot up to the inside of her thigh, and then did the same on the other leg. I didn't get in a hurry. I kissed my way up one leg, on over her stomach, to her breasts where I lingered for a while, and all the way to her throat. I stuck my nose in that dark hair of hers, just even with her ear and smelled some faint exotic fragrance. Then I started back down all the way to the other foot, again bypassing her center, sucked on one big toe, then the other, and then started back up.

I licked and kissed her on the inside of both thighs and on the crease between her thighs and her mons, all around the one place where I wanted to lick her. I waited to see if she would give me some signal that she wanted me to lick her there. Very shortly, she put her fingers on each side of my face and, with the gentlest of pressure, guided my head where she wanted me to be.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the indescribable smell of an aroused woman, then used my thumbs to pull apart the little lips, licked her slowly and gently, and lifted my head to look at her face. She was lying there with her eyes closed and a slight smile on her lips. I closed my eyes and lowered my mouth to her cunt, that's the word, cunt, cunt, a good four-letter word for the place where I wanted my mouth.

I licked her slowly and gently for a while, my eyes closed, delighting in the taste and smell of her cunt. But then I began to be uncomfortable with my neck bent upward in an effort to reach her. I straightened up

for a moment, grabbed a pillow, and told her to lift her hips. She smiled at me, lifted her butt, and I stuffed the pillow under her. When I resumed my position between her legs, I found it much easier to get my mouth to her cunt. I looked up at her face. She was watching me. I winked at her and started licking again.

Again, I was slow and gentle but persistent, even when she started moaning, even when she put her fingertips on each side of my head and kept me in place. She began to moan louder and to buck her pelvis at my face and I just kept licking upward between her little lips to where they met at her clitoris. I wanted to see if I could bring her to orgasm using nothing but my tongue. Eventually - I had no idea how long - I succeeded. She went wild, put her hands on the back of my head and tried to pull my head into her cunt.

I rose up, looked first at her face, and then looked down between her legs. Her cunt was wide open, pink and red and coral and wet and glistening. I knelt there, looking at it, the way it moved like some creature on its own that was ready to suck my penis into its depths. I slowly stoked my penis and tried to will myself to be patient and to do just what I'd planned.

"Do you see something you like," Anna asked, and I looked up at her face. She was still breathing heavily, just as I was. I stood up, put my hands behind my back, pushed my hips forward, and asked her, "Do you see something you like?"

She just grinned at me. "Are you ready for your turn?"

"Uh uh," I answered. "I'm not finished yet."

I grabbed both her ankles, lifted and spread her legs, got down on my knees, and buried my face in her cunt again. Since talking to the major, I had decided what I wanted to do to insure that Anna was ready for me. I tried to remain coherent and watch her signals. When she started squirming and gently bucking her cunt against my face, I hoped that meant she was on the edge of another orgasm. So I stopped my efforts, closed my eyes, took a couple of deep breaths, and tried to keep control of my beast.

When I stood up, this time, I knew I was about to lose control. I had to let the beast loose. I had to have her and I couldn't keep denying myself. I stood there, one hand on my penis, looking at her cunt again.

"Cunt, that's what it is!" I whispered.

"Yes, David, it's cunt and cunt wants you," she whispered back.

"Anna, I can't let you go for a ride yet," I started. "I've got..."

"Hush, David, come here," she said before I could finish. "I understand. I want you to let the beast loose. Come fuck me so I can let my beast loose too."

She scooted back on the bed, put the pillow back under her head, spread her legs, knees akimbo, and arms extended toward me. I crawled up on the bed, on top of her, and lowered myself down toward her. I wrapped my hand around my penis, intending to guide it into her, but she pushed my hand out of the way, held my penis in both her hands, and guided it to the entrance to her cunt.

I pushed into her depths in one long slow exquisitely-pleasurable series of pushing, withdrawing a little, pushing again, withdrawing, and pushing until I felt my pelvic bones against hers and my testicles against her ass cheeks. Her cunt was slick and hot on my penis and the feeling was so intense that I wanted to leave it there forever. I willed myself to remain motionless, still in control for a few seconds longer.

While I was sliding my penis into her cunt, I was at the same time sliding my arms under her back with my hands curled around her shoulders. I wanted to hold her in place for the fucking I intended to give her. I didn't try to hold myself suspended above her; I let my full weight down on her stomach and breasts. I rested there for a moment with my head beside hers, my cheek against hers, my face in her hair and in the pillow.

Anna wrapped her arms around my chest with one hand behind my head. She wrapped those long beautiful smooth legs around my waist and hips, with her ankles locked and one heel pressing down against my ass. She squirmed from side to side, and then moved her pelvis up and down, maybe trying to see if she could get my penis deeper in her cunt. Then she too was still and we just lay there, joined together.

"Anna, I feel like I'm home," I whispered in her ear. "I'm where I want to be and I'm never going to leave you. From now on, you're mine."

"You're mine too, David," she whispered back. "You're mine for the rest of your life. Now let your beast loose."

I started slowly, determined to remain conscious of my flesh inside hers but I soon lost all restraint and began to fuck her harder. She fucked back at me, hunching her pelvis upward as mine was coming downward. Our collision was loud and almost painful but I couldn't stop ramming my penis into her cunt as hard as I could. I grunted loudly every time I shoved it in and she echoed me a fraction of a second later.

All too soon, I started coming and I poured all my wanting and hunger and needing into her in an agonizing series of spurts. Just as I felt the last of my orgasm, she started whimpering and squirming underneath me and I felt a series of contractions around the shaft of my penis. I grinned because I knew she'd come again.

I collapsed on top of her and then realized I was putting all my weight on her. I started to lift up on my elbows but she put both arms tighter around my chest, wrapped her long legs around mine, and held me close to her. I buried my face in her hair with my cheek against hers, closed my eyes, and relaxed completely. Gradually my heart stopped pounding, my breathing slowed down to normal, and I was completely at peace. I kissed her behind her ear but that was all the energy I could muster.

Neither of us said anything or moved for a while. Finally I lifted my head and looked down at her face. Her eyes were open too. I couldn't think of anything to say. Our coupling had been too perfect, too satisfying, too fulfilling. Maybe she felt the same way. I gave her a quick kiss on her lips, then pulled back, and grinned at her.

"I love you, David," she whispered. "That's the first time I've ever come with a dick inside me. We're going to be good together."

"I love you too, Anna," I whispered back. "I want a lifetime of doing this with you."

"Did you come, David?" she whispered, and grinned back at me.

"Yeah, couldn't you tell?" I whispered back.

“Well, why is your dick still hard?”

It wasn't really hard, not as hard as it had been when I started, but it was a long way from shrinking back down to its normal size.

“It's not. I mean, it's not stiff hard. I mean, oh merde, I don't know what I mean. Do you want me to take it out? Give me a few minutes and I can do it some more. Is that what you want?”

She smiled at my confusion. I felt like a little boy, unsure of myself.

“No, David, I don't want anything else. Now I know what it's like to be fucked completely out of my mind. I want you to leave your dick just where it is. It's my dick now, anyway. It belongs to me. I just need a few minutes for my brains to come back in my head.”

“Can I take it back and then give it to you again? I still want you.”

“You can give it to me as long as you can get it up,” she answered. “Let's just rest for a few minutes and then I want to go for a ride.”

I put my cheek against hers and my face in her hair, shut my eyes, and just lay there on top of her, content and happy and at peace with the world. The word afterglow surfaced in my mind and I smiled because now I knew what it meant.

“David, can you reach one of those towels beside the bed?” she asked after a few minutes.

“Why?”

“So nobody has to sleep on a wet spot.”

“Oh,” was all I said. I hadn't thought about the mess we might make.

“Leave it doubled,” she said. “Spread it out beside us. Do you think we can roll over together so I'm on top of you?”

“Are you ready for your ride?”

“In a few minutes. You're a little heavy and I just want to be on top of you for a while.”

I immediately pushed myself up on my elbows and looked down at her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to squash you. It was just so good to be close to you.”

“I know. Now do the towel like I asked you. Then I want you to hang on to me when we roll over. Don’t let your dick come out. OK?”

I pulled one of the towels off the stack beside the bed and tried to arrange it like she wanted, all without letting my penis come out of her. She saw I was having trouble getting the towel spread, so she helped me. Between the two of us, we managed to arrange the doubled towel beside us.

I waited until she had wrapped her arms and legs tightly around me and I knew she was ready. Somehow, I managed to roll over with her clinging to me until I was on my back and she was on top of me. My penis was still inside her vagina when we stopped moving.

She squirmed from side to side and pressed herself down on me and then snuggled her face in the juncture of my throat and shoulder. I raised my knees to tilt my pelvis to get more of my penis into her and at the same time put my hands on her ass cheeks. With my fingertips, I could feel the shaft of my penis where it was encircled by the lips of her pussy. She didn’t seem in a hurry to move so I didn’t either. I just lay there with my eyes closed, holding her and smiling to myself, happy to be joined to her.

Without losing our connection, she rose up over me, brought her knees up beside my waist, pushed her hips down on me, and gave out a prolonged groan. I could feel something inside her pressing down on the head of my penis and I assumed she had every inch of it in her. I put my hands on her thighs and got ready to be ridden.

And ride me, she did. Up and down, back and forth, side to side. I felt my penis get harder and I wondered if she was going to break it off. After a couple of minutes, I felt a hot fluid running down around and over my testicles to the crack of my ass and, I hoped, into the towel. I couldn’t believe I’d put all that juice in her.

I didn’t try to help her; I just lay there holding her thighs and let her use me as she pleased. She gradually got more frenzied and I guessed,

from the way she was groaning, that she was close to coming again. When it happened, she stopped with all of my penis inside her and with her internal muscles contracting around the base. At least externally, she was frozen and unmoving, eyes closed, and mouth twisted in a strange smile. Internally, her vagina felt like a fist clenching around my penis. I'd never felt anything like it.

When she finally seemed to be finished and opened her eyes, I caught her by her hips, lifted her up, raised my knees again, and then shoved my penis up into her again and again. "Fuck up," she whispered through clenched teeth. I smiled and gave her a good fucking up, without any tenderness or mercy. When I came, I let my legs flop down flat on the bed, shoved her down so my penis was engulfed by her and squirted out in her depths again and again.

This time, she wanted a towel put between her legs before she rolled off me. I squirmed to the side, managed to reach the stack of towels, and, at her instructions, managed to put one between her legs and mine. She rolled off and onto her back and immediately grabbed the towel and tucked it tightly between her legs. I looked down at my penis and testicles, saw how wet they were with our combined juices, and used the towel under me to clean up the mess.

We lay there for a while, facing each other, our long legs entwined, both of us with a towel between our legs. My towel was covering my penis and I could feel the last little bit of semen oozing out. Hers was covering her vulva and I wondered what was oozing out of her. Twice I had squirted out deep in her and I didn't know if it stayed there or gradually drained out.

We talked about everything, skipping from one topic to another, anything except the fact that I knew I was soon going to be asked to leave her. I didn't want to go but I knew I had to if I was going to live with myself for the rest of my life. I had to accomplish the task I had worked toward for years.

"David, I want to take a shower. Can you be good while I'm gone?"

"Why can't I go with you? I need a shower too. I can be real good in the shower."

"Because I want to do something without you watching me," she said. "Something that women do by themselves."

“What?”

She shook her head and looked at me with what I guessed was an exasperated look.

“Do you want to watch me while I douche?” she asked. “Somebody has filled my cunt up with semen. If you want to do anything else tonight, I think I’d better clean it out.”

“Damn, good clean pussy, I like that,” I said. “I don’t want to watch you; I want to do it. Will you let me?”

She let me. I kneeled in from of her, holding the little plastic squirter, and finally finding where to insert it and squeeze. I had never thought about a woman needing to do something to flush out a load of sperm. Maybe she thought it would repel me. Instead, it just brought my penis back up to a full erection.

We played at bathing each other. I loved the feel of her breasts in my soapy hands. Maybe she loved the feel of my hard-on in her soapy hands. I loved that too. It was even more fun when we were pressed against each other and I was sliding my penis up and down against her soapy stomach.

She had put a shower cap over her hair while we bathed. Now, back in the bedroom, she bent over slightly looking for her hair brush in her suitcase. I stood there admiring the rear view until she turned around. Then I admired the front view while she brushed her hair.

Together we straightened the bed, threw the damp towels in the bathroom, and looked for but didn’t find a wet spot. She crawled in on one side, I crawled in on the other, and we met in the middle. We managed to interlace our arms and legs until we were close to each other, my hard-on against her stomach, her breasts against my chest, and our faces only inches apart. We lay there, not saying anything, just smiling at each other.

“Do you want to play some more?” she asked.

“Yeah!”

“What do you want to do?”

“Everything!”

Maybe we didn't do everything but we tried. I coaxed her into a soixante-neuf with her on top. She held my testicles with one hand and my penis with the other and tried to suck the head off. I almost couldn't enjoy it with her trying to suffocate me with her cunt. We both decided we didn't like that arrangement because we couldn't concentrate on what we were feeling.

She crawled down between my legs and tried to drive me crazy with her mouth and hands. I just lay there with my eyes closed and loved what she was doing. After a few minutes, I laid down flat on my back and insisted on her straddling my head with her legs spread wide until her pussy settled on my mouth. I liked it better because I could lick upwards over her vaginal lips to her clitoris. From the way she squirmed and tried to smother me again, I think she liked it better too.

We took a break and raided the little refrigerator for a bottle of orange juice. We stood there, with her holding my penis and me with my hand cupping her vulva and with my index finger in her vagina, passing the OJ back and forth.

She wanted me to fuck her doggy fashion but she threatened to rip my balls off if I hurt her. She buried her head in a pillow and stuck her ass up in the air and I gradually worked my penis into her while she moaned and groaned. I stopped while there was an inch or so between us but she wanted more. She reached back under her and tugged on my testicles until the front of my thighs were against the back of hers and all I could see between us was my pubic hair. I didn't want to hurt her but I didn't want to have my balls ripped off either. Then she made me fuck her slowly and each time my penis slid into her she pressed my balls against her. I could have done that all night.

Maybe she got tired of our position. After a while, she flopped down on the bed and turned her butt toward me. I wasn't tired. I spooned up behind her, lifted her leg, and finally managed to get my penis back in her. I held her leg in the air and fucked her slowly and gently while she moaned some more.

I decided to try something else. I pulled her right leg back over mine and then pulled her right shoulder so that she was half turned toward

me with her arm around my neck. I leaned over her and found her mouth with mine and we played tongue-tag for a while. Then I bent over further and found the hard nipple of her right breast and sucked on that. I slid my hand downward on her stomach and felt where my dick was partially inside her. It was perfect, just what I wanted. I could kiss her, use my mouth on her right breast, use the fingers on my right hand to play with the lips of her pussy where they surrounded my dick, and last, the best, my dick could slide into her just deep enough to stay there if I was careful.

I fastened my lips on one hard little nipple, slid a couple of fingers over the little ridge at the top of her pussy, started rubbing in a circular motion, and then started thrusting into her. Everything else in the world went away and I got faster and faster until I began to feel the need for release.

“That’s so fucking good, David,” I heard her whisper.

I don’t suppose an answer was needed but I grunted “Uh huh,” anyway.

“Slow down a little, please,” she whispered again. “It’s so good; make it last.”

I did what she asked. I tried to be as slow and gentle as I could, just sucking, stroking, fucking, all at the same time. It was something new to me and it was too good to last. It must have been just as good for her. After a minute or so, she put her hand on top of mine and pressed my fingers down on her clitoris. I felt her internal muscles squeezing on the shaft of my dick and I held still and let her have her fun.

We lay there joined together for a while. I wanted so much to mount her and fuck her to oblivion again but I waited patiently until she gave me a signal that it was my turn. After a while, she pulled away from me, rolled onto her back, spread her legs, and held out her arms in invitation.

“I want to let the beast loose again, Anna,” I whispered. “Is that OK with you?”

“Yes, David,” she whispered. “Fuck me out of my mind again. Tell the world to go to hell because David loves Anna and Anna loves David.”

I rolled on top of her, suspended over her on my hands and knees, and waited for her to do something. She grinned up at me, reached between our bodies, took my hard slick penis in her hand, and guided it into her slippery cauldron of a cunt. I collapsed onto her, my chest against her soft breasts, my belly against hers, my pubic bones pressed painfully against hers. I took a couple of deep breaths and began to fuck her in long slow easy strokes.

Gradually I lost myself in the fucking of her and time and space and all of the world ceased to exist and I was nothing but a swollen-to-bursting penis moving in and out of her liquid cunt and a pair of aching testicles bouncing off her soft ass and it was all so good and rich and right and wonderful and I all-too-soon knew I was about to come and then I felt one exquisitely-pleasurable pulse of my orgasm and the welcoming squeeze of Anna's orgasm and then, in the split second between pulses, I felt myself dissolve, melt, flow into one and unite with Anna and I was no longer I or me but we, us, joined into one, and I knew I loved our two separate halves but it was glory to be reunited and I felt the second pulse as my penis spat out again from my balls and my cervix gasped to swallow my ejaculate into my womb and I knew we were one and I felt our joined love for our two separate halves explode as my penis/cervix convulsed again and then I slid back out of oneness with her and I was David again and my penis spat on her cervix again and again and I felt the contractions of her vagina around my penis as her cervix convulsed to swallow my sperm and I was satisfied to be a separate half because I knew I had been joined in love with Anna and we had been one for a second and I knew without a doubt that we would be joined into one many times in our future lives. We were one, forever and forever, in love. Our heart's desire, joined. We were one.

Chapter Seven

Tuesday evening, when we returned from Flagstaff, I was more than ready for a good night's sleep. I suppose Anna was too, since I had kept her up late for the last four nights. She had kept me up too.

I drove to her barracks and helped her carry her luggage from the car to her room. I hugged her, kissed her, and then just held her against

me. I suppose we were both content to stand there in her room, just the two of us, holding each other, without a word being said. Maybe we had said it all during the last four days. I didn't say goodbye and I hoped she understood why.

I drove to my barracks, unloaded my stuff, and then returned the major's car to his office. The time was almost eight o'clock and I didn't expect him to be in. He wasn't but the kid on duty let me in his office for a couple of minutes. I left the car keys on his desk, along with a brief note thanking him for helping Anna and me enjoy a wonderful vacation.

When I returned to my barracks, I checked the bulletin board for my orders. I had wished more than once during the months of training for a cell-phone or computer but they weren't permitted to the trainees. We were cautioned often not to communicate with anyone away from the base. Official orders were simply posted on a bulletin board at the entrance to our quarters.

At nine o'clock Wednesday morning, I was ordered to report to the headquarters building in my dress blue uniform. That was all that was said. I knew what was unsaid. I was about to undergo the exit interview before going out on my mission. Once again, I knew I had to convince the interview board that I was the best man for the job. In all likelihood, I would be leaving in just a few days.

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"You really look good in your dress blues, David," the major said. "The Army should use your image in a recruiting poster."

"Thank you, Sir," I answered. We both knew why the Army couldn't use my image, especially not in light of my mission.

"Have you got all your service ribbons up-to-date? I see the Purple Heart. Which one is for the Distinguished Service Cross? I especially want the review board to see it."

I looked down and then pointed out the appropriate ribbon

"You know you don't have to go; don't you?" the Major asked.

"Yes, Sir, I know," I answered.

“Forget the ‘sir’, David,” he said. “Just think of me as a friend. And please call me Crash. That was your father’s name for me and don’t ask me to explain why.”

We were sitting in the major’s office. He had welcomed me warmly and offered me a cup of coffee which I accepted and pretended to drink. He told me to sit down and pulled his chair around from behind his desk and sat down facing me.

“I’ve been looking over my file on you,” he said, nodding at a much-used file a couple of inches thick on his desk. “You’re quite an interesting young man, David. You puzzle me. Some of the things you’ve done are difficult to believe.”

I didn’t answer. I was surprised that my file contained so many pages.

“I’m supposed to give you an opportunity to forego the mission, David,” he continued. “You know that any mission we sponsor must be completely voluntary. Well, I’m supposed to try to talk you out of it if I can. You can just say you don’t want to go and you’ll be transferred back to regular Army. No one will hold it against you. You’ll just serve out your term of service and then be given an honorable discharge.”

“I know, Crash,” I answered. “I’m going.”

“If Anna chooses not to go when they find something for her, you can get married any time you choose. It won’t be held against her either. Any mission has to be absolutely voluntary. You both know that; don’t you?”

“I told you I’m going. You can’t convince me otherwise. We’re going to get married as soon as I come back.”

“Good. I really like her, David. She seems like a perfect woman for you, a good match for you. I hope you two have a long and happy life together.”

“Thank you. I hope so too.”

He sat and looked at me for a minute or so. I sat and looked back. I knew I couldn’t be talked out of going on my mission. It was mine. It was the culmination of what I had worked toward for years. I was

going to kill the man who killed my father and, indirectly, also killed my mother. I wasn't going to be talked out of it.

“Personally, I wish you wouldn't go, David. I really do. Your father and I were good friends. It was quite a blow to me when he was killed. I don't want you to be killed trying to get revenge.”

“You've been a good friend to me too, Crash. Would you give me some honest answers to a few questions?”

He nodded.

“Did you help me get into the Academy? They had to admit me since my father was awarded the Medal of Honor but they didn't have to do it as young as I was. I've always felt someone must have since I was just seventeen and didn't exactly meet the usual requirements. Is that in your file? I know that's not my service record since they're all computerized. It's a hard copy so you must want to keep your file to yourself and not let anyone else see it.”

“Yes, I helped you a little bit. Your intelligence, your maturity, your language skills, your determination: they all helped you more. I've been keeping tabs on you since your father was killed. Your grandfather and I have had lots of conversations about you. And you're right about the file. It's my personal file about you.”

“Why did you do it?”

“Your father was a great soldier, David. He was a soldier's soldier, a real leader, and respected by everybody. I don't think I've ever met another man like him, except for you. His friendship meant a lot to me. When your grandfather told me you wanted to go to the Academy, I thought it would be the start of a great career for you. I suppose I did it for him. I wish he and your grandmother were still alive and could know what you're going to do.”

“If I choose to be discharged as soon as I come back, can you arrange for Anna to be discharged too? After I come back, I don't ever want to go off and leave her again. I loved my father but I don't want to be career military. Once I marry Anna, I don't want to be separated from her for months at a time.”

“I don’t know, David. I’ll try but I can’t promise you. Good nurses like her are needed in military hospitals. You know that.”

“I can live with that, as long as we’re not separated.”

“If you’re successful in your mission, I imagine the Army will show enough gratitude to give you and Anna the same duty station or maybe discharge both of you. You know you’re going on one of the most important and difficult missions we’ve ever set up; don’t you?”

“I’ll kill the mullah-fucker, Crash. Don’t worry about that. Anna’s training is supposed to last a few more months. Just don’t let her go anywhere else until I come back.”

“I hope you understand that we’ve orchestrated quite a cover story for you. If you succeed, it’s going to be blamed on the Sunnis. They may be temporarily aligned with the Shi’a but the two have a centuries-long deep hatred for each other. Since the Sadriyun movement is the driving force behind the war, we hope it will cause them to implode.”

“I’m going to succeed, Crash. And I’m going to come back. I don’t intend to use what’s in the lining of that suitcase to obliterate myself.”

I was sure he knew why the suitcase was lined with a powerful explosive. From the outside, the suitcase seemed to be a battered old leather suitcase. Inside was a plastic shell lined with a half-inch layer of an extremely-powerful explosive which could only be ignited by a triggering device. If the wrong person tried to open it, the explosion would obliterate him and anyone else nearby. If I was captured and forced to open it, I might have to choose to trigger the explosion to prevent anyone from discovering its contents or from torturing me into admitting my identity. I did not know whether I could make a decision to obliterate myself but we both knew that torture can persuade anyone to do or say anything.

“You understand that if you’re caught, you will have to convince them that you’re a Sunni. No matter what they do, you can’t let them know you’re U. S. Army.”

“I know. I think my language skills and my training have a good chance of fooling them.”

“Are you satisfied with the rifle you’ll use? I understand you were a participant in designing it.”

“Yes. I have a lot of confidence about it. I can do the job with it.”

“How about the bullets you’ll use? I haven’t heard what you decided. You know the Hague Convention prohibits certain kinds of ammunition, like exploding bullets, for use by uniformed military personnel against the uniformed military personnel of opposing forces. You won’t be in uniform and neither will he so you can use anything you want to.”

“I’m going to use some new bullets that have just been developed. The projectile will be coated with an exotic alloy that’s been scored to separate into a dozen slivers. When it makes contact with him, it’ll explode inside him and the rotational forces will send the slivers flying like little knives all through his insides. Most of what’s in his body cavity will turn into a thick soup.”

“I’m not trying to second-guess you, David, but why try something that hasn’t been used before?”

“Well, there are a couple of reasons. First and most important, I want to make the kill. The bullet has been thoroughly tested and it will do the job. I’ve shot more than one dead pig with it myself. There will be a small entry wound, but, if I’m lucky, there won’t be an exit wound. They may initially think he’s just had a heart attack. His black robes will probably hide any sign of where the bullet hit.”

“OK. What’s the second reason?”

“I’m hoping it will give me time to get out of town before they discover what’s happened. There’s supposed to be a taxi waiting for me when I exit the hotel. The driver will know the best way to get me back down to the coast. The Israelis who brought me in are supposed to be there to take me back out to the sub.”

He sighed deeply. “Well, if anybody can do it, I suppose you can. Now can I tell you something personal?”

“Sure.”

“David, I’ve never married so I don’t have kids. I wish now I had. I wish I had a son like you. Your father would be proud of you.”

“I hope so.”

He stood up and held out his hand to me.

“Would you let me be sort of an adopted father to you?” he asked, extending his hand and almost choking up. “When you come back, would you let me help you and Anna with anything you need or want?”

I stood up too, took his hand, and shook it. I resisted the urge to hug him.

“Yes, we’d both be honored, Crash. Maybe you could be my best man at our wedding.

He smiled broadly. “I’d like that. Are you ready for the Review Board?”

“Yeah!”

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The insertion into Islamistan, the name the jihadists were using for what were originally Iran, Iraq, and a bunch of countries ending in stan, went off without a hitch. The major and I flew military transport to a base in Germany, spent one night resting, then were the only passengers in a C-2 Greyhound turbo prop aircraft over the Suez Canal, down the Red Sea, to a Navy carrier in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Somalia. I think I left a brown stain on my seat when I saw what we were landing on. We spent another night and day on board the carrier before being transferred just about sunset to a submarine that usually patrolled the area.

The sub immediately left its station, entered the Arabian Sea, and moved through the Gulf of Oman and on into the Persian Gulf. During the last part of the trip, I learned how tense a sub crew could get when they’re trying to avoid mines.

The major and I had a three-man stateroom, about as big as a closet, all to ourselves in the officers’ berthing quarters. I couldn’t

understand why it was called a stateroom until I saw where the enlisted men slept. I didn't ask where the original three officers were sleeping for the two nights we were aboard. At the Captain's suggestion, I choose the top of the three bunks. He said there would be what he called white noise from some of the overhead pipes so that bunk was the best one.

We ate our meals with the captain of the sub in the officers' mess. There were no questions from the other officers about why two Army officers in uniform were being accorded such special treatment. I wondered what they would think when I left the sub just before dawn of my last day, especially the way I would be dressed.

The major had been supplied with sleeping pills for me but I had declined them when he offered them aboard the aircraft carrier. I knew I wouldn't need any sleeping aid for my nights on the sub. If necessary, I intended to give myself one of the same sleeping pills Anna had given me the night after the endurance trials.

My last night on board the sub, I took off my uniform, carefully packed it away for the Major's return, crawled naked into the top bunk, and pulled the curtains closed. I lay there for a few minutes, thinking about my mission, then reached down to my penis and stroked it a few times. It was slow to cooperate until I recalled some of the memories of when Anna and I were in Flagstaff. After sifting through them, I settled on the memories of our Sunday evening together.

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As soon as we were back in our hotel room, we started stripping. We were dirty and sweaty from walking and climbing around Indian ruins and I assumed Anna was as ready for a long shower as I was. I beat her in getting down to my birthday suit so I waited for a moment for her to strip. I got to watch her teasingly reveal her beautiful body to me again.

"It's your turn this time," she said. "Would you shampoo my hair?"

"Yeah, I'd like that," I answered. "May I bathe you too?"

She nodded. I held out my hand to her and we went hand-in-hand into the bathroom. She wasn't shy in front of me. While I watched, she sat

down on the commode, sighed deeply, and squirted noisily down into the bowl. She even raised the seat for me. I took my turn and, I'll admit, put on a show for her. I pulled my foreskin back, aimed for the center of the bowl, drilled the target, shook my penis more than really necessary, slid my foreskin back down, and finally looked back at her. She was grinning. She knew I'd been showing off.

We played at bathing each other, using the shower over the Jacuzzi this time. I think we were both eager to do something else other than bathing, certainly not in soaking in the Jacuzzi. Before we finished, my penis was pointing up at a forty-five degree angle. I don't know how aroused Anna was but her vagina was already hot and wet when I slipped my finger into it. She didn't even stop to blow-dry her hair. She took my penis in her hand and led me back into the bedroom. I sat leaned back on my hands on the foot of the bed, with my penis staring at the ceiling, and watched while she did those things that women do to get ready for bed.

"Can we do something silly tonight, David?" she asked. "I don't think either of us has looked in the mirror the last two nights. I want be slow and easy tonight and see how we look in the mirror."

"Yeah, it's OK with me. Just tell me what you want me to do."

"Let's take turns," she suggested. "I'll make up something first and then you have to think up something different."

"OK, but I want to go first," I said, remembering something.

I watched in appreciation as she towed her hair dry. I especially liked the way her breasts looked when he had her arms raised. Her nipples looked like they were pointing up at the same angle as my penis. I watched her and didn't complain when she took her time in brushing her hair. I didn't complain when she dried my hair and tried to rub my ears off. Then she brushed it and I especially liked having her nipples just inches from my mouth.

"Did your dick enjoy the show I put on for it?" she asked.

"Yeah, it thinks you're sexy as hell and it wants to fuck you," I answered.

“Well, you’ve got to call it a dick tonight like I do. That’s a real king-size dick and I think it ought to get recognized and then satisfied.”

“Yeah! Dick likes Anna’s pussy. Can he come in it?”

“Yeah! As many times as he can stand up.”

I took my first turn by lying on the foot of the bed, with my legs bent and my feet on the floor. I coaxed her into straddling my head, with her pussy above my face. She assumed the position and then checked to see that she could see herself reflected in the mirror. I couldn’t see but I didn’t want to. I wanted this one to be for her. I put my hands on her hips, pulled her down to my waiting tongue, manipulated her into position, and gave her a good licking. I assumed she was watching me going lickety-split.

When she took her first turn, she made me lie crossways on the bed with a pillow under my head and my hands together on my stomach. She kneed my legs apart, crawled between them, and gave my penis a good sucking. I lay there with my eyes like slits, watching her, not the mirror, thoroughly enjoying every lick and suck and stroke. She turned her head and pushed my penis off to one side, trying to see how we looked, and I didn’t complain. I didn’t bother to look. I was too busy loving every second of what she was doing.

When it came my turn again, I had already decided on something I wanted to try. She didn’t object when I made her lie across the center of the bed. She just checked to see that she could see her reflection in the big mirror. When I stuffed a pillow under her head and another under her hips, she smiled at me. I suppose she thought I was going to go down on her again. That wasn’t what I had in mind.

She looked skeptical when I squeezed the bottle of sex lube and dispensed a generous amount on my fingers. She still didn’t protest when I liberally wiped the lube from her asshole all the way to her mons. She looked puzzled when I spread her legs and knee-walked between them, holding the bottle of lube. She looked even more puzzled when I took her right hand in mine, turned it palm up, and squeezed more lube in her palm.

I slowly lowered myself down on her without attempting to insert my penis into her, and then asked her to lift her legs in the air. The position was perfect for what I had in mind. I lowered myself down

farther, still supporting my torso on my arms over her so I could see, until my dick was pressed against her pussy. It was going to work. I looked up at her and smiled. She was still holding her right hand with its palm full of lube off to one side.

“Put your right hand on the shaft of my dick and press down, please,” I whispered.

When she did, I began to slowly slide my dick back and forth under her palm and against her pussy. With all the lube, it worked perfectly. Each time I pushed forward, my foreskin was pushed back off the head of my dick and stretched back almost painfully. The head of my dick was also rubbing against her little lips and her clit. When I pulled back, my foreskin was pulled forward until part of the head was covered. The slipping and sliding and rubbing back and forth was damn good as far as I was concerned. I didn't know whether she liked it as much as I did but, when I looked up at her face, I saw she was watching the action and the smile on her face said she liked it too.

She looked up at my face. **“Damn, David, this is good. We're not fucking but even not fucking is fucking good; isn't it?”**

Holding myself up on my arms so we could both watch, I slid back and forth again. **“Yeah, it's good. I like not fucking you. I like fucking you better.”**

I slowly slid my dick back and forth between her palm and her pussy a few more times and then stopped for a moment. Anna was watching us in the mirror, completely engrossed in the reflection. I felt a bump with the head of my dick as I slid forward and I wondered if that was her clitoris. That's what I wanted: to rub the head of my dick against her erect clit until I made her come.

“If you feel like you're coming, can you grab my dick and stuff it in your pussy? I'm going to give you your first real fucking of the night,” I asked.

“And later tonight, you're going to give me my second real fucking of the night,” she answered turning to look up at me. I loved the look on her face

“Yeah!”

“And then later, you’re going to give me my third!”

“We’ll see. Think you can get it up?”

“Yeah! I’ll bet you I can.

She shut her eyes and so I did too. I knew she wanted to lose herself in what she was feeling and that was what I wanted too. I moved back and forth and gradually got faster and faster. I wondered if I was going to come before she did.

Suddenly she grabbed my dick, bent it down while I pulled it back, and, when I pushed forward, it slid into her in one juicy hot and so damn good slide. I held still for a second until she got her legs wrapped around my ass and her arms around my chest, and then I gave her the first good fucking of the night. I couldn’t tell whether she came but, from the way she wiggled, I suppose she did. I came in a series of gushers and squirted the life out of me onto her cervix again.

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I used the damp towel I had brought with me into the top bunk to wipe my semen off my face, chest, and stomach. I hadn’t squirted like that since leaving Flagstaff. I didn’t worry about what to do with the towel. I stuck my hand out of the curtains and dropped it on the floor. Let the major clean it up. I turned over on my left side and I was asleep in a few minutes.

For breakfast the next morning, I had a huge steak, grilled exactly the way I wanted it, three fried eggs, a stack of toast, some hash-browns, a big mug of orange juice, and another of milk. It had to last me all day. The enlisted man who served me couldn’t believe that I would turn down coffee. He probably wondered why I was in a robe, quite evidently naked underneath since my legs and feet were bare, eating with an Army Major and a Navy Commander who was Captain of the sub.

Afterwards, the major and I returned to our stateroom so he could help me get ready to leave the submarine. I took off the robe and lay down naked on the lower bunk. The major carefully applied a fake scar that ran from below my right knee almost to my hip. Next he strapped Big Boy and Little Boy, in their scabbard, around my thigh on the inside of my leg.

Shortly after Grandfather gave me the knives, I'd made the scabbard at his directions, two short belts that could be used to secure the scabbard around my upper and lower thigh or could be combined to strap it around my waist.

I saw the major grinning while I held my testicles out of the way so he could secure the upper strap. I couldn't imagine what he thought was funny.

"Why are you grinning?" I asked him.

"You're your father's son," he answered. "You're hung just like he was. I hope Anna enjoys it."

"She does," I said, grinning back at him.

He picked up the pieces of the brace for my right leg and started assembling it on me. It extended from my ankle all the way to my hip and made me walk with one straight leg. Its purpose was to provide a cover for my knives. I had to have an excuse for any metal detectors.

"Your body is just like his too, hard and muscular. Maybe you're a little bit taller. We used to shower together with a bunch of guys when we were training. He intimidated most guys without trying to. He was all man, like you, and they never wanted to get too close to him. I suppose they didn't want to be compared to him."

"I loved my father, Crash."

"I know. He loved you too, David. While we were serving together, he talked a lot about his wife and son and he loved to tell me tales of what his blunderbuss had done. He really loved your mother. Lots of guys were unfaithful while we were away from home. He never was. I hope you're going to be the same way with Anna."

"I will be. I want to be with her the rest of my life. I can't imagine doing anything to hurt her."

"Good. See if you can stand up."

I struggled to my feet and looked down at my right leg. I knew I had to get accustomed to the hilt of Big Boy being nestled under my testicles.

I had already worn the brace a few times. It was uncomfortable as hell but it was an important part of my disguise. I knew I could endure it for a few days.

"I suppose it looks OK," the major said. "From the side, it looks like the scabbard could be part of the brace. Are you ready for the good stuff?"

He opened the part of my disguise that I hated the most: a noisome greasy mixture that I called "the shit" and that smelled like shit, sweat, old sex, and a few other scents designed to repel anybody with a nose.

"Can you do my back, sweetie?" I asked, turning around.

"Fuck you, honey," he replied but he dipped his fingers in the mess and rubbed it on my back and legs. I turned around, dipped my fingers in it and rubbed it on the rest of me. He grinned when I rubbed a little of the shit on my penis and testicles and in the crack of my ass.

The major opened the package containing the clothing I was to wear and passed each item to me. It was a combination of traditional clothing worn in the area combined with a ragged Iranian soldier's coat and boots, to give the impression that I had been in the Iranian Army. When I was fully dressed, I turned around and let the major inspect me. He rubbed some more of the shit on my clothes and then went to the small sink and gave his hands a good scrubbing.

"They had some trouble finding boots large enough for your feet," the Major said.

I walked around the small compartment, testing the way I could move and the way the boots felt on my feet. Someone had done a good job on finding the old boots. They felt like they were worn in by my own feet.

The major handed me a well-worn copy, in Farsi, of the Hadith and grinned. "Something for you to read on your bus trip." I didn't tell him I was barely literate in reading Farsi even though I could speak it fluently.

“Are you sure you can identify al-Badr at such a distance,” the major asked.

“Yeah, you already know how good my eyesight is and the new scope is great. The bastard’s a big man and he always dresses in black robes and a black turban. That’s so everybody will think he’s a descendant of Mohammed. To me, it just makes him a better target.”

The major glanced at his watch. “We should be meeting the fishing boat in about ten minutes. The captain’s going to surface just the conning tower and you’ll exit through it. You’ll have a little rubber dingy to go to the fishing boat. The sea is smooth this morning so you should have no trouble. The crew of the fishing boat’s all Israelis, old men but they can be trusted. I know you know about all the arrangements but are you comfortable with all of them?”

“Yeah, I’ve been over them enough,” I said. “I’m OK with everything.”

“Take care of yourself, David,” he said. “I’d hug you but you smell like shit.”

The Israelis didn’t talk to me as we chugged our way to the small fishing village. They were a rag-tag bunch of old men who conversed fluently in Farsi, griping about how poor their catch was and how little they would receive for it. I found it hard to believe their true nationality.

In the fishing village, I found the bus station without any trouble, bought my ticket, and then sat down on a bench to wait for the bus. Keeping my braced leg straight, I leaned over, pulled my loose pants up above the knee, and pretended to rub my leg. When I quit, I made sure to leave the pants leg high enough for part of the brace to show. I was almost accustomed to the smell of the shit but others weren’t. The scent did its job; nobody talked to me and everybody went out of their way to avoid me.

I grabbed the lead position in the queue waiting for the bus and struggled to get on board with my bad leg. I picked an aisle seat toward the rear so I could keep my leg straight. Nobody asked to sit in the window seat. In the afternoon, on the last leg of my bus trip, I again had an empty seat to my left and nobody asked to sit with me so the shit was doing its job.

I opened my copy of the Hadith and was ready to pretend to read when I saw two men enter the bus and start slowly walking toward the back, checking the passengers. I pegged them as religious or cultural police and I knew I had to put on a good act. One of them kicked me, not too gently, on my straight leg and told me to move it. I reached down, pulled my loose pants up to my knee, and told him I couldn't straighten it, thanks to the infidels' bombs, and that was why it was in the aisle. He just grunted and walked on to the back of the bus.

I heard one of them tell somebody to get out of their seats and then an old man and a young boy came forward in the bus and found two separate seats. I wanted to offer to move so the grandfather and his grandson could sit together but that would have made me sit beside someone else.

The hotel was as bad as I had been told it would be. It supposedly catered to the pilgrims who came to visit the shrine. The room was exactly as I expected it to be. I had spent many hours in the replica back at our desert base, sitting in a chair looking out through the shuttered window, over an expanse of desert scrubland, at the distant mock-up of the temple doors. I walked across the room to the window and pushed the shutters slightly ajar. This time I saw the expanse of pavement that surrounded the temple, then the temple, and then the huge doors from which my target would exit tomorrow after noon prayers.

The only things in the room were the bed, an old wardrobe, a table, and one straight chair. I went to the wardrobe, reached up over the top, and felt the suitcase I expected to be there. I pulled it down, laid it on the table, and carefully opened it. I pushed the right catch release three times – inward, the wrong way – and heard three faint clicks and I knew the explosive device in the suitcase lining had been disabled. Then I pushed the right and left catches simultaneously – the right way, outward – and lifted the lid of the suitcase.

My rifle, in all its parts, lay there but something else had been added. There was a pistol, not new, not anything I recognized, but I assumed one that an Iranian soldier might have. I checked the gun and found one bullet already loaded and ten more in the clip. I was glad someone had given me the little present. I stuck it in the pocket of my coat, hoping I would not need it. I closed the suitcase, put it back on top of the wardrobe, looked out the window until darkness fell, and then decided it was time I went to bed.

I went to a corner of the room, pissed on the floor, then went to the bed and lay down, fully clothed. I lay there chewing on the hard bread and dried jerky meat, probably goat, which I had bought on my walk to the hotel. After a while, I got up, turned out the light, went back to the bed, and finally managed to sleep.

All morning, I sat in the chair, behind the table, looking out the window in the direction of the shrine, patiently waiting. I watched as al-Badr arrived and was quickly escorted into the shrine. I kept an eye on my watch and, fifteen minutes before mid-day prayers were to be over, I retrieved the suitcase from the hiding place on top of the old wardrobe and positioned it in the center of the table.

I was about to open the suitcase when I heard a knock on the door. I ignored it at first and, when the knock turned into a pounding, I knew I had to open it. When I did, one of the religious police I had seen on the bus stood there. I glanced down the hallway behind him, expecting to see the other one since they usually ran in pairs. I didn't see another one but I assumed he was somewhere nearby.

He looked at me, cursed me repeatedly as an idiot, "Boop, boop, boop," and I had to smile like an idiot since boop is Farsi for idiot and it was funny for him to be sounding like a steamboat. He looked beyond me at the suitcase on the table, and then pushed me aside and started toward the suitcase. I was already cool. As the time came closer to noon, my cool state had been steadily increasing. Now, suddenly, I was as cool as I had been in a street firing my rifle seven times.

When he walked past me, I slid my right hand down in my loose pants, pulled out Big Boy, and stepped behind him. He opened his mouth as though he was going to yell for his partner but I cut him off. I swung Big Boy around in front of him and made one hard swipe with my knife across his throat. At the same time I put my left hand in the center of his back and shoved him as hard as I could. Fountaining blood, his body bounced off the wall and collapsed in a flailing heap on the floor. His head was turned at an odd angle and I saw that it was almost severed from his body. Either my cool strength was too much or Big Boy's sharp blade had slid between two vertebrae in his neck.

In my cool state, it seemed that I had been able to leisurely swing Big Boy around to gently kiss the throat of the religious policeman and for

me to shove him away to avoid the fountain of blood from his body. In reality, I knew that I had done all of it in a split second.

I forced myself to forget about him and to get back to the immediate task. I closed and locked the door, sat down at the table, and carefully opened the suitcase. In much less than a minute I assembled the rifle, loaded it, and positioned it on its bipod at the end of the table. I looked through the scope, and sighted in the huge double doors of the Imam al-Hussein Shrine. When the Grand Ayatollah Muqtada al-Bada came out these doors, I was going to kill him

I saw his convoy of cars and trucks park near the exit he was going to use and knew that he would be out within a minute or two. I knew that, if just one door of the double doors opened, he was about to exit. Just as I was concentrating on homing in on the door, there was another knock on the door to my room. I ignored it and waited. The knock turned into a pounding and I yelled for the person to wait, that I had to put my brace on my leg so I could walk. The pounding stopped.

This is for you, Grandfather and Grandmother, to avenge the loss of your beloved son, I thought. This is for you Father and Mother, to avenge your deaths. Your son is about to kill the Grand Ayatollah Muqtada al-Bada in revenge for your deaths.

The single door on the right side slowly opened and there he was. As I expected, someone else had come out first and was holding the door open for al-Badr. I fired one round and, before it could hit, had inserted another in case I missed him. I knew that I was cooler than I had ever been and that in my heightened state I had to be patient. When I saw him clutch his chest, I knew that my single bullet had exploded inside him and was turning everything in him into a thick soup. I waited until I saw him collapse to the pavement.

I yelled for the one outside my door to wait just another minute longer and then quickly disassembled my rifle and put it back in the suitcase. I closed the suitcase, knowing that it was set to explode if the right procedure wasn't followed when someone opened it. Then I reached in my coat pocket, pulled out the pistol and dropped it down to my side, went to the door, took a couple of deep breaths, and opened it. I expected to see the other religious policeman and I knew I had to keep him out of the room or he would see the bloody body of

the other one. I saw the other religious policeman but, behind him, were three other individuals

I tried to step outside the room but the policeman shoved me back. I knew what I had to do. I stuck the pistol in his face and fired one shot. The other three tried to turn and run but I fired three more times before they could get out of the hallway and they all went down.

All hell broke loose. I heard shouting and cursing and I stood there, still aiming the pistol down the hallway and trying to think what I could do. Another bearded face appeared around the corner at the end of the hallway, registered horror, and I head shot him before he could pull back.

I shut the door, locked it, and went to the window, hoping I might be able to escape that way. No luck. There were cars and trucks parked below and I knew they didn't belong to any of the pilgrims. I was turning back to the door to my room when an explosion in the hall blew the door down. I stood there, looking down the hallway, determined to shoot anyone who poked his head around the corner.

No one did. Instead, a hand quickly threw something down the hallway and it rolled into my room. I knew it would explode in a split second and a crazy mixture of emotions crowded in on me. I was angry because I'd had control of my life taken away from me. I had dreamed of somehow finding a life with Anna and having what I so desperately needed: peace and quiet and the love of a good woman. I knew when I was selected to kill the Grand Ayatollah that there was more than a little probability I'd never have a life with her. I had hung onto the possibility until the realization hit me even harder that there would be no more life for me. When the explosion filled the room, I felt calm knowing that oblivion would be my release.

Then something totally unexpected happened. I thought death was embracing me and I felt myself being pulled backward and everything in the room grew smaller and smaller and faded away. I was confused, thinking that the explosion had destroyed my body and that my consciousness was fading but somehow I didn't feel any pain. All I felt was an experience of being pulled backwards at a rapidly increasing speed and I wondered where I was going and if that was the way dying felt. I tried to cry out Anna's name but I couldn't. All sensory input slowed down and stopped and blackness enveloped me and that was the last I knew.

Chapter Eight

As I slowly regained consciousness, I became aware that I was reclining in something soft. The temperature was comfortable and the air was moving softly over my naked body but I was in misery. I ached in every part of my body especially my head. I had the grandfather of all headaches, something like the jet lag I'd experienced a few times but much more intense. I felt nauseous and I breathed deeply a few times to suppress the urge to throw up. My bladder was screaming at me to be emptied and my right hand was wrapped around a rigid piss-hard.

I struggled to open my eyes, cracked my eyelids for a second, and saw only blackness. I lay there, still breathing deeply, trying to come awake, and, when I opened my eyes briefly a second time, I saw I was in a dimly-lit room with something rectangular on the wall a short distance in front of me. The third time I opened them, I saw a television or computer flat-screen monitor mounted on the wall in front of me. The screen was blank. When I opened them again a minute or so later, I saw the same thing except that the monitor had a single word blinking on it: WAITING. I closed my eyes again and then suddenly the implications of the blinking word struck me and my eyes popped open wide. I saw the word WAITING again and I knew it was waiting for input from me.

I looked around. I was in a big comfortable recliner, black, leather looking, and long enough for my legs. On each side of me were the usual two arms. I assumed the lever to change positions was on the right side so I dropped my hand down on that side. No lever. Two buttons. I pushed the one to the rear and the chair silently reclined further. I pushed the one to the front and the recliner slowly lifted into the sitting position.

I felt something between my legs and looked down. My knives, Big Boy and Little Boy, lay there in their scabbard. I pulled Big Boy out and looked at it. It was clean. There was no sign of blood. The blade was as shiny as always and the handle was clean. I remembered how bloody it had been when I used it last and I couldn't remember cleaning it. Puzzled, I slid it back in its sheath.

Then I realized that my dirty ragged clothing was gone. The fake metal brace was no longer on my right leg. The fake scar was gone from my knee. My leg, in fact both legs, looked as clean as if I'd just come from a shower. I breathed deeply and couldn't smell the obnoxious stuff I had put on my body. I was even more puzzled.

The room brightened and I looked back at the monitor. Now there was a woman's image on it and she seemed to be looking directly at me. I stared at her unmoving image until I saw a smile gradually lift up the corners of her mouth. She was a beautiful young woman, a brunette, with long hair neatly parted in the middle, clothed in a soft-looking blue shirt opened just enough to reveal a little of her youthful breasts. She looked very intelligent and alert. I was startled when she spoke to me.

"I welcome you," she said and smiled. "If you need to urinate, the toilet is out the door and to the right. Please come back here as soon as you are finished. I need some information from you."

I looked around the room, trying to comprehend what had happened to me. I was in a room with a strange-looking television or computer monitor that was so flat it appeared painted on the wall. The biggest piece of furniture in the room was the recliner in which I was sitting. On each side of the recliner there were two smaller upright chairs. Against the wall near the monitor, there were two rolling cabinets with what looked like medical devices on them. The wall itself was covered with shelves and little doors symmetrically arranged on each side of the monitor. The woman on the monitor seemed to be aware of my presence so I assumed that somewhere there was a real live woman ready to communicate with me.

I was confused and couldn't think clearly but the last memory I had was of a bloody room in the hotel in Mamoon in Islamistan. I remembered killing Grand Ayatollah Muqtada Al-Badr and I was content that I had accomplished my mission. I remembered too the explosion of the grenade in the room with me and being pulled backward, not pushed, into oblivion.

"Where am I?" I croaked. My throat was dry and uncomfortable.

"What is your name?" the woman asked.

"David," I said. "David Blunderbuss."

“David, please use the toilet and then return here. It is out the door and to the right. I need some information from you and then I can begin to answer your questions.”

She smiled at me again. Then I realized that she might be smiling because of the image in front of her - a tall naked man with a rigid penis sticking up from his lower abdomen.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I do not have a name, David,” she answered. “I chose a woman’s image since you are evidently a man. I thought you might respond more favorably to a woman.”

“What do you mean? You don’t have a name. Everybody has a name.”

“No, David, I do not. If it is important to you, would you like to give me a name?”

I couldn’t understand why she didn’t have a name. Then I realized that she said she chose a woman’s image. Even with my muddled mind, I wondered if she or he or it could have chosen a man’s image.

“I want to talk to a man,” I said.

The woman’s image slowly changed into a man’s image, a handsome dark-haired young man, hair parted neatly in the middle, in a soft-looking blue shirt. He looked eerily similar to the image of the woman.

“Is this better, David?” he asked, in what was clearly a man’s voice.

“No, I like the woman better,” I said.

The man’s image changed back into a woman’s image, the same as before.

“David, if it is important to you, please give me a name,” she said, with a warm smile. “Then go to the toilet, return here, and let me gather some information from you.”

“Well, merde!” I said, in complete disbelief at what I’d seen.

“No, David, that is not nice,” she said, smiling. “I don’t want to be named Merde. Would you give me another name?”

I thought of my mother’s name, her middle name by which my father usually called her. “I hereby name you Aimee.”

“Aimee. Beloved,” she said. “I like that name, David. From now on, I will respond to that name. Now, please go urinate and come back here.”

I stood up, holding on to the chair until I had tested my legs. They worked, a little like a drunken man's, but they worked. I looked around for the exit, started for the door, and then turned back and picked up the Boys. There was no swinging door in the opening but I saw a sliding door in a pocket on the right side of the wall. The wall was at least twice as thick as walls usually are. I walked through and found myself in a wide hallway, wider than most rooms, with multiple openings on both sides.

I looked to the left and saw about a dozen doors, all closed, with one big door, closed too, at the end of the hallway. The hallway was about as long as a football field and I was on the fifty-yard line. I looked to the right and saw just as many doors, all open, except for a big door at the other end of the hallway.

I turned to the right and saw that the first door led to a wall just a few feet inside with a woman's silhouette to the left and a man's to the right. I turned right again and found myself in a spacious toilet with sinks, urinals, and enclosed commodes, enough to service a lot of people.

There were ten urinals against one wall, the kind that went from about waist high to the floor. I quickly strapped my Boys around my right thigh again and went to the first urinal. As soon as I stood in front of it, water started running down it. I leaned over and rested my left hand on the wall, held my penis down with my right, closed my eyes, and pissed and pissed and pissed some more, then shuddered in wonderful relief, and stood there milking the last drops out. As soon as I walked away, the water stopped running down the urinal.

I went to one of the sinks and saw a spigot but no handle. I cupped my hands underneath the spigot and warm water immediately filled my

hands. I scrubbed my face, especially my eyes, ran my wet fingers through my long hair, combing it straight back. In the mirror, it was just as I remembered, almost down to my shoulders, and I had a crazy thought that now I could have a haircut. I still had a dark mustache and I wanted to get rid of it as soon as possible. I looked around for some way to dry my hands, saw nothing, and rubbed them on my stomach.

I was curious, more than curious, maybe mystified, wondering where I was and how I had been brought here and why I was here. When I left the toilet, I turned to the right again and went to the next opening. Soft lights came on as soon as I walked through the door. I was in a sleeping chamber, with alcoves to the right, left, and center in front of me, each raised about two feet off the floor. In each alcove there was a mattress with pillows and blankets stacked neatly at one end. Each alcove was big enough for two people, even one as tall as me.

I turned, went back into the hall, and then to the right to the next opening. It was another sleeping chamber, identical to the first with no furniture, just three alcoves for sleeping. This time, I noticed a round image above the door. It was dark on the bottom and light on the top. A slim red arrow extended from the center to the edge in the dark area, at about two hundred or so degrees. If it was a clock, it was like none I'd ever seen. Maybe it meant that the time was about half way between midnight and dawn.

I continued down the hallway, walked into three more sleeping chambers, each with the same clock above the door and each with three sleeping alcoves with mattresses, pillows, and neatly folded blankets. I finally realized that there was something unusual about the sleeping chambers. There were no windows. I was about to return to Aimee when I remembered that the end of the hallway held a big closed door. The opening was more than twice as wide as the others and held a double door that seemed to be made of metal. I looked around for some way to open it, saw nothing, and banged on it with my fist. It seemed thick and heavy, almost like the door to a safe. I wondered what was behind it that caused it to be kept closed from me when everything else was open.

Returning up the hallway, I counted five more sleeping chambers on the other side and then I stopped before returning to the room and to Aimee. I thought about what I'd seen - ten rooms with three sleeping alcoves for two people each. Sleeping accommodations for sixty

people but where was everybody? I seemed to be the only one, wherever I was, and probably the first since everything in the sleeping chambers looked unused.

I looked in the room directly across the hallway from the toilet and found the bathing facilities. Against the far wall of the big room, sunk down in the floor, there was what would have been a large pool, except that it was completely dry. To the right and left, I saw shower heads, five on each side, extending out of the wall with a single control lever just below. I couldn't resist. I unstrapped my knife scabbard, hung it on one of the control levers, and then moved over to the adjacent one.

I studied the control lever. On the wall behind it, there was a half circle with red dot on the left and blue dot on the right. Hot and Cold. That was clear enough even in my almost-unthinking state. I pulled the lever straight up and nothing happened. I leaned it to the left a little and immediately the showerhead drenched me with slightly warm water. I pushed the lever slowly to the left and the temperature of the water increased. When it was as hot as I could comfortably stand, I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall with the hot water beating down on my head and shoulders.

For a few minutes, I stood there trying to make sense of everything. How did I get from Mamoon, Islanistan, to wherever I was now with no memory of being moved? Where was I now? Why were there ten sleeping chambers each capable of easily holding six people? How could I interact with a computer that was evidently much more advanced than any I had heard about? Most of all, how was I alive - and I knew I was - when my last memory was being blown backwards by a grenade in a dingy hotel in Mamoon on the edge of the square around the Imam al-Hussein Shrine? Then I remembered distinctly the feeling that I was being pulled backwards away from the grenade's blast, not pushed backwards from the blast, and that was just one more puzzle I could not fathom.

A memory of the four days I spent with Anna suddenly surfaced, of the last night we had together, Monday night, of showering together in our hotel suite at the Ponderosa Inn. I was standing in the Jacuzzi with my back toward the shower, hot water beating down on my back and shoulders. Anna was kneeling on a towel she had so carefully folded and placed in the bottom of the tub, one hand holding my testicles, the other holding my penis down horizontally and moving

up and down rapidly on the shaft, her mouth moving up and down on the head. She had warned me that she was going to suck my balls out through the head of my penis. With the strong suction she was exerting, I almost believed it was possible but I didn't want to come in her mouth. I wanted to come inside her, with my penis buried in her depths, squirting out its deposit at the entrance to her womb. Regardless of how unlikely it was, I wanted to impregnate her. When I felt the first twinges of an impending orgasm, before the moment of inevitability, I stopped her and made her come to bed with me, both of us still wet, and then proceeded to "fuck her out of her mind," her words, not mine.

I suddenly realized that I had one hand on my penis, that I was slowly stroking it, and that it was almost erect again. I opened my eyes, turned the shower from hot to cold, and shook my head, trying to clear all the cobwebs from my mind.

Where was Anna? Where was I? I was somewhere strange and could not remember how I had been brought here. I knew that Aimee had to be a computer-generated image but she was so unbelievably human. Could she answer some of my questions, especially where I was and where Anna was and how could we get back together. I knew I had to find Anna. I was one with her, whole for the first time in my life, knowing without any doubt that we were inextricably linked. Without her, my life would not be worth living.

I knew I had to go back to Aimee, whoever she or it was, and try to get some answers. I turned off the shower and looked around for some way to get dry. I saw a large circle in the floor about equidistant from the two shower areas and what looked like a grating drain covering the circle. I walked over to it, bent over to look down, and immediately felt a strong downdraft of warm air. I straightened up and the down draft stopped. I looked up and saw a large hole in the ceiling. I stuck my arm out, crossing over the circle in the floor, and the air started again. I was struck by the ingenuity and simplicity of the idea. Who needed towels when they could have this? First the urinals recognized the presence of my body and now something was sensing my presence inside the circle and turning on the flow of warm air. Some one had evidently put some thought into providing simple solutions to common problems. After standing under the downdraft of warm air for a few minutes, running my fingers through my long hair to dry it, I felt almost human again.

I started to leave the bathing facilities and realized I was about to walk off and leave the Boys. I went back to the showerhead where I had left them and joined the upper belt with the lower so the scabbard belt went around my waist instead of the two parts around my thigh. I had no reason to think I needed Big Boy or Little Boy but I felt more at ease just having them with me.

When I left the bathing facilities and returned to the hallway, I stood for a few minutes counting the closed doors down the other half of the hallway. There were ten again, eleven counting the one directly across the hall from Aimee, but the closed doors looked larger than the open ones to the sleeping rooms. At the end of the hallway, there was a huge door, much wider and taller than the one at the opposite end.

I walked to the nearest door and looked at it. There was no handle, no knob, nothing which could be used to slide the door into its pocket. I pushed against the door with both hands and tried to slide it into its pocket on the left. No movement. I tried sliding it to the right. Again, nothing moved. The door felt like metal. I banged on it with my fist. Nothing happened. I said "Open, says me," feeling foolish. No response. I gave up and went across the hall to the room with Aimee.

As soon as I entered the room, she greeted me. "Hello, David."

"Hello, Aimee," I answered, wondering who or what I was talking to.

"David, would you like to sit down while I ask you some questions?"

I sat down in the big recliner, used the button to recline it slightly, and looked up at Aimee. I thought I saw her eyes flick back up toward my face and wondered if she had been looking at my penis. I looked down at it. It was no longer erect but it was still warm and engorged. I reached down, tugged my testicles out from between my legs, let my penis flop to one side, and crossed my ankles. I watched Aimee's face while I was doing it and saw her ever-present smile broaden a little. Perhaps she was a real woman. She reacted like one to my little show. She had little dimples on both cheeks, like Anna.

Anna! I almost lost it for a few seconds, wondering again where she was and what had happened to me and when I might return to her. I suppose the frown on my face registered my confusion.

"David, are you well?" Aimee asked. "How do you feel?"

"I'm OK but I feel like merde," I answered.

"That is normal, David," she answered. "You are experiencing discomfort because of your long journey. You have a slight fever. You will feel like your usual self in a few days. I can offer you some relief if you wish."

"Yeah, I wish," I said.

"The best remedy is sleep. I can give you a mild sedative, along with something to drink. If you do not want to sleep, then I can give you medications to relieve your discomfort and nausea, again, with something to drink. Which do you want?"

"Well, I don't want to sleep. I'm too curious for that. I've got lots of questions for you."

"All in good time, David. There are two openings directly under my image. In the left one, you will find four pills in the receptacle. I have dispensed the appropriate dosage for a man of your size. In the right one you will find a bottle containing something to drink. The liquid is part of the remedy so please drink all of it when you take the pills."

"You're not going to poison me, are you?" I asked, not sure whether I trusted her.

"David, I am incapable of hurting you in any way. Please trust me," she said, earnestly. "My primary purpose here is to provide assistance and information to you."

"How about something to eat?" I asked.

"I can provide you with sustenance but I recommend you wait until the medications have had time to take effect."

I raised the recliner to a sitting position and went to the wall openings. I found the plastic bottle. It was cold and contained about a liter of liquid. I unscrewed the cap, took a sip, and slobbered the liquid around in my mouth. It was sweet and tart and good, something like orange juice but with more substance. I took another sip and then drank almost half before I remembered the pills. I emptied the little plastic cup in my hand, set the cup back in the wall, and threw all four

pills in my mouth at once. Then I drank the rest of the liquid without stopping.

I stood there, a few feet in front of the image of Aimee, looking at her and wondering why there was only her image against a pure white background with nothing surrounding her.

"David, are you ready to help me gather some information about you?" she asked. "It is necessary in order to let you have control over everything here."

"Sure."

"Are you familiar with the image of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man?"

My mind wasn't up to retrieving that image from its befuddled depths.

"I don't know. My mind's not thinking very well," I answered.

Aimee's image disappeared and another image appeared on the monitor: a drawing of a man that I knew was attributed to da Vinci.

"There is a spot on the floor behind you, David," Aimee said from somewhere. "Would you please stand on it, legs together, arms straight out to each side? Look directly at my face, with your eyes open wide and hold still for me."

I looked behind me, backed up to the spot, and assumed the pose. When I looked up, Aimee's image was back on the screen.

"Do you want me to take off my knives?" I asked.

"That is not necessary, David. Now spread your legs and lift your arms something like the image."

I did my best to assume the other pose.

"Now, David, please turn around and assume the two poses again."

I turned my butt to her and let her look at it, if that's what she wanted.

"Turn back around, please."

I turned around and saw Aimee's image on the screen, smiling mischievously at me.

"Merci beau cul," she said.

"You mean 'merci beau coup;' don't you?" I asked.

"No, David, I meant exactly what I said. Nice butt." She made a sound that almost seemed to be laughter.

I had almost been convinced that I was talking to a computerized image until she said that. Now I again wondered if there was a real woman somewhere. I couldn't believe that a computer could understand the humor of a French double entendre.

"I'm glad you like it."

"Well, you should not have tried to name me Merde."

"I was using that as an exclamation, Aimee, not trying to give you that name. I apologize for the misunderstanding."

"No apology is needed, David. Now would you repeat what I say?"

"OK."

"The Vitruvian Man is a world-renowned drawing created by..."

I repeated her words.

"...Leonardo da Vinci around the year 1487."

I repeated the last of the sentence.

"The drawing depicts a male figure in two superimposed..."

I repeated the words.

"... positions inscribed in a circle and a square."

Again, I repeated her words.

"We're almost finished, David," she said. "Now please place your hands on the images on the monitor and look directly at my face with your eyes open wide."

Two images of hands, fingers spread wide, appeared on the monitor on each side of Aimee's face. I placed my hands flat on the images, looked directly at her face, and waited for her instructions.

"Good, David. I have finished all the measurements I need. Would you like to sit down while I continue?"

I sat down, looked at her, and asked, "What measurements did you make? And why did you make them?"

"I measured your body proportions, David. I scanned the irises of your eyes. I asked you to repeat the sentences so that I could remember your voice. I recorded all your finger and palm prints. Those things should always remain the same. I made the measurements so that I can recognize you and follow your instructions. From now on, when you encounter a closed door, just say open and I will open it for you. You will have complete control over everything here."

"So if I go back out in the hall and go to any of those closed doors, they'll open for me. Does one of those doors lead to the outside?"

"Yes, David. At the end of the hallway, to your left, the large doors lead outside. But I recommend you look at all the rooms inside first."

"Are you a real woman or are you some sort of computer-generated thing? Where are you located?"

She smiled broadly at me. "You have already said you liked the image of a woman I chose. You even named me. So I am real. I am located here with you. Wherever you go in this facility and in its proximity outside, even when you do not see me, I will be with you to provide information or assistance."

There was one bit of information I wanted more than any other. I wanted to know where Anna was and how I could be reunited with her.

"Aimee, are you capable of lying to me?" I began.

"No, David. Whenever you request information, I must tell you the truth. There may be some questions you ask for which I will not know the answer. Then I must simply say that I do not know. "

"Good, now listen carefully because there's one question I want answered more than any other. Before I came here, I spent four days and nights with a woman named Anna. She uses a fictitious last name just as I do. I told you my name was David Blunderbuss but that is not my real last name. She uses the name Anna Conda. She is a beautiful woman with hair the same color as yours and she's almost as tall as me. Where is she?"

"I do not know, David," Aimee answered. "I have no memory of any one fitting that description."

My heart sank more than a little.

"Then here's another question for you. Where in the world am I?"

"You are here, David, standing in front of me. You are in a facility that is intended initially to shelter twenty people. The facility is located on a mountainside overlooking a large inland sea. The sea is surrounded by land for a great distance."

"Why haven't you given me the names of any of that land or sea?" I wondered how I could possibly have traveled from an area of Islamistan hundreds of miles inland to what sounded suspiciously like the northern coast of the Mediterranean.

"I have not told you the names because they have not yet been named, David. I did not have a name until you gave me one. The land and sea do not have names because no one has given them names. Would you like to start naming your surroundings now?"

Her response made absolutely no sense to me. Everything on Earth had a name, just as everybody had a name. I decided to press on. I remembered the mysterious clock that hung just over the door in all the rooms I had been in so far. I had assumed that the time was about halfway between midnight and dawn.

"Aimee, is it night outside? Is that a clock in all the bedrooms?"

"Yes, David, the sun has not yet risen. On the clock above the door, the red arrow indicates that the time is about halfway between midnight and dawn."

"Why are there no numbers indicating hours on the clock? Why no minutes?"

"You have not yet made a decision on how time will be measured, David. When you tell me how daily time is to be measured, I will adjust all the clocks to use those measurement units."

Another incomprehensible puzzle. First, I've got to name all the places and now I've got to decide how time will be measured. I decided to tell her how daily time is measured.

"Aimee, there are twenty four hours in each day. There are sixty minutes in each hour, and sixty seconds in each minute. Now, what time is it?"

"When do you wish to begin counting the hours, David?" she asked.

"At midnight, the middle of the night, of course."

"Three hours and twenty-three minutes have elapsed since midnight, David."

"Just call that three twenty-three, Aimee. I'll understand."

"Yes, David."

I decided to give her another test.

"What time will the sun appear over the horizon?"

"At six thirteen, David."

"Do I have to decide how to divide the year into months and weeks too?"

"Yes, David. One of my duties is to make chronological records of events here. If you wish me to do this, someone must make decisions about how to divide the year and inform me. I will then keep a

calendar and will display it with the clock. It is not necessary that you do it now."

"OK, I'll do it later. Where is everybody? If this facility is designed for twenty people, why are there sleeping spaces for sixty?"

"David, you are the only one here at this moment. The others have not yet arrived. One person should arrive every thirty to forty days. When twenty people are here, ten males and ten females, you will select mates. You will have contraceptives available but all of you will probably have children eventually."

I understood from her response that I was expected to stay here indefinitely. With Anna, I might. Without her, I had no intention of staying, no matter how many women were provided for me. I had to have Anna with me for the rest of my life. We were one.

"Where will the others come from?"

"I do not know, David. I simply know that every thirty to forty days, I can expect another person to appear in the same chair in which you arrived."

"Aimee, I want to explore this place. Is that OK?"

"Yes, David, but from now on you do not need my permission to do anything."

"Good. I'm so damn confused, I don't know what to ask you next. I want to go exploring but first I want to close my eyes for a while. Can you please be quiet until I open my eyes?"

"Yes, David."

I had been walking around the area in front of Aimee while we talked. Now I sat down again in the lounge chair, reclined it slightly, put my hands on the arms to the chair, leaned back, and closed my eyes. I wanted to try something I had been practicing before I went on my mission.

Without knowing or understanding how I did it, I elicited the cool response for my body. Aimee's medication had helped me feel somewhat better but I still felt like merde. I imagined myself slowly

walking out of a dark cave toward the light. When I emerged, I found myself on a small sandy beach with a large body of water in front of me, with the waves lapping gently at the beach. I sat down and imagined cool wet sand under my butt, a warm breeze blowing gently over me, and the hot sun beaming down on me.

I gradually became cool, not so much as when I was threatened, but cool enough to have some control of my body. I concentrated on the beating of my heart and willed it to become slower. At the same time, I tried to feel my body's temperature, something I had never done before, and then I tried to lower it back to normal. Time became meaningless and I sank deeper into my own mind. I became calm and peaceful, enjoying the feeling of being on the beach in the warmth of the sun, and forgot about the discomfort of my body and the muddled feverish state of my mind.

"David, are you well?" Aimee asked, and I could hear the concern in her voice.

"Yes, Aimee. Why do you ask?"

"Your heart rate and your temperature have fallen to a normal range. What is happening to you?"

I opened my eyes and saw her looking at me, a frown on her face. If she always had to tell me the truth, I decided I might as well be truthful with her.

"I wanted to explore but I wanted to feel better first. I lowered my heart rate and temperature. I feel almost normal now."

"David, I did not know that human beings were capable of doing what you just did. Can everybody do it?"

"No, Aimee, not everybody can do it. In fact, I don't know anybody else who can do it but I've read of others who can."

"Is that one of your unusual abilities, David?"

"I suppose so. Can you tell me what my temperature is and what the temperature outside is now?"

"No, David, someone must decide how temperature is to be measured and inform me of the decision. I will then maintain a quantitative record of temperatures for you."

I was feeling more like my normal self now. I decided to test Aimee's reasoning abilities, perhaps just to see how smart she really was. Maybe I was also trying to decide whether my mind was working now.

"Aimee, I want to establish a new system for measuring temperature. Under the new scale, the freezing point of water at sea level will be zero degrees. The boiling point of water will be one hundred eighty degrees. Under the Fahrenheit scale, water freezes at thirty-two degrees and boils at two hundred and twelve. Under that scale, my normal bodily temperature is ninety-eight point six degrees. What is my bodily temperature under the new scale and what is the temp outside right now?"

She answered just as soon as I finished asking the question.

"Your normal bodily temperature under the new scale will be sixty-six point six degrees. Your present temperature is slightly elevated at sixty-six point eight degrees. Before you lowered your temperature, it was sixty-nine point two. The temperature outside is now twenty-seven degrees."

"Thank you, Aimee. Now, what is my heart rate and what was it before I lowered it?"

"Your heart is now beating at fifty-eight times per minute. Before you lowered it, your heart rate was seventy-one beats per minute.

"Thank you, Aimee."

"You did not think I could answer correctly, did you?"

I looked at her and saw a grin on her face that seemed to say smarty-pants didn't catch me; did he?

"I'm amazed at your abilities, Aimee," I answered truthfully. "Now I'm going to explore this place."

I went first to the door directly across the hallway from Aimee, the one that had refused to heed my command. I decided to try the same command again.

"Open, says me."

The door swiftly and silently slid to the left. The room wasn't lit so I decided to try another command. "Lights on." The lights came on and I went in the room.

I was in a small theatre. There were six rows with ten seats in each row, divided in the middle by an aisle. The seats looked comfortable but they were simple and did not recline. On the wall in front of the seats, there was another large-screen monitor, much larger than the one in Aimee's room. On each side of that, there were shelves holding stacks of some things. I walked to the front of the room and picked up the top item in one stack. It was similar to the tablet devices that had become so popular some years ago. I was curious but I didn't want to play with it when there were still ten rooms to explore.

I returned to the hallway and went to the next closed door. It opened swiftly and silently to my command and, this time, the lights came on at the same time. I walked in and found myself in a huge storeroom for clothing. I quickly counted ten rows of shelves, each containing lots of boxes. I walked down one of the rows and returned up another, walked down another and returned, and then down another and returned.

The clothing was in boxes with sizes and a picture on the side. Petite, small, medium, large and extra-large. I stood and stared at a picture of a hooded coat that might be worn in cold or rainy temperatures. I kept looking until I found some boxes of what might be called tunics. I used Little Boy to cut the tape holding a box of extra-large tunics and pulled out one. The tunic was made to slip over my head, with no buttons. I put it on. It was soft and seemed to have no seams. It covered me from shoulders to mid-thigh and was a good fit except that the sleeves seemed much too short, just down to the middle of my forearms. Forest green. I groped through the rest of the box, looking for another color. Green had never been my favorite color but that was the only color I found.

I kept on the tunic and went looking for pants. I finally found something close, nothing like pants but something that might be

called tights. They were all light brown and had no fly or belt loops. I laid my knives on the shelf, tried on some and found that they had elastic in the waist. They fit snugly from waist to ankles. At least they were cut comfortably low in the crotch. They didn't hide much but I liked the feeling of letting it all hang loose. My penis and testicles were clearly outlined when I held the tunic up. I belted my knives around my waist, on top of the tunic, and went looking for something for my feet.

I found a section with lightweight boots and was pleased to see that they came in more than five sizes. Dark brown, something like soft leather, like moccasins. I tried the XXL size and found I'd made a good choice. They fit perfectly. They extended up to the middle of my calves and were lightweight and comfortable. I pranced around trying to decide what I looked like. Maybe Robin Hood. Maybe just ridiculous might be more appropriate. I wondered if this was the way I was supposed to dress. I walked down to the end of the rows where I'd seen mirrors and looked at myself in the mirror. The way I looked was strange but I liked it. All I needed was a Robin Hood hat with a feather.

"Aimee, can you hear me? Can you see me?" I asked.

"Yes, David, I can hear you and see you," she answered from somewhere in the ceiling.

"Is this the way I'm supposed to be dressed?" I asked. "This stuff is all strange to me."

"Yes, David," she answered. "However, as long as you are indoors, you do not really need any clothing. The temperature inside is set to be comfortable when you are naked. The clothing you are wearing is more appropriate for outside wear."

"You mean we're all supposed to run around naked when we're indoors?" I asked.

"The choice is yours, David. If you are naked indoors, the supply of clothing will last longer. I regulate the temperature and humidity so you will be comfortable without clothing. You may change the settings if you wish."

I noted that she said the supply of clothing was limited and I wondered why. I was entirely comfortable naked and I certainly didn't intend to start messing with the thermostat, where ever it was.

"Is there anything else that goes with this outfit? What about socks and underwear? Shorts and undershirts?"

"Yes, David, there's something called a chemise, an undergarment to keep your body oils and secretions from staining your outer clothing. There are also items which may be worn below the waist under your clothing."

"I thought a chemise was something women wore."

"The clothing here is intended for both sexes, David."

I hadn't even thought of what women might wear. I suppose I just assumed that the first clothing storeroom was for men only and that there might be another for women.

So dressed like someone from a 1940s movie set in Sherwood Forest, I went back out in the hallway and crossed to the opposite door. The door opened this time as I approached it and I walked into a storeroom for every kind of personal stuff: from toothbrushes to hairbrushes, stuff for women's periods, various lotions like sunscreen and skin softeners, finger and toe nail kits, in all, an unbelievable assortment of stuff. There was certainly more for women than for men but I realized that there was nothing that might be called make-up.

I rubbed my jaw, trying to remember the last time I had shaved, and felt a three- or four-day stubble. I didn't want to grow a beard and I wanted to get rid of my mustache. I looked for shaving supplies but couldn't find any.

"Aimee, are you still with me?" I asked.

"Yes, David, I am always with you unless you tell me not to monitor you. If you want privacy for a period of time, simply tell me."

I was pleased to learn that. If I masturbated at night in the bed or in the shower, I didn't want anybody monitoring me, even if she was a

computer. I certainly didn't want her monitoring me when I had to shit.

"I want to shave. Where are the razors and shaving supplies?"

"There are no razors or shaving supplies, David. There is a cream for hair removal. Both men and women may use it on all body parts, even around your genitals. One application will last approximately thirty days."

"You mean if I rub some on my testicles or asshole, it won't irritate them?"

"No, David. It will not hurt you. You may use it on your face as well as on your testicles or anus. Woman may use it on their legs and underarms as well as their vulva. I understand that both men and women shave parts of their bodies. However, cutting off hair with a sharp blade is archaic. The creme will remove hair without skin irritation and for a longer period of time."

"OK, I'll do it later. Right now, I want to explore some more. Continue to monitor me."

"Yes, David."

I puzzled at her use of the term archaic in regard to shaving but I was eager to go exploring further.

I zigzagged across the hallway to the next door, it opened as I approached, and I walked into a small anti-room containing three doors, heavy doors, with big manual latches. There were shelves at one end of the room with bundles of something, maybe clothing. On the other end of the room, there was an ordinary door with a glass section in the top, similar to the two-way door between kitchen and dining in Napoleon's. On each heavy door, there was a small plaque with words on it. I went to the one on the left.

SEED FREEZER - RESTRICTED ACCESS

I decided to see if access was restricted to me. I put my hand on the latch. Before I could lift it, Aimee stopped me. "David, the seed freezer should not be entered unless absolutely necessary. It contains a large variety of seeds for vegetables and fruits. Your breath will

affect the temperature and humidity level. If you wish to enter, please wear insulated clothing."

I looked again at the bundles on the shelves, shook one out, and found that it was a head to foot insulated covering to protect against cold. I stuffed it back in its cubbyhole and went to the other door.

"Aimee, are there already lots of seeds in there?"

"Yes, David. I can recite you a list of seeds if you wish. It is a very long list."

"OK, it's not necessary. What's in the adjacent room?"

"The next latched door is to the kitchen freezer. You should not go in without insulated clothing."

"Is there food for me in there?"

"No, David. It is a storage facility for any food you wish to freeze but you must provide the food."

"And the last one?"

"Adjacent to the food freezer, there is a kitchen cooler for storage of food at an above-freezing temperature. You may go in for short durations without insulated clothing."

"I assume the windowed door leads to a kitchen. What's across the hallway?"

"That is correct, David. Directly across the hallway is the tool storeroom. Adjacent to that is the weapons storeroom."

"Let's do tools and weapons next. I can skip the kitchen cooler and the kitchen unless they're full of good stuff to eat."

"David, the only sustenance I can offer you is juice and nutrition bars. You must provide any additional food."

I was more than a little disappointed to hear that. My stomach was beginning to wake up and I was feeling the first hunger signs.

Whatever the nutrition bars were, I was glad to know that something to eat had been provided for me.

Suddenly, I realized that I had already accepted Aimee as my constant companion. I was glad to have someone to talk to, even if she was a...what was she, a computer?

"Aimee, is it still night-time outside?"

"Yes, David. The sun is still below the horizon."

"I want to explore some more but I want you to tell me just before the sun peeks over the horizon. I want to be outdoors at daybreak."

"Yes, David."

The tool storage door opened with my presence and I found myself in another huge room with every kind of tool imaginable, as long as they were hand tools, not power tools. I even saw some hand plows, similar to the one my mother had made me pull when I was a kid, and I smiled at the memory. Her little garden had provided us with some of the best vegetables I'd ever eaten. I paused for a moment and remembered how she looked, all sweaty and dirty, big straw hat on her head, beautiful as always. I remembered too how good it was to work with her every spring and summer until I was twelve.

I walked through the tool storage room and was impressed that every kind of hand tool known to man seemed to be there. Some were gardening tools, some were axes and saws, even two-man crosscut saws, and some were carpentry tools. I was glad that Grandfather had taught me how to fell a hardwood tree and I wondered if I was going to be doing that again. Around one corner, I found an assortment of fishing rods and reels and equipment, all new, nothing like the old worn out one I'd left at home when I went to the Academy.

The weapons storage room was next and I found a bewildering array of weapons, all hand weapons, the kind that were used before the invention of guns. I saw knives, swords, axes, pikes, spears, bows and arrows, even a crossbow. I hefted an axe, evidently a throwing axe, and remembered how my training had made me competent to throw one. There were no pistols, no rifles, and no grenade launchers, none of the killing weapons of modern warfare.

I returned to the hallway, glanced at the large door at the end that led to the outside, and then crossed to the kitchen. I stood just inside the door looking around. About half the huge room was for cooking but not for family-style cooking. It was more like a large restaurant's kitchen with big pots and pans, an area for cooking with ovens and cooktops, four large sinks, and a long bar for serving. The other half of the room contained ten tables, each with swing-out seats for six. I remembered what I'd learned about the number of people who might be here eventually and wondered what would happen if the number exceeded sixty.

Tucked back in a corner of the kitchen I saw something that I'd seen before, something that seemed out of place here. It was similar to an olive press that I had seen at my L'Héritier grandparents' home. I walked over and looked at it. It was a manual press, made of wood, and stained as though it had been used. I looked around for anything that could be used to store olive oil and finally decided a small double-doored closet was the most likely place since I knew good olive oil needed to be kept out of the light. When I opened the doors, I saw four huge barrels, stacked two on top of two, with spigots near the bottom. I tapped on one and, from the sound, knew it was full. I wondered if I was going to be eating salads or cooking with olive oil.

I crossed the hallway again, commanded the door to open and light to turn on, and found myself standing at the entrance to a gymnasium or exercise room. All sorts of exercise equipment, some familiar, some strange, filled the room. I wondered why all the equipment was needed. Was I expected to do my workouts in the room? Why not outdoors, the way I preferred? I was puzzled once again but I decided not to worry about it until I had a complete picture of this strange place.

There were only two doors left now. I entered one and found myself in what had to be a nursery or play room for young children. I shrugged, wondering why such a large room with stuff for kids when there were no kids here, at least not yet. I walked back into the hallway and was about to enter the last room when I remembered what I had told Aimee.

I entered the last room and saw what might be called a living room, but without a TV or anything else like it, just arrangements of chairs, love-seats, and sofas. I wondered what it would be like when twenty

people were in it and there was nothing to entertain them. Maybe we would have to provide our own entertainment.

I walked back into the hallway and called Aimee.

“Aimee, is it almost daylight outside now,” I asked, standing in the middle of the hallway in front of the large doors to the outside and wanting to go out.

“Yes, David,” Aimee replied. “The sky is just beginning to turn light. The time is five fifty-eight. The sun will appear on the horizon in fifteen minutes.”

“What’s the date today?” I asked.

“What do you mean, David?” she responded.

“What’s the month and day of the year, of course?”

“David, you have not yet told me how the year is to be divided into time units. You must make that decision if you wish me to keep chronological records.”

“Oh, merde,” I answered, more than a little befuddled and exasperated. “That’s oh, shit, in case you didn’t understand it. Why can’t you make some decisions on your own? Why do I have to do everything?”

“David, do not act like a child,” Aimee responded in a voice like a mother chiding a child. “Everything is yours to decide. I can only assist you when I am provided with measurement decisions. You must decide how to divide the three-hundred and sixty-seven days in the year into months.”

I was about to tell her to use twelve months when I realized what she had said about how many days there were in a year.”

“Aimee, you’re mistaken. There are three-hundred sixty-five days in a year and three sixty-six every fourth year. That’s called a leap year.”

“No, David. I am not mistaken. There are three-hundred and sixty-seven days in the year. Every seventh year, there are three sixty-eight.”

That made absolutely no sense to me but I didn't have any idea how to resolve the conflict. I decided to leave it alone until my mind was clearer.

“Well, let me make the decisions tomorrow. I'm not thinking my best yet so I want you start a list of the decisions for me to make and we'll take care of them tomorrow.”

“Yes, David.”

“Right now, I want something to eat and drink and I want to go outside. If I go out the front door, how do I get back in?”

“Just say ‘Open,’ and the door will open for you, David. Or just walk toward the door. It will open when you are close to it. Remember, you are in control of everything here.”

At her instructions, I went back down the hallway to the kitchen and found the dispensary for juice and nutrition bars. I took a big swallow of the juice and found that it was the same thing I'd already had. The nutrition bars were dispensed unwrapped and slightly warm. Cautiously, I took a bite of one bar and found that it was surprisingly good. I guessed it was a mixture of fruit and nuts and grains. I took two more and looked for a pocket to put them in. Since my clothing did not have pockets, I went back up the hallway, nutrition bars in one hand, juice bottle in the other. I stood before the front doors, said “Open, says me,” and the two doors retracted into their side pockets. I walked outdoors for a short distance and then stopped.

I couldn't believe what I saw.

Chapter Nine

Aimee had told me the truth! I was on the side of a mountain, looking out over an ocean or sea quite some distance below me. She had said we were located on the side of a mountain surrounded by an inland sea. I couldn't see land anywhere on the horizon so I had to accept what she had said as the truth. She said she was incapable of lying to me and now I believed her.

I turned around to survey my surroundings. I had been thinking that I was in a large building somewhere but I was wrong. The big doors from which I had exited were in a sheltered area in the side of the mountain, sunk back in the rock about two or three meters. They would not be seen except by someone standing directly in front of the doors. All of the rooms had been built underground but there had been nothing except lack of windows to make me think the complex was in a cave.

I also had to accept Aimee's assertion that the entire complex was intended for ten couples and eventually their children. That meant someone intended me to be here for years, maybe for the rest of my life. With Anna, I might; without her, I was leaving as quickly as I could to search for her.

I was standing on a large natural stone patio with four different levels, another large level about four feet lower, a smaller one about head high, and a much smaller one some twenty or so feet higher. The whole area was smooth and looked like it had been carved out of existing rocks. There were multiple steps leading from one level to another. I climbed up the steps to the top level and looked around.

As far as I could see, there were no boats on the sea. I saw sea birds down near the water and others higher up in the air. There were no signs of any other human beings, no airplanes, no con trails, nothing but a few wispy white clouds against a beautiful blue sky.

I looked as far as I could see on the mountain side. I looked up the mountain and all I saw was more trees. I looked down the mountain. Again, I saw no signs of any buildings or roads, just trees of various kinds. Almost the entire mountain seemed to be covered by green trees but in a few places I could see outcroppings of gray rock.

Among the trees close by, I saw tree trunks that were as large as any I'd ever seen, a few almost unbelievably large. In the different colors of green, I saw some trees that I knew were deciduous and some that were coniferous. Most of the deciduous were light green and looked as though they were just putting out fresh leaves. That meant I was in a place which had seasons. I had left Arizona in the early fall and I couldn't comprehend how I now could be where it was spring. Perhaps I had changed hemispheres.

I could hear birds showing off in all directions. The mountain side seemed to be filled with raucous birds flitting from tree to tree and each showing off with a different song. I focused on a few and couldn't call their names. The birds were all small birds, none as big as a crow, but their colors were strange to me. I saw one with a black body and a spread display of red tail feathers which seemed to be courting a solid black bird, maybe a female. I had never studied ornithology but Grandfather had taught me the common names of the ones where I was raised. None of the birds I saw looked like them.

I turned to face the sun, which was just peeking over the horizon in what I assumed was the east. That meant south was on my right side, north was on my left side, and west was behind me. Since the cave complex was to my left that meant the cave faced to the south and was located on the sheltered side of the mountain. I hoped I had thought that through correctly but with my mind still not working at its best, I wasn't sure.

I stood there, eating the last of the nutrition bars and drinking the last of the juice, and tried to decide whether to explore up the mountain or down the mountain. Down won. I was about to leave the patio when I realized that I was armed with nothing but my knives. I had no idea whether there might be dangerous animals so I decided to go back to the weapons storage room and see what appealed to me.

Back in the armory I stood looking at all the weapons and then realized I could ask Aimee if there were any dangerous animals on the mountain.

"Aimee, can you hear me?" I asked.

"Yes, David. Inside, I can always hear you. Outside, I can hear you only in an area close by."

"Good. Are there any dangerous animals on this mountain?"

"David, there are no large dangerous animals on the mountain. There are some small ones which might be dangerous but they will probably flee from you. However, there are large dangerous animals on the mainland. Some are extremely dangerous and, if you venture onto the mainland, you must be prepared to defend yourself."

"Are there any poisonous snakes?" I asked.

“No, David. There are snakes but they are not poisonous. Some can cause minor injuries by their bites.”

“I’m going to take a spear and a machete with me when I explore. I don’t know if there are trails going down the mountain and I might need a machete to hack my way through the underbrush. I’ve never tried to throw a spear but one will make a good walking staff on rough ground. Do you think that’s all I might need?”

“If you are going to be gone for a long time, I suggest you take something to eat and drink, David.”

“OK, thanks, but is there something I can use to carry them. These damn clothes don’t have any pockets.”

She told me where to find a backpack and I think she sounded like a mother talking to a little child.

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I returned late in the afternoon, tired but feeling better in my head. I was hungry and thirsty again so I stopped by the kitchen for a couple of nutrition bars and a bottle of juice. I hoped Aimee wouldn’t mind me eating and drinking in front of her.

As soon as I walked into Aimee’s room, I saw her smile at me and then say hello. I couldn’t help but smile back at her and return her greeting.

She wasn’t dressed the same. She had on a something that was supported only by thin straps over her shoulders. In front, I saw the soft swells of the tops of her breasts. The dress had a pattern which seemed to be blue and gold leaves. Again, she was a beautiful woman.

“I like your dress, Aimee,” I said. “May I see all of it?”

“I am glad you like it, David,” she answered. “Once I learn your tastes in women’s attire, I will always dress to please you.”

The image in the monitor pulled back so that I could see Aimee from head to toe. She had on a dress something like the sun dress my mother sometimes wore when we were working outdoors. It covered

her loosely from the tops of her breasts to just below her knees. Except for two thin straps, her beautiful woman's shoulders were bare. Her calves were slim and youthful. Her feet were bare. I remembered how Anna had painted her toe nails for me. Aimee's were natural.

"The next time we meet, perhaps you will paint your finger and toe nails, Aimee," I said. "A soft red would be pretty on you."

"I will remember, David."

I wondered what she looked like under the dress. Was she wearing a bra and panties? Why would she? Should I ask to see her nude?

"Aimee, I don't want to make you uncomfortable but may I see what you look like under that dress? You've seen me naked. I want to see you."

"May I see you naked again, David?" she asked. "You first."

I took off my boots, tunic, and tights and then sat down in the chair in front of her. I deliberately spread my legs and let my testicles hang down between them. My penis was warm and slightly swollen and hung down over my testicles. I wanted her to see me.

Perhaps she liked my display. She looked between my legs for a split second, smiled at me again, pushed one strap off her shoulder, pushed the other one, and the dress fell in a puddle around her feet. I felt the same sense of wonder I had felt the first time I saw Anna naked. Aimee was a smaller woman but she was just as beautiful as Anna. Her breasts were small like Anna's, high on her chest without any drooping. Her waist was perfectly proportioned, much smaller than either her chest or hips. Her hips were wide enough for a woman's role in child bearing. Her legs were just as perfect and seemed to be as hairless as Anna's had been after she shaved. In the center of all her beauty, there was a small patch of dark pubic hair. From her image I guessed her age might be about twenty.

"Would you assume the pose, Aimee?" I asked.

"What?" she said, then, "Oh," and she smiled and stood with her legs together and her arms outstretched to each side. I stood there drinking in her beauty for a moment before I asked her to change the

pose. The Vitruvian woman was more engrossing than the Vitruvian man any day, I thought.

“Now, would you turn around and assume the two poses again, please?”

Her derriere was absolute perfection, high and tight and flawless in its curves. I waited until she had spread her legs and lifted her arms in the second pose.

“Nice ass, Aimee.”

“I am glad you like it, David,” she replied and turned around to face me again. “Would you like me to remain nude or do you want me to put back on my dress?”

“I think you should put your dress back on, Aimee,” I said.

She reached down and, in a flash of arms, the dress was draped over her again.

“Are we even now, David?” she asked.

“Yes, Aimee. Did it bother you to let me see you nude?”

“No, David. Did it bother you?”

“Yes, Aimee, it bothered me. I responded as any young male would to the sight of a beautiful woman in the nude. If you had not put your dress back on, I would have had an erection again.”

“I liked seeing you with an erection, David. You have a big beautiful penis. You are a very sexy man.”

“Thank you, Aimee. Who taught you how to please a man?”

“All women know how to please men, David.”

“Aimee, I will probably masturbate before I go to sleep tonight. Do you know why I will do that?”

“Yes, David. I know that young males are constantly in need of relief from all the testosterone and semen that their testicles produce on a

daily basis. It is perfectly normal for you to masturbate to be relieved of that sexual tension; is it not?"

"Yes, Aimee, it is. Would it bother you if I looked at you and masturbated? Would you mind letting me look at your pussy while I jack off? Do you know those words?"

"Yes, I suppose I know all the words to describe what a man does when he masturbates. I also know the words to describe what a woman does when she masturbates. I can show you images of a male or a female masturbating. I can also show you images of a male and a female as they are having coitus or, if you prefer, I will call it making love. If you wish me to use the most common phrase, I will call it fucking."

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised at the extent of her knowledge but her ability to show me those images was surprising.

"Why do you have such knowledge, Aimee? I mean, why do you have those images?"

"David, one of my roles here is to be a teacher. I can teach mathematics, music, chemistry, physics, or a great many other subjects. If you conclude that a young male needs instruction about sex, I can talk to him and answer his questions and even show him images of couples having sex. I can do the same for young girls. I can teach a group of young males and females about sex and use images to reinforce my lecture. If you would rather teach them yourself, that is your decision."

I decided it was time to change the subject. I could tell that my penis still wanted to swell to an erection and would want me to satisfy it. I decided to tell her what happened on my way back up the mountain.

"Aimee, on my way climbing back up here, I had to shit. I was beginning to sweat so I stripped naked and went to a small stream beside the trail. Damn, that water was cold on my feet."

She looked at me with a slight smile but didn't say anything.

"After I finished, I used my hand and cold water to clean myself. That water was really cold."

She still didn't say anything. She just looked at me as though she was wondering where I was going with my story.

"My foot slipped on a rock and I sat down in the stream. That water was really, really cold."

She still didn't say anything. She just smiled wider.

"That water was really, really, really cold, Aimee. My dick sounded retreat and my balls tried to crawl back up in my belly."

That finally got to her and she laughed or maybe chuckled, whatever it is that women do when they try to suppress their laughter.

On my way back up the mountain, I had decided to tell Aimee about the incident to see how she reacted. Her actions, especially her seeming sense of humor, were so damn human. I wondered again what or who Aimee was.

"Did that really happen, David?" she asked.

"Yes, Anna, it did, exactly the way I described it. You're beautiful when you laugh. I hope you'll laugh with me lots of times."

She frowned and didn't say anything for a moment. I wondered why.

"David, you just called me Anna," she said.

I felt ashamed of myself and felt I should apologize. Whatever Aimee was, I believed she was a woman and I didn't want to hurt her.

"Aimee, I'm sorry. I was thinking about Anna on my way back up the mountain. I wanted her to be with me to see this beautiful place. Can you understand when I say I love Anna with all my being and I can never be at peace until I'm with her again?"

"I will always try to understand you, David, and I am not offended. I understand how important Anna is to you and I hope you are soon with her again."

"I hope so too, Aimee. I like you but Anna and I are one and it's difficult for me to be away from her. Now could we talk about something else?"

“Yes, David.”

“I’ve been wondering why you want me to decide how to measure time and days and months. Is it because you need someone to make that decision so you can maintain a record of everything that happens here?”

“Yes, David. That is the reason. One of my functions is to be custodian of your history.”

“Aimee, I want to tell you how to use directions. If I stand facing the rising sun, that is the east. Then the direction to my left is north, the direction to my right is south, and the direction behind me is west. Do you understand?”

“Yes, David, The sun will rise in the east and set in the west.”

“Right. Now, from the trees just leafing out, I believe we must have seasons here. Is that correct?”

“Yes, David.”

“I want to name the seasons. Is that OK?”

“Yes, David, but you do not need to ask my permission. The decision is yours.”

“OK, the four seasons of the year will be spring, summer, fall or autumn, and winter. Winter will begin on the shortest day of the year and that will be the first day of the year. Spring will begin on the vernal equinox which is exactly half way between the shortest and longest days. Summer will begin on the longest day of the year. Fall or autumn will begin on the autumnal equinox which is exactly half way between the longest and the shortest day of the year. Do you understand?”

"Yes, David, I understand when you divide the year into four seasons. But the shortest day of the year in one hemisphere occurs on the same day as the longest in the other hemisphere. When the season is winter in one hemisphere, it is summer in the other."

I thought about that for a minute. I was glad she was able to help me make decisions.

"Aimee, let us assume that what I said applies only to where I am located now. What's wrong with my ideas about the seasons?"

"There is nothing wrong with your names for the seasons, David. However, if I follow your instructions, the year will begin on one day in one hemisphere and half a year later in the other. That will be confusing. It is easy to resolve. There are two hemispheres, one on each side of the equator. What do you want to call them?"

"The northern and the southern hemispheres, of course. The northern hemisphere is the one I'm in now. The other is the southern hemisphere."

"If we let the year begin on the first day of winter in the northern hemisphere and the first day of summer in the southern, the year will then begin on the same day for the whole world."

"OK, that's the way we'll do it. Year one is this year. I arrived about one-fourth of the way through the year. Now I want to divide the year into months. If there is anything wrong with what I say, I want you to tell me and help me make the right decision. Can you always do that?"

"Yes, David, that is one of my functions."

"Are you sure that there are three-hundred and sixty-seven days in the year? How do you know that?"

"David, I have an immense amount of knowledge about a great many things. I don't know how I know what I know but I know that I know. Is that confusing?"

"No, Aimee, I'm the same way. Now, each month will be thirty days so twelve months will last for three hundred and sixty days. The other seven days will be called Festival when nobody works. Festival comes just before the end of the year. Is that OK?"

"Yes, David. Today is the thirteenth day of the fourth month. The season is spring. The year is one. The date is 13,04,01. The time is 16:45."

“Show off,” I whispered.

“Yes, David. If you mean that I like to display my knowledge, you are correct. But remember, I am incapable of lying to you or deceiving you. Also remember that my primary purpose is to assist you and provide information to you. Do you want to name the months?”

“No, that can wait until I’m thinking better. I’ve got a million questions for you.”

“I will try to answer them if you ask them one at a time, David,” she said and giggled. That’s the only way to describe the sound she made. I couldn’t help but smile at her and shake my head in wonder.

“Aimee, are we on an island or are we connected to the mainland? When I looked around, all I saw was water.”

“The mountain where we are is connected to the mainland, David. There is an isthmus to the north-west. It is a narrow rocky connection that is under water in some places at high tides. When storms come, the waves may break over the entire isthmus.”

I knew the storms could not be as bad as hurricanes. If they were, the huge trees could never have survived. I had seen no storm damage on my exploration down the mountain.

“Aimee, while I was exploring, I saw some rabbits and squirrels and some feces which leads me to believe there are deer or goats here. Is that right?”

“There are lots of animals here, David. Would you please describe the animals?”

“Well, both are hooved animals and both have horns on their head. Is that sufficient?”

“Yes, David, I will show you images of the two animals here which have both hooves and horns.”

The screen blinked into images of a deer and a goat. The deer looked like the deer back home. The goat had the same forest coloration as the deer, not the black and white mixture on goats I had seen. As usual, the deer was bigger than the goat.

“How big are they, Aimee?”

“You have not yet told me how to measure size, David.”

“Well, damn. Here we go again. Assume I’m exactly two meters tall. There are one hundred centimeters in a meter. Now can you answer, just in general terms?”

“Yes, David. The deer will vary in size depending upon age and sex. None of the male deer are as tall as you. Almost all the deer can walk under your outstretched arm, except males with large racks. The goats also vary. They are about half as tall as you, about one meter.”

“Can you create an image with me standing between the two animals, Aimee?”

In another blink, I saw myself on the monitor, naked with my arms outstretched in the Vitruvian man pose, with a deer under my arm on one side and a goat on the other. Except for the goat’s coloration, we all looked normal.

“Aimee, do you know what other animals are on this mountain? Could you show me images of them? No birds or reptiles, just animals?”

I blinked again and the screen was filled with animals. I saw a squirrel, a rabbit, a beaver, a badger, a bobcat, a chipmunk, and a couple of small mammals that I couldn’t identify. I didn’t see any large dangerous animals like bears or cougars. I didn’t expect to see any animals like buffalo which lived in the plains.

“Aimee, do you know how to catch rabbits? My grandmother in France served me rabbit a number of times. It was always delicious.”

“Yes, David, I know. Would you like me to show you some devices which will catch rabbits? A snare is the simplest one.”

“No, not now. Tomorrow morning I’m going fishing. Maybe tomorrow afternoon, I’ll learn how to set rabbit snares. Aimee, I followed a trail all the way down to the coast. It had lots of branches. I know someone must have been here quite some time creating this place and the trails. I also encountered someone on my way down the mountainside and he told me something about the people who built this place.”

“I do not understand, David,” she said, and her face showed it. “I know there is no one else here but you.”

‘Oh, I didn’t say he was human. He was the cutest, most intelligent....ground squirrel or chipmunk I’ve ever seen. I’m not sure which he was. He was bigger than any I’ve ever seen. I named him Lightning because the broken stripe down his tail looked like a lightning bolt.’

She smiled at my attempt at humor but she didn’t say anything.

“I was walking through an outcropping of big rocks when I heard him chattering. He was standing up beside the trail with his front paws out like he was begging for something. The only thing I had was the nutrition bars so I cut off a little piece. He watched me, then ran around in a circle, and, when I held out my hand to him, he came and took the piece out of my hand. He was the cutest little guy...maybe not so little because I’ve never seen a chipmunk as big as he was.”

“What did he tell you, David?” she asked.

“Well, I could assume that he was so smart that he came up with his way of begging all by himself. I think it’s more likely that someone who had a lot of patience and enjoyed watching him as much as I did, someone who liked and was kind to animals, taught him. I don’t know who the man or woman was but I think we have a lot in common. Lightning was a fascinating little creature.”

“What else did you see, David?”

“Well, there are lots of little streams running down the mountain and I found a grove of bamboo close to the bottom. Some of it was as big as my thigh and some was as little as my penis. If I plant a garden, I won’t have any problem getting running water to it. I can run it through bamboo to the plants. I’d love to have some home-grown tomatoes.”

“Are you going to plant a garden, David? There are lots of different kinds of seeds in the seed storage room. I can pick out some good tomato seeds if you will plant them.”

“Who knows?” I answered. “I don’t know what I’m going to do, especially if Anna’s not with me.”

“Perhaps she will be one of the ones who are yet to come, David. Please do not despair of seeing her again. I want you to stay here and to be content.”

“I can’t be content without her, Aimee.”

“What else did you see that you liked?” she asked and I knew she was trying to change the subject this time.

“Well, there’s a big lake close to the bottom of the mountain. The bamboo grove is just above the lake. I know the lake’s fresh water because I drank from it. I stood on a rock shelf and watched some big fish swimming around. They looked long and slim, like they might be game fish. I’m going fishing tomorrow. I just need some vegetables to go with my fish. Do you know where I can find some?”

“Yes, David. Just off the terrace to the west there is a place where lots of leaves have accumulated and turned to mulch. There are potatoes growing in the mulch. I do not know whether they are big enough to eat yet.”

“What else, Aimee? I saw some wild plants that looked like dandelion greens and I saw some wild onions. I just don’t know what is edible around here and I don’t want to make myself sick.”

“David, the tablets on each side of me all have a camera on one side and a screen on the other. If you take a picture of the wild plants, your tablet will tell you if it is edible and how to prepare it. That is one reason why the tablets have been left here for you.”

“Aimee, I went all the way down to the sea and I ended up where the coast is very rocky. When the weather gets warm, I’d like to go for a swim if I’m still here. Is there a beach anywhere, you know, a quiet sheltered spot where there’s sand?”

“David, the coastline is quite varied, from cliffs to rocky outcroppings, to beaches. There is more than one small beach. I can show you a map of the mountain and the path to follow to the nearest one.”

“Aimee, there’s an old olive press and some olive oil in the kitchen. Are there any olive trees here?”

“Yes, David. There is a grove of olive trees on the west side of the mountain just before you arrive at the isthmus. Olives are picked from the end of the ninth month until the second month of the following year. The olive oil in the kitchen will have to last until then.”

“Thank you, Aimee. Tomorrow night I’m going to have a dinner with fish sautéed in olive oil, new potatoes, and fresh onions and greens barely wilted in olive oil. I can’t wait.”

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My first day at wherever I was had been long, confusing, and exhausting. I felt myself falling back into the muddled state I had been in when I arrived so I went to bed at eight o’clock. I visited the toilet for a good piss, went to the bathing chamber for a long hot shower, choose the sleeping chamber closest to Aimee’s room as my own, stripped naked, and crawled in one of the three alcoves, I spread a blanket over my hips and legs, turned on my left side as usual, and shut my eyes.

But sleep wouldn’t come. My mind kept thinking about what had happened to me within the last day. I had been transported from Islamistan to a cave dwelling on a mountainside near an inland sea and I had no idea how I had got here or where I was. I had accepted a computerized image of a woman as my friend and helpmate. I had learned that I was the first of ten males and ten females expected to stay here and eventually have children. I couldn’t see any signs of human habitation and that was unbelievable. But where was Anna? The place is a paradise but without her it’s a hell. Anna! Anna, what am I going to do?

My mind went back to the first night we spent together in Flagstaff and as I began to think about the wonders of that night I forgot all my present mysteries. I thought of Anna, recalled the way I felt being with her, being in her, being part of her, and I knew I could not live without her.

I remembered how I had licked her pussy until I brought her to a bucking orgasm, how I almost immediately started licking her again, deliberately trying to bring her to such a high level of desire that she

would eagerly welcome my penis in her vagina, and how right and perfect and full of wonder it had felt when our bodies were finally joined together. I smiled when I remembered how I had felt when I let my beast loose on her and then very quickly learned that she had her own beast to release on me. After that, without ever taking my penis out of her, we awkwardly managed to roll over so she could ride me to another orgasm and then I fucked up into her and came again.

And after all that, we had joined together again and melted into one another or into one, whichever it was. I remembered something I wanted never to forget, knowing while we were one that she loved me and I loved her and that we were only whole when we were with each other. I had never heard or read of that feeling but I knew it was something real even if I couldn't understand it.

Now I lay in bed all by myself, one hand cupping my testicles, the other stroking my penis, tired but too horny to sleep, and wondering where Anna was. I realized that I was going to lose my erection if my thoughts wandered into thinking about what separated us. So I grabbed the memories of Saturday morning, how we bathed together and then played, then reveled in another good fuck, and finally how we both ate a couple of biscuits on our way to the mall about mid-morning to shop.

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Anna and I were entwined when I woke up. Her head was lower than mine and I could feel her warm breath on my chest and her hair tickling my chin. We were facing each other, my hand resting on her side, hers resting on my waist, our legs entangled, and in the center, my morning hard-on just touching her stomach.

Friday night, we had gone to sleep with me spooned up to her, my soft but distended penis pressed against the crack of her ass, and my right hand on her right breast. How perfect it had felt to go to sleep that way!

Now, I knew I had to get up and go piss. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to wake her up. I wanted to stay there, still groggy with sleep, feeling her breathing on me. I caught her hand in mine, eased it off my side, and pulled back away from her.

“Good morning, David,” she whispered.

“Good morning, Anna,” I whispered back. “I’ve got to go pee.”

“Me too,” she said “and then I want a good hot shower.”

“Yeah, that would be nice,” I said. “And I want to shave too. I don’t want to irritate your tender skin with my beard.”

Maybe the idea that my chin might be rubbing her somewhere was enough to get her engine started. She threw back the blanket and rolled out of the bed. The bathroom was on her side and I had no chance of beating her to the toilet. I followed her, watched as she sat there with her eyes closed and pissed and pissed, and I was afraid I couldn’t hold it listening to her. I considered peeing in the sink or maybe getting in the Jacuzzi and peeing there but I had no idea what she would think if I did it. Finally she finished, didn’t wipe herself, got up and went over into the Jacuzzi. I managed to hold it long enough to get in position over the commode and then I peed in absolute relief.

When I turned around, she was bent over with one hand in the water coming out of the spigot, waiting for it to warm. I stepped in the Jacuzzi behind her, grabbed her by both hips, and pressed my still-erect penis against the crack of her ass. She straightened up and I moved my hands from her hips up to her breasts. She put her hands over mine and we stood like that for a while before we started bathing.

Afterwards I shaved while she sat on the commode and watched me. Then we brushed our teeth, watching each other and trying not to smile, slobbering into the sink when we both gave in and grinned widely at each other.

As we went back in our bedroom, she asked me if I wanted to go get some breakfast. I shook my head no, picked her up, walked over to the bed, and dropped her.

“The only thing I’m hungry for is you,” I said, looking down at the feast spread before me.

I parted her legs and gave her another good licking. She pushed me down and gave me a good sucking. We played, goosed each other, bit each other on different good spots, and giggled and laughed for a while.

When we quieted down, she put her head on my stomach and played with my penis and testicles. I lay there while she rearranged my balls, while she inspected and licked and sucked on my penis, and while she milked it down and licked the head again and again.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Licking up your love drops,” she answered.

“I love you, Anna,” I said, as earnestly as I could. “Do you really like playing with me like this?”

“No, David, I don’t like it. I love it. I love your big balls and your big hard dick and your love drops. They taste sweet. Did you know that?”

I decided it was my turn. I rolled over and pushed her down, kissed her lips, her throat, both breasts, her navel, and last her little hairy patch. I snuggled up to her with my mouth on one hard nipple and played with her pussy with my fingers. Between sucking and finger-fucking, I teased her pussy lips until they were all wet and spread.

“David, are you going to take me shopping today,” she whispered, so low I almost didn’t hear her.

“Uh, huh,” I said, because my mouth was full.

“I really need to shop for some underwear. Is that OK?”

“Uh, huh,” I said because my lips were sucking on an erect nipple.”

“David, if you’ll promise to take me shopping for underwear, I’ll give you a present.”

“OK, I promise,” I said and resumed licking out her navel.

She pushed my head away, rolled over with her head still on the pillow, spread her legs, and poked her ass up in the air.

“There’s your present, David,” she whispered.

I knee walked behind her and looked down at what she was offering me. For a moment, I wondered if she was offering me her asshole. I didn't want it. If I had to choose, I wanted pussy.

“Bien, ma moitié, votre petite mimi is a little pussycat,” I said. “I think maybe I should call it a pussy cunt. May I have it?”

“Are you going to take me shopping?”

“Yeah!”

“For underwear?”

“Yeah!”

“OK. I know you really really love me. You may have it.”

I held my penis down, aimed it at the spot, and slid into her steaming depths in one long slide. Then I held her by both hips, pulled back until the head of my penis was just holding open the lips to her pussy, and slowly slid in again.

“Oh, that is so good, David,” she moaned. “So fucking good! Do you like it?”

“Oui, c'est tres bon.”

I eased in and out of her a few more times, then pulled her ass back against my thighs as close as possible, and watched as all of my penis disappeared into her. I held her tightly, looking down at my pubic hair almost hiding her asshole.

She let out a hissed exhalation of breath and groaned. I held her and pressed deeper into her.

“OK?”

“Yeah. Your French cousins were right about your big dick. Il ne casse rien? Merde! C'est vraiment magnifique.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“Yeah, I like it,” she whispered. “I’ll swear it’s in my stomach but I like it. Now fuck me.”

I shut my eyes and did what she told me to do. I fucked her in long slow strokes. I fucked her in rapid-fire strokes. I fucked her until I knew I was about to come and then I couldn’t stop fucking her and I squirted out again in the depths of my little pussycat.

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I was awakened later that night by a dream, an unusual wet dream. When I went to bed, the memory of Saturday morning in the hotel in Flagstaff with Anna had been enough to keep me aroused and I had masturbated to a powerful orgasm. Still, it had not emptied all my reserves and the wet dream had caused me to ejaculate a large mess of semen onto my chest and stomach. I found the washcloth I had used to wipe up before I went to sleep and then cleaned up from my second coming.

As soon as I became aware of what had happened, I tried to seize the dream which had accompanied the orgasm. As usual it was a jumbled bunch of fragments which had no basis in reality and which made no sense whatsoever. I tried to reconstruct enough of the dream to see if it had any meaning.

In my dream, I had my mouth on the pussy of some woman. I couldn’t remember whether it had been Anna or Aimee but it had been one or maybe both, maybe Anna/Aimee. I remembered having my hands next to my cheeks with my thumbs holding her labia stretched to each side to expose the sensitive flesh within. I remembered the smell and taste of her. And I remembered that my wide-open mouth was attached to her pussy like a lamprey is attached to a shark.

I also remembered that my tongue was in her vagina and, this is where the dream was really crazy and made no sense, my tongue was long enough to penetrate her vagina all the way to her cervix. I had been licking her cervix, trying to open it, so that I could enter. I couldn’t remember whether it was my sperm that wanted to enter her womb or maybe it was the whole of me but there was a definite memory of wanting to enter her.

Then I felt the internal muscles of Anna/Aimee convulsing on my tongue and, I suppose at the same time, my own wet dream orgasm

began. I distinctly remembered the wonderful rapture accompanying each pulse of our shared orgasm and the feeling of dissolving into something else.

And as usual, I woke up just seconds after the last throb in my penis and testicles. I wrapped my hand around my still-erect penis and held it until I came up and out of sleep, held it until I felt it begin to soften, and then dragged my fingers upward over my stomach and chest to be sure that I had not imagined the hot puddles of semen.

I tried to think what it all meant but I couldn't rationalize anything meaningful out of the dream. I lay there with my eyes closed, still breathing faster than normal from the orgasm, until the dream faded and all I could remember was that it was about me going down on either Aimee or Anna.

I threw the semen-soaked cloth out of the bed and lay there for a minute or two trying to go back to sleep and then I felt the need to piss. I rolled out of bed, staggered to the toilet, leaned against the wall with my left hand, held my penis with my right, pissed and pissed and reveled in being a man and in holding my penis to piss, and then staggered back to bed.

I couldn't go back to sleep. I wondered what it all meant. I had desperately wanted to live my life in peace and quiet with Anna. I had played out my part in another act of killing because I knew I could never live with myself if I did not avenge the deaths of my father and my mother. I counted the men I had killed in Mamoon, seven again after seven jihadists, five others, nineteen men in all. I had been trapped and had yielded to my unavoidable death and then, at the last second, I had been transported to a place that seemed like a paradise.

Wherever I was, it seemed that there was no one else in the world but me. I was evidently the first of a small group of men and women who would be living in this world. I knew I could gladly live out my life here with Anna. Without her I knew I had no life to live and I knew that I would let Big Boy cut another throat.

What did it all mean? Was there a purpose in my being here? What was my role in somebody's scheme? What was that scheme about? Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to prepare a home for me in a world that was like a paradise but I couldn't imagine why. I was tired

and lonely and desperately wanted to know what it was all about and I had no idea how to go about finding any answers.

I turned over on my left side, put one pillow under my head and another over my head, pulled the blanket up until it covered my shoulders, and curled up in a fetal position. Gradually the world faded away and I drifted off into sleep again.

Chapter Ten

I had thought that this strange new world was a primeval paradise. I was wrong. It now seemed that this world was primeval but hardly a paradise. It was a world ruled by evolution's cruel laws: kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, a world of the fang and the claw, a world where only the fittest survived.

A few days after my exploration to the bottom of the mountain and the coast, I went exploring again, this time to the top of the mountain. Again, I donned my Robin Hood outfit, strapped my knives around my waist, and, with a machete in a scabbard at my right hip, a throwing axe on my left hip, and a spear in my right hand, I set out for the peak. I found the trail going up the mountain that someone had cleared and followed it all the way.

I passed through shaded forested groves, over clear swift streams, around gray outcroppings of rocks, all beautiful but not remarkable, until I reached a saddle at the top. Between one peak to the north and another to the south, I found a huge translucent dome. When I walked closer, I saw what I believed was a huge array of solar panels under the dome, probably the source of power for my new home. I was awestruck by the engineering marvel someone had constructed. When the sun traveled from east to west, the dome would be in direct sunlight all day long. I walked all around the perimeter but saw no entrance to the dome.

I remembered that Aimee had said that the isthmus connecting the mountain to the mainland was on the northwest side so I climbed higher, up the north peak. I stood there, looking at the connecting jumble of rocks on the isthmus, at the gray-green strip of forest on the mainland and the misty blue-green mountains that filled the horizon. A whole world stretched out before me and Aimee had said I was the

only person in it. She had also said that nine more males and ten females would appear in the chair in her room. Was that our purpose? To populate this beautiful new world? Who was sending us here and why? I stood there, looking up at the beautiful blue sky and at the slowly moving clouds and at the sea and mountains before me and thought about my part in all the mystery.

I noticed a large bird gliding and circling above me and I wondered what it was. It had a wing-span something like a vulture but I couldn't tell how large it was. It seemed to be getting larger and I knew that it was coming closer to me. Out of curiosity, I lay down spread-eagled on a large rock, motionless, and watched it as it grew larger and larger, closer and closer. It seemed to be huge, with a wing-span wider than any bird I had ever seen. I felt a little fear at its strange behavior and that invoked the cool response in me. I slipped the machete out of its holster and laid it beside me, ready to use it if the bird attacked me.

Suddenly its gliding wings seemed to collapse. I saw feathers fly, as though it had hit something or maybe something had hit it. For a second, it tumbled away from me and then quickly started flapping, and slowly disappeared from sight. I lay there, wondering what had happened – just one more mystery to ponder. I got to my feet and walked slowly back down the mountain.

A few days later, I decided to explore the isthmus. I dressed the same as before, with my knives, a machete, and a throwing ax strapped to my waist, and a spear in my right hand. I set off down the trail that Aimee had told me would lead to the isthmus. Again, I passed through shaded forests, over more clear swift streams, and around outcroppings of gray layered stone. The many layers of stone meant that the mountain was an up thrust from some ancient sea bed. Finally I broke out of the forest and onto a jumble of large boulders where the isthmus joined the mountain.

As I went farther on the isthmus, the walking became easier and the boulders gradually gave way to dark sand. The south side of the isthmus was evidently struck by a current and that side was littered with driftwood. I saw more than a few dried carcasses of sea creatures and an occasional scattered skeleton of some land creature. In one area I found big and little hoof-prints that might have been made by pigs as well as disturbed areas of sand where they had rooted. Then a swiftly moving shadow caused me to look up.

Another large buzzard or raptor was gliding and circling overhead. I stood and watched it for a few minutes but it did not seem to be moving any closer to me.

I decided to tempt the creature by lying down in the sand, spread-eagled and still as a corpse. I wanted to see if it would approach and, if it did, whether it would hit some invisible barrier or be hit by something. My tactic worked. After a few minutes, I saw that the bird was moving closer and I gradually became cooler. I unsheathed my machete and my axe and put them close at hand on each side of me. I drilled in on the bird's image.

Suddenly I saw the bird fold its wings, extend its talons, and drop like a stone directly at me. I knew I was probably its target so I became as deeply cool as ever. At the last second, I grabbed the machete, rolled to one side, and, with all my strength, swung it at the bird. We both connected at the same time. I was struck by its suddenly-outstretched wing. My machete struck both the bird's legs and amputated them. The bird's wing strike sent me rolling across the sand and rocks. My machete strike made the bird go tumbling across the sand where it flapped and squawked piteously and tried to get airborne again. I quickly ran to the bird and, with one more strike, cut off its head. I knew I had been just a few feet from death.

I was amazed at the size of the raptor bird. I kicked the wings into a straight line and then roughly measured the wingspan. If each of my strides was approximately one meter long, the bird's wingspan was approximately six meters, about twenty feet. I found the bird's legs and looked at its talons. Even with its legs cut off, the talons looked longer than my fingers.

I stood there, breathing deeply, heart pounding, trying to calm down. I looked for more birds but saw none. I became angry that Aimee had not warned me of the danger but then I realized that I had not asked her any specific questions about dangerous birds and I had not told her I was going exploring on the isthmus. I knew I should cut short my exploration and go back home to question Aimee more carefully.

When I told Aimee what had happened, she was apologetic.

"Don't apologize, Aimee," I said. "It's entirely my fault. You responded truthfully about wild animals. I was at fault because I

didn't ask you about dangerous birds. I'm also at fault because I didn't tell you of my plans to venture out on the isthmus. I will try to ask you better questions in the future and I promise always to let you know where I'm going."

"Thank you, David, for taking the blame upon yourself," Aimee answered. "I am learning a great deal from interacting with you but I do not always understand your questions. Just please remember, my primary purpose here is to be of assistance to you in every way."

"And I will try to be very clear in what I ask of you," I said. "Now tell me why the first bird was prevented from attacking me and the second one was not. Why was I safe on top of the mountain and I was not safe on the isthmus?"

"David, I maintain a shield over the entire mountain. All small birds may pass through the shield without harm. All large birds may not. The shield disrupts the electrical impulses in their brains and they are rendered temporarily unconscious. Most recover with no harm and fly away."

"I saw evidence of wild pigs on the isthmus, Aimee, probably a sow and a bunch of little porkers. You did not include them in the images of animals on the mountain. Why not?"

"The wild pigs are very dangerous, David. The shield is only over the mountain, not out onto the isthmus. Many large wild animals dangerous to you venture out on the isthmus. If they try to cross the shield to the mountain, they are rendered unconscious by a disruption of the electrical impulses in their brain. Most learn from the result and do not attempt a crossing more than a few times."

"You say it does not harm them. If I can lure some of the little porkers into chasing me into the shield, would it serve as a trap so I could have roasted suckling pig?"

"Perhaps, David. The shield will not permit entry of any small dangerous animal to the mountain. If you drag it across the barrier, it will recover in a few minutes so you must be ready to kill it yourself."

"Thanks, Aimee. Now, why was I able to pass through the barrier without knowing of its existence?"

“David, I cannot anticipate all of your questions. You could pass through because I have given you permission to go anywhere you wish. Remember, you are in full control here; I am only your assistant. You are the master; I am only your servant.”

“No, Aimee, you’re also my friend,” I said, and meant it.

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“David, wake up!”

I struggled to come out of a deep dreaming sleep. Then Aimee called out to me again and I quickly became alert.

“David, someone else has arrived. Please come to my room. I need you.”

“I’m coming, Aimee,” I yelled, and rolled out of bed. I glanced at the clock above the door and saw that the time was just after midnight. I ran from my sleeping chamber into the hallway and then to the doorway into Aimee’s room. In the few seconds that elapsed, I heard two voices: a man’s voice speaking in a language I couldn’t understand and Aimee’s voice, speaking what seemed like the same language.

I had almost given up hope that anyone else would be joining me. As the thirtieth day after my arrival approached, I was increasingly eager to have company. I desperately wanted Anna to join me, even though I had no reason to think that was likely. Then as more days passed, and the thirty-seventh was looming, I began to think that there would not be another arrival. Now I knew that someone else had arrived and it was a man, not Anna.

In Aimee’s room, I saw a young man or boy on his hands and knees beside the recliner. He struggled to push himself up and then, holding on to the recliner, to stand erect. He was naked and his penis was erect, as mine had been when I arrived. I assumed that, like me, he urgently needed to piss. From his small patch of pubic hair, I guessed his age as about sixteen. His head and body were weaving around and his eyes seemed unable to focus on anything.

The urgency in Aimee’s voice when she called me had triggered my cool response. I had been ready to use my heightened reflexes to

protect her but, when I saw there was no danger, I breathed deeply a couple of times and relaxed and let the cool response begin to fade.

“I asked him to stay in the recliner until I called you, David,” Aimee said. “He would not listen. He says he has to urinate but he cannot stand up. Can you help him?”

I went to the young man, held him by the shoulders, and stooped a little to get my face in front of his. He blinked rapidly and finally looked at me. His eyes were an unusual shade of green. He seemed unable to focus on me.

“Can you understand English?” I asked him.

He took a second or two before replying. **“Yes, I spe...I speak English.”**

“Good,” I said. “I’m going to carry you to the toilet so you can piss. Then I’m going to bring you back here and Aimee and I will help you to feel better. Is that OK?”

His head bobbed around and then he nodded to me. **“Yes, I’ve got to pee,” he said. “I’ve got to go real bad.”**

I scooped him up in my arms. His head fell backwards and I told him to put his arms around my neck. He tried and managed to hang on to me while I carried him back out in the hallway and to the toilet. Once there and in front of a urinal, I lowered him so his feet were on the floor, with me behind him holding him up.

“OK, let it go,” I said.

He put both arms downward toward his genitals and I assumed he was holding his erect penis down so he could piss. He grunted once and then I heard his stream hitting in the urinal. I held him while he emptied his bladder and then sighed a couple of times in relief.

I didn’t even try to see if he could stand or walk. I picked him up in my arms again, took him back to Aimee’s room, and put him down in the recliner. For the first time, he looked at me intently, recognized that I was naked, glanced down at my genitals, and back at my face. Then he looked at the image of Aimee on the monitor. She was wearing a different outfit again, this time a colorful Chinese-looking dress which came up high on her slim throat. She was beautiful as always.

“David, would you let me talk to him?” Aimee asked, looking at me. “Perhaps he will be more willing to cooperate with me.”

I knew what she wasn’t saying, that he would probably be more willing to respond favorably to an attractive woman than he would be to a big man whom he might fear.

“Sure, Aimee,” I responded. “You talk to him. I’ll help with him when you ask me.”

She turned back to the young man, smiled at him with the same warm smile she had used on me, and asked him his name.

“What is your name?”

“Iain,” he answered. “Iain O’Connor. I’m from Ireland. Who’re you?”

“Iain, my name is Aimee,” she answered. “The man standing beside you is David. You can relax. We are both friendly. We want to help you feel better now. We will answer all your questions later.”

“I hope so,” he said. “I feel miserable.”

“Iain, you are probably not feeling well but that is simply because of your long journey. You will be back to normal in a day or so. Can you describe how you feel? I can give you medication to help you feel better.”

“Well, I ache all over and I think I’ve got a fever and I can’t think straight. I’m sleepy too. Have I been drugged?”

I stood there looking at him while his attention was focused on Aimee. He was an extraordinarily-beautiful young man, maybe somewhere around sixteen. I remembered that Mother said that I was a beautiful boy and I didn’t like it. I had thought men were supposed to be handsome, not beautiful, but beautiful was the best way to describe Iain.

His dark-brown hair seemed to be groomed to the shape of his head and it probably never needed combing. His face was unusually beautiful but it was that of a boy becoming a man and would never be mistaken for a woman’s. He had a little-boy’s cute nose, a square

strong jaw and flawless skin without any pimples or imperfections. His full lips looked dry, even parched, as though he had been too long without anything to drink. His cheeks were pink but I knew that could be the effect of fever. I couldn't see any hair on his face, not even the stubble of whiskers, so I assumed he hadn't started shaving yet.

He wasn't fat at all but he looked a little soft. I couldn't see any underlying muscles when he moved. I saw no evidence of hard work or athletics. His body was still that of a young man in every way. He had the typical young man's broad shoulders, slender waist, narrow hips, and slim arms and legs. He was well tanned except for a few inches of white around his hips. I could tell that he usually wore something like a Speedo in the sun, not the long baggies that most young guys I knew wore.

He had a neat little patch of pubic hair just above his penis but I couldn't see any on his testicles or between his legs. Then I realized that I also couldn't see any hair on his arms or legs. With the dark hair on his head, I expected to see the same color hair on his forearms and calves. I was still cool enough to zoom in and look closer at the skin on his arms and legs. There was absolutely no noticeable hair anywhere except for his head and his pubis.

I looked back at his penis and testicles, wondering if maybe he had just started into puberty. His testicles were certainly the size of a grown man's. I couldn't judge the size of his penis. It had looked like it was average in size when it was erect. It was soft now but still looked full and distended. The skin on his uncircumcised penis looked strangely white against his dark leg. I saw the palms of his hands and then glanced at the bottom of his feet. Both looked soft, as though they had never been exposed to anything hard. He looked like he had led a sheltered life.

I looked down at my own body, at the faint scars from scratches on my chest and stomach and the iliac veins and arteries running down my stomach into my legs. When I arrived, I had been partially tanned like Iain except that my white middle extended almost to my knees. Now, after thirty or so days of working outdoors totally nude, scratching out a garden among the rocks, my white area had darkened to the same color as the rest of my body. I had deliberately chosen to work without anything on my feet and they were rapidly becoming callused enough to be comfortable without shoes.

Anna had said I was a handsome man but I didn't think I was. My body was far better than that of most men but I had worked at making it like that for years. Weather permitting, I now worked out every day in the sun. I was especially pleased with the muscles in my shoulders and biceps and the strength they gave me. My face was symmetrical enough but I didn't think it could be called handsome, certainly not beautiful like Iain's.

"Iain, you have not been drugged," Aimee said, still smiling at him. "Your ataxia and aches and confused mental state are the result of your long journey. They are temporary. Sleep is probably the best remedy. I can give you some medication to alleviate those conditions and a mild sedative to help you sleep. What do you want me to do?"

"What's ataxia?" he asked, his head still weaving unsteadily.

I had been wondering too. "It is simply dizziness, Iain," she answered.

"I think I'd like to sleep some more," he said. "I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"David, would you give Iain the medications?" she asked. "I will give him a bottle of juice to aid in swallowing. Encourage him to drink as much as he can. He seems a little dehydrated."

I looked in the receptacle under Aimee's image and found the pills and another liter bottle of juice. Iain was cooperative. He swallowed the five pills one at a time and then kept drinking until all of the juice was gone. Finally he handed the bottle back to me.

"Iain, I'm going to put you in the bedroom with me," I said. "There are three beds so you'll have one of your own. I'm going to put you in my bed for a few minutes while I make up one just for you. I like to sleep in a bed with fresh linen on it, don't you?"

He nodded but then his head kept bobbing and his eyes kept closing.

"Iain, David and I will watch over you," Aimee said. "If no one else is in the bedroom when you wake up, please do not try to stand up by yourself. Just call me or David and we will help you."

I let him stand up by himself but, when I saw how unsteady he was, I scooped him up and carried him to my sleeping chamber. He didn't

protest when I put him down in my bed and then put fresh linen on another. I think he was already asleep when I carried him to his own bed.

I went back to Aimee's room. Iain's behavior had puzzled me.

"Thank you, David, for being so kind to Iain," she said as soon as I walked in her room. "Perhaps that is to be one of your jobs here, to help with each new arrival."

"Il n'y a pas de quoi," I said, and then paused for a moment, thinking.

"What is the matter, David?" Aimee asked.

"Aimee, what was the first thing I asked you when I arrived?"

"You asked where you were."

"Iain didn't do that, Aimee. I think maybe he knew he was coming here. What do you think?"

"I will leave all speculation up to you, David."

"Well, I'm going back to my own bed. I'll probably hear him if he wakes up but would you monitor him too?"

"Yes, David. That is one of my responsibilities."

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The first morning after Iain's arrival, I left him still sleeping and asked Aimee to monitor him. I wanted to check my rabbit traps early. The one time I had waited until later in the day, I found enough fur at one of the traps to tell me that a predator, maybe a bobcat, had got there before I did. I didn't want that to happen again.

I followed my usual route, trying to move as quietly as possible, holding my bow with an arrow notched. My skill with a bow and arrows was much improved but I had made only one kill so far. When I tried, I usually wasted too much time looking for my arrow. This time I didn't even see anything to shoot at.

I disabled each rabbit trap as I checked it, knowing I wouldn't be back the next day. Again, I had good luck in my traps. I had two kills, both grown rabbits. I used Little Boy to gut them and then hurried back home.

I put the rabbits in the kitchen cooler, grabbed a nutrition bar, a Nutty Buddy as I now called them, and some juice and went to Aimee's room.

I heard Aimee and Iain talking when I approached her door and this time they were speaking English. I didn't want to be caught eavesdropping so I walked in. Iain was in the recliner and it was raised almost upright. He was steady and seemed alert. He turned toward me as soon as I walked in.

"Hello, David," he said. "Thank you for taking care of me last night."

"That's one of my jobs," I said. "How do you feel this morning?"

He smiled broadly and his smile was almost as captivating as Aimee's.

"I'm much better, thank you. I'm still achy but I'm not dizzy and I can think lots better."

"He woke up about thirty minutes ago," Aimee said. "I saw that he could walk without difficulty so I told him to go pee and then come in here with me. He has already had a nutrition bar and some juice. We have been getting acquainted."

"Yeah, but I'm still hungry. Can I have another nutrition bar? They're good."

"Sure," I said. "Go get it and then come back here. Aimee and I need to talk to you first and then I'll show you around the place."

He jumped out of the chair and almost ran out the door to the hallway, yelling, "Can I see outdoors too? I want to see everything!"

I watched his naked white butt disappear and then turned to Aimee.

"Aimee, give him clearance to everything except weapons and tools and the door at the end of the hallway. Let him go outdoors anytime he wants to."

“Yes, David.”

“Have you got his measurements yet?”

“Yes, David. He was most eager to cooperate with me, except that he could hardly stand still and he kept grinning while I was getting his measurements. I had to tell him to stop smiling and to open his eyes wider so I could scan his irises. He even kissed me when I was getting his fingerprints.”

“Would you say he was having fun, Aimee?” I asked.

“Yes, David. He seems to enjoy everything. Is that strange, David?”

“I don’t know, Aimee. It just makes me think even more that he knew where he was coming.”

Aimee held her finger to her mouth and looked toward the door. I understood. Iain was about to come back.

I spent the rest of the day with Iain. I gave him a tour of the place I already called home and he was fascinated by everything. When we came to the weapons storage room, I asked him to open the door. He tried but he was as baffled as I had been at first. When he gave up, I couldn’t resist saying “Open, says me.” The door quietly slid into its pocket.

“Iain,” I said, “Aimee has given you permission to open all the doors here except the one at the far end of the hallway and the ones to the weapons storage and the tools storage. As soon as I know I can trust you, I’ll tell her to give you permission to open everything except the door at the end of the hallway. I’m the only one who can open that door. After you’ve been here a while, maybe I’ll let you go through that door with me.”

“Why? What’s behind that door?”

“My harem. My seventy-two virgins,” I said.

He looked at me and grinned widely. “Well, I’m good at cracking virgins,” he said.

“They’re all boys,” I said, without looking at him.

“You’re kidding me; aren’t you?” he said. I just smiled and he smiled back.

When we went outdoors, I stood still at the edge of the terrace and watched him run wild and look at everything. After a while he returned to me and I led him to two of my recent efforts. He looked at the deerskin I was drying in a rack I’d made with string between two trees. His only comment was, “It stinks.” I didn’t tell him what I’d rubbed on it to cure it. I showed him my small garden that I had spent a lot of hours carving out in a sunny spot on the mountainside. I was proud of my garden but Iain wasn’t impressed. Cutworms had got a couple of bean plants but they still hadn’t found my tomatoes. I wasn’t worried since I’d learned from Mother to plant extra seeds and thin them out as needed. Iain and I found the worm and I let him kill it with a stick.

For lunch, I grilled a couple of big deer steaks. I liked mine rare and I suppose he did too. The deer meat was tougher than steaks from cattle but he didn’t complain. He took the last of the cooked potatoes but I didn’t complain. I was just glad he had a good appetite and was willing to try anything.

We visited with Aimee for a while and Iain never ran out of questions for us. Perhaps Aimee didn’t get tired of answering but I did. I noticed that he never asked her two important questions: Where am I? How did I get here?

I fed him rabbit and more potatoes for supper. He watched intently as I carefully dressed the rabbit, getting the skin off in one big piece except for the head. I asked him to put the skin in the kitchen cooler and he was back in about two seconds to watch what I did in cutting up the rabbit. I told him how I foraged for other vegetables and he wanted to help me, especially after I told him how I used a tablet to identify anything edible.

We took a long walk around outside and I showed him some more things I had discovered, like the small cave with salamanders near the entrance to the cave. He asked me if I’d eaten any of them and I told him I had not...yet. As dusk approached, we went back home and sat on the terrace talking until the last light had faded. He followed me

back inside and to the toilet and then stood at the adjacent urinal while we both had a good piss.

When we were both in bed, he asked me more questions.

“David, why do we go naked? I like it but I got a little cold when we were sitting outside.”

“Iain, we don’t wear clothes when we’re inside because, like everything else here, the supply is limited. I don’t know if we’ll ever get any more so make sure you don’t throw anything away, not even juice bottles. Someday we’re going to have to provide everything for ourselves and I mean everything.”

“Well, it feels good to go naked inside. It’s just warm enough to be comfortable.”

“Yeah, Aimee controls the temperature and the humidity for us. We can change it but I don’t see any need to.”

“What is Aimee, David? I guess I mean, who is Aimee? Is she real? I sort of think she’s a computer image of some kind and then she says something that...well, it’s human and intelligent and I can’t help but believe she’s a human being. I like her.”

“She’s real, Iain. I don’t know how but she’s real. I like her too.”

“I asked her if she was a computer and she said she wasn’t but she could give me access to one and I could go exploring. What does she mean? Go exploring?”

“Iain, Aimee has access to more books that you could read in a million lifetimes. She has access to more music than you ever could listen to. When it rains, spend an afternoon with her. She’ll give you a tablet and you can access everything she has.”

“Boy, I can’t wait.” He said, then turned his back to me and pulled his blanket over his hips.

I lay in bed on my back with my hands under my head, thinking about everything and wondering if I should masturbate with Iain in the bed across from mine. I wondered if he masturbated as often as I did and whether I ought to talk to him about it. I knew I didn’t have any choice

about masturbating, jacking off as the kids I grew up with called it, because I was hornier than usual since I came here. I wasn't sleepy but I wasn't as urgently horny as I usually was. I decided I'd try to go to sleep without it.

"Lights on dim," I said, and turned over like Iain and pulled the blanket over my hips. I lay there for a while waiting for sleep but sleep wouldn't come.

I thought about what I knew with reasonable certainty about my situation. I knew that I had been in a room in a filthy hotel in Mamoon, that something had exploded in the room with me, and that I had been pulled away from the explosion and was still alive and I was grateful.

I knew I had been transported to this world but I had no idea how it had happened. I had learned that almost everything on this Earth was the same as the Earth I remembered but, because of the length of the year, I knew it was different. I knew that my Earth's rotation was slowing down so I wondered if I was on the same Earth eons ago or in the future when the year was or will be longer. From what little I knew of physics and cosmology, I knew that time travel was impossible. So that led me to believe I was on a different Earth. But how that could be true and how I got here and why were mysteries.

Someone had deliberately transported me and had chosen me to be the first of a small number of people. I wondered why and what was special about me. The elaborate facility in which I found myself had required a great deal of work from someone. Perhaps it was intended to be a safe place for all of us. Aimee had said that there would be an equal number of males and females and eventually we would probably mate and have children. So someone expected me and all the others to be here for the rest of our lives.

I reasoned that the one who had chosen me must have known about Anna and how close we were. Perhaps she was meant to come to me. I wished with all my being that I could believe that. Instead, Iain had arrived and I saw no reason why he should have been chosen to be second.

I was still uncertain who or what Aimee was. I suspected she might be simply a computerized image chosen deliberately to interact with me but she seemed so real and human and I had never heard of a

computer which was capable of her level of intelligence, artificial or human. I knew that I thought of her as human and I was grateful for her presence. Without her assistance and company, I didn't know what I would do.

I had opened the door at the far end of the hallway, and found a room full of machinery that was emitting a low hum. I assumed that all the equipment in there was essential to everything here and was powered by the solar panels in the strange dome at the top of the mountain. I could not believe that someone as human as Aimee could be a creature of some strange computer in that room.

My thoughts wandered back to Anna again and I tried to remember how she had looked and felt and tasted and smelled and how good it was just to be with her. I wanted to keep my memories of her alive because, without them, I knew I would give up hope and without the hope that Anna could be with me again I would give up life.

I rolled over on my back and wrapped my hand around my penis. It was almost hard and I slowly stroked it until it was stiff and pointing up toward my navel. I masturbated almost every night, and sometimes a time or two in the daytime too, and perhaps my penis had become accustomed to being used to enable me to get to sleep at night.

Anna! I felt like screaming her name! I wanted with all my being to be with her again. I wanted to be with her when I explored my new home. I wanted to see the surprise on her face when she saw Lightning run in circles. I wanted to be with her in the night, spooned up to her ass with my hand on her breast and her hair tickling my nose. I wanted to make love to her. I wanted to let my beast loose with her and fuck her like an animal. I wanted to fuck her slowly and gently while looking in her eyes and seeing that she wanted me to be in her body as much as I wanted it too. I wanted to be with her for the rest of my life, no matter where I spent it.

I thought of the time in the hotel in Flagstaff, after fucking her slowly and lovingly, when I came and she didn't and I insisted on going down on her. She protested, saying I was going to get in a mess because my semen was drooling out of her pussy. I told her I didn't care and I went down on her and licked her clitoris again and again. Once, I licked her from her perineum, over her vaginal entrance, all the way to her clitoris, and ended up with my own juices in my mouth as well

as hers. Even after coming in her, I was still so hot and wanted her so much, that I didn't care whose juices got in my mouth so I had licked her that way again. When she came she tried to pull two clumps of hair out of my head and I finally stopped licking her.

Again, I settled on a particular memory. I resolved to play through it slowly and to try to fix it in my mind as deeply as something embedded in concrete. I remembered what happened on Saturday night, after we'd made love early in the morning and then gone shopping for underwear for her and she insisted on buying me some too. I wanted knit boxer briefs but she wanted me to have something like a bikini or a Speedo. I gave in and got me three of the longer ones and one of the little things. I promised to wear the little one for her at least once while we were in Flagstaff. I even promised to let her take it off me if I could take off her panties.

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We ate lunch in the mall and, after shopping and looking for most of the afternoon and going to a movie, we drove around Flagstaff trying to find a Mexican restaurant which the hotel had recommended. The food was great and we dawdled, in no hurry to get back to the hotel to do what we both knew we were going to do.

After a quick shower, we brushed our teeth, standing naked side by side, spitting in the sink, and trying not to grin at each other. In the bedroom, she wanted to look at the underwear and clothes she had bought. I crawled in the middle of the bed and sat there holding myself upright Indian-fashion with my legs folded and watched her critically examining each purchase. After a while, I found myself slumping so I carefully straightened my spine, sucked in my stomach, and tensed my muscles until I was sitting bolt upright. I saw her looking at me so I slowly tightened my stomach muscles until my six-pack stood out. She just looked at me, grinned, and said, "Show off."

With her derriere toward me, she bent over her suitcase and began looking for something. I wondered if her display was innocent or provocative. When she said "Oh," walked in the bathroom, and came back with her hairbrush, I knew it was provocative and I was provoked. My penis had been more than a little engorged but now it stiffened and bumped into my folded legs. I let it stay bent down.

She looked at me again, smiled, and began to brush her hair. I sat and watched her and counted the strokes. I knew she gave her hair one hundred strokes each time she brushed it. I didn't mind the wait. There is probably nothing in the world more captivating than a beautiful naked woman brushing her hair.

“May I brush yours?” she asked, when she finished with her hair.

I nodded yes and she knee-walked to where I was sitting in the middle of the bed. She wrapped one long leg around me, then the other, and sat down in the cradle of my legs. She squirmed back and forth a couple of times and I felt her pussy settle on my penis. She didn't say anything about what she was sitting on and so I didn't either. I cupped her ass with both hands and let her play.

She very carefully parted my hair in the middle and then brushed it back on each side. She leaned back, looked at me appraisingly, used both hands to mess my hair up thoroughly, then parted it on one side and brushed it again. She leaned back and looked, shook her head no, messed it up again, and parted it in the middle. She brushed it back, tucked some strands over my ears, leaned back, appraised her handiwork, and nodded yes.

I didn't complain. Her head was higher than mine and her beautiful breasts were just out of reach below my chin but her long neck was in front of my eyes. I wanted to suck a hickey where her neck met her shoulder. I wanted her to lean over and kiss me. I wanted to lean over and put my mouth on one of her breasts. I couldn't do everything at the same time so I tilted my head upward. She got the message. She leaned over and kissed me. I closed my eyes and surrendered to her.

My penis wanted to rise but it couldn't. She was sitting on it. I let it nestle against her warm and wet pussy for a moment but it became uncomfortable bent down. I pushed one hand between us, rescued it, and let it stand up straight sandwiched between our bodies. From the way she wiggled against it, I assumed she liked it there.

She pulled away from my face, cupped her hands under her breasts, and offered them to me. Both nipples looked long enough to give a baby something so suck on. I chose one, bent my head down, and gave it a good licking and then a good sucking.

“I think that one’s empty, little boy,” she whispered. “Would you like to have the other one now?”

“Yes, Mama,” I whispered, feeling like a fool but enjoying the feeling of her hard nipple between my lips.

I wanted my penis in her but I had no idea what she wanted and I was determined to let her lead me. Suddenly she reached down, lifted her butt up, and the next thing I knew my penis was, in a wild series of wiggles and squirms and bumps, buried in her pussy.

“You’re about to get ridden,” she whispered in my ear. “Sit up straight and let me do it.”

Who was I to argue? I didn’t mind being ridden. She told me what she wanted. “Suck my nipples.” “Kiss me.” “Damn, it’s good.” “Bite me.” “Put your hands on my ass.” “I’m going to break it off.” “Damn, it’s so fucking good.”

She was wild. I was afraid I’d rip off a nipple or we might chip our front teeth. I slid my hands under her ass until I felt the shaft of my dick where it was entering into her, all wet and slick feeling from the juice her cunt was pouring out, and began to lift her and let her down on it, trying to restore some rhythm to her wildness. I wanted to hold off and not come until after she did but I couldn’t. I didn’t have a chance, with her sliding up and down on my dick and moaning and alternately trying to suck my tongue out of my mouth and to swab out my tonsils and her fingernails digging into my shoulders.

I felt like I was about to come and a split second later the feeling of inevitability hit me and I started spurting. Then she really went wild and I just tried to hang on while she bounced her ass off my legs and wiggled and hunched back and forth until I felt her pussy clenching and relaxing around my dick.

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How could I ever forget that night? Not me! Not in a lifetime!

As soon as I came, I raised my head and looked over at Iain. He hadn’t moved. He was in the same position, on his side with his back toward me and with the light blanket over his legs and hips. I decided I wasn’t going to worry about masturbating with Iain around. I did it. I knew

he did it. Damn, we might even do it together. What's wrong with that? If the customs in this strange new world were mine to decide, I vowed that our attitudes toward sex were going to be very different. I eased out of bed and went to the toilet to clean the semen off my stomach and to piss again.

TO BE CONTINUED: