



Chapter 1

MEETING

Johner stepped out of the doorway into the deserted street. Even in Westcoast, some streets were deserted at 3:00 in the morning. He took a deep breath of the fresh night air, a relief after the air of the bar, almost palpable with smoke, liquor fumes, and essence of overheated bodies.

As he walked slowly across the street, heading for his room and his bed, he ruminated on the evening behind him. He must be getting old. Drinking didn't interest him much any more, and he couldn't even get himself up to join the one brawl that he had witnessed. When a fight no longer drew him, the situation was getting serious.

But maybe it depended on the fight. As he rounded the corner into his street, he stopped to witness an interesting sight. Twenty-five yards away, under a streetlight, stood an unusual group. Three large men encircled one small slight woman, menace in every line of them. As Johner watched, they closed in.

He started forward at a run; this was a fight worth getting into. But he needn't have bothered; by the time he had covered the distance all three men were lying on the ground. One was moaning and moving slightly, but the other two were apparently out cold.

As he approached, the woman whirled toward him, her hands up, her body tense in defensive posture.

OK, it's OK, I'm on your side," he said quickly, holding up his hands, "I was coming to help." He looked around at the carnage. "But I guess you didn't need me. Pretty good work, lady!"

"Thanks." She relaxed slightly. "They weren't much. Amateurs."

"And you're a professional?"

"Security."

"Ah."

She surveyed her handiwork lying on the ground. "Do any of them need an ambulance?"

He leaned over to look at the nearest man. "This one's coming to. That one's already awake. They can take care of the other one, if he needs it."

She bent to retrieve a pack from the ground where she had dropped it. As she did so she flinched slightly. Johner knew that flinch. It was familiar to him from years of combat. She was

hurt.

“All right. Where and what is it?”

Her look questioned him.

“You took one. Where and what?”

“It’s nothing. One of them had a knife; unfortunately he wasn’t the first one I went for. He got one in.”

“Is it going to need sewing up?”

“I suppose so. Feels like it. I’ll get it later.”

“I’ve got a room over there.” He pointed across the street. “Come on, I’ll sew it up for you.”

She looked at him speculatively. After a minute she said, “OK, thanks.”

He laid out the implements he would need from a neat pack of first aid equipment. She watched with some interest as he threaded a needle and uncapped a bottle of antiseptic.

“OK, all ready. Let’s see it.”

Without any hesitation she pulled her sweater over her head. She wasn’t wearing anything under it. She held the sweater up, her fingers through the hole cut in it. “Damn! Look at that! I liked this sweater!”

“Nothing lasts forever. Turn around.”

The cut was in the back of her shoulder. It was about three inches long, and moderately deep, but not of a serious nature. It had bled freely; her back was bloody, and the waistband of her pants was soaked.

Johner examined the cut briefly. “This isn’t bad. Easy job.” He poured antiseptic on a cotton pad. “This will sting.” He swabbed the cut generously.

She flinched and shivered. “That hurt worse than the cut!”

“You were thinking about other things when you got cut. Now hold still.” He began to take careful stitches. As he worked he asked, “What’s your name?”

“Connor. Sarah Connor. Ow!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, the pain is terrible. My name is Johner. Just Johner.”

“Hello, Johner. And thanks. This is very good of you.”

His grin wasn’t visible to her from where she sat. “How do you know I’m not going to ask for something in return? I’m a man, you’re a woman; it follows that you’ve got something I want.”

“In your dreams. That’s not something that I use to pay my debts. You can ask, but don’t insist. You’re a big guy, and you’ve been around; I may not be able to stop you, but I’ll bet I can make you hurt bad enough that you’ll lose interest.”

“Don’t worry about it. I like my women willing.” He took a final look at his handiwork. “All done. About fifteen stitches.” He began to ready a bandage.

She craned her neck to see over her shoulder. “Very professional job. You’ve sewed up a few in your time. What do you do? To make a living, I mean.”

“Been crew on a space freighter for quite a few years, but I’m ready to spend some time on earth. I’m going to have to find something to do before long; the money won’t last forever. Guess I’d be best suited for what you do, now I think about it.”

“Want a job? My outfit is looking for someone. You look like you could handle whatever’s thrown at you. Got weapons knowledge?”

“Just about anything made. I was weapons master on the freighter. And we had a few; our cargo wasn’t always delivered without some objections.”

“OK. I’ll put in a word for you.” She grinned at him. “Now, maybe you’ll give me something to wear. That is, if you’ve looked long enough.”

He grinned back. “I’m getting old, but I’m not dead yet.” He rummaged in a drawer and brought out a T-shirt. “This one’s too small for me anyway.”

She put it on; it was roughly twelve sizes too big for her. “Not for me.” She smiled at him again, and wrapped it around herself to take up the slack.

He stood up and stretched. “It’s four o’clock in the morning. Is there someone who’ll be wondering where the hell you are?”

“Not at the moment. I’ve got a son who lives with me, but he’s away at school. No one will worry.”

“Want to sleep here? On the couch, I mean.” His glance was full of amusement. “I’ll leave you alone, I don’t like pain.”

“Yes I do want to. I wasn’t looking forward to trekking home at this hour. I’m not feeling in the greatest of shape.” She looked at him measuringly. “What’s in this for you? What’s the deal that you’re being so helpful? You don’t strike me as a Good Samaritan by nature.”

“Hah! I’m not. I’ve spent a good part of my life being *not* nice to people. You might say I did it for a living.” He paused. “But lady, I saw a helluva demonstration of skill and guts tonight, from someone about as big as a minute. I liked that.” He looked embarrassed by what he had said. He added quickly; “Well, fall down on the couch. I’ll cover you up.” He went to a small chest against the wall and took out a blanket. “Come on, Connor, lay down, I’m tired and I want to go to bed. ---No, wait, take off those pants first, they’re all over blood. Under pants too, that shirt comes down to your knees.”

She complied, and after moving around in the kitchen area for a few minutes he too settled in his bed and all was quiet. Sarah turned herself on her side, looking for a position to ease the discomfort in her shoulder. As she tried to get comfortable, she smiled into the dark.

This was a very good guy under the rough exterior. It sure was rough, though. He had been around all right, his face showed considerable wear and tear. A few battles there, not all of them won, from the number of scars.

Well, anyway, she felt perfectly safe with him. She shrugged her shoulders, wincing as she was reminded forcefully of the evening’s events. For whatever reason, and with all her experience to the contrary, she trusted him; and she’d lived long enough to know when to go with her gut instinct. She turned over again, found a more comfortable position, and went to sleep.

Chapter 2

BREAKFAST

She woke very fast, as was her habit. Her eyes opened without a movement from the rest of her body, and looked quickly from side to side. She wasn’t in her own bed. Her body tensed for action as her eyes searched for movement in the room. Then she relaxed slowly. The first

aid kit was sitting where Johner had left it, and memory returned. As she moved for the first time, her shoulder reminded her sharply of the events of the previous night.

She got up soundlessly, and turned to survey the room. Johner lay asleep on the bed in the far corner. Her eyes widened slightly as she glanced around. The room was orderly, and noticeably clean. Even the kitchen area was policed. No dirty dishes, no food left out. And her pants, with her underpants beside them, were hanging on a clothesline stretched across a corner of the room. So that's what he had been doing in the kitchen last night. She crossed to her pants and felt them. Dry. Still stained, but clean and dry.

She took them down and quickly pulled them on. As she tucked in his shirt, she turned to look at him. He was watching her, his eyes following her movements.

"Hungry?" he asked. "Breakfast will be ready in a minute. If I can get my aging carcass out of the sack." He yawned and stretched, and threw the cover off. He was nearly nude, wearing only briefs. He got out of bed without self-consciousness, and walked across the room to the bathroom. Sarah watched him all the way, stunned admiration in her eyes, sorry when the door closed behind him. His body was beautiful; broad shouldered, heavily muscled, long legged, and his movements had a feline grace. 'Aging, my foot!' she thought.

She spotted the coffeepot, and opened cupboards, looking for coffee. The same order and cleanliness prevailed behind the cupboard doors as in the rest of the room. Amazing.

By the time he returned from the bathroom the coffee was nearly ready. He had put on pants, but she found that she was happy to see he was wearing no shirt. His chest was profusely covered with gray hair, and she was conscious of a passing desire to touch it.

"Coffee smells good," he said. "Do you want bacon with your eggs?"

"You're cooking?"

"Got to eat. No one else here to cook it, I'm cooking."

The breakfast was delicious, eggs scrambled with onions and green peppers, crisp bacon, toast with strawberry jam. She mopped up the last bits of onion and egg with the last corner of toast, sighed, and said, "Could you move in with us? A cook as good as you are is worth anything. And you do surgery also. Not to speak of being a great housekeeper. Is there anything you can't do?"

He looked down at his plate for a moment, then looked up and grinned. "I can't carry a tune."

"That is a skill not necessary to make a great housemate---except if you sing in the shower."

She looked around the room. "I've never seen bachelor quarters like this before. Usually they're not fit for human habitation. How do you explain this weird behavior?"

"Easy. I've lived for years on a ship. Quarters there are about one fifth the size of this room. If you don't keep it in order, you can't get in the door after a while; I've seen it happen. And on a ship with a small crew, cooking is a chore that's usually divided up between everyone. If you want to be able to stomach the food, you learn to cook it yourself."

While he talked she became conscious of how much she liked listening to his voice. Velvet, that was the description that fit. Deep, soft, gray velvet. Her attention came back to what he was saying with a little start.

"The skill at sewing up people---that comes from the kind of ship I was on. We hauled some cargoes that weren't exactly welcome at the delivery point---and some cargoes were loaded on board with objections from people who thought they owned them."

"A pirate?"

"No, I wouldn't say that, exactly. Just right on the edge all the time." He paused and leaned

back in his chair. "It was a good time for a while, but I was getting too old for it even before we---we encountered a cargo that we couldn't handle. They're mostly all dead now."

"Who?"

"The crew. My shipmates."

"What happened?"

"It's a long story. It doesn't matter any more anyway. They're dead."

She thought, *They were family. He's grieving*, and her heart hurt for him suddenly. So she smiled brightly, and said, "Let's do dishes. I've got to go home sometime today. What time is it, anyway?"

"About three, I think."

As they worked in the kitchen, finishing up the dishes, she asked, "Were you serious about wanting a job?" When he nodded, she continued, "I'll talk to George Roberts. He's the boss. You'll have no trouble getting the job; you're qualified. It's a small firm, pretty relaxed atmosphere. We do mostly body guarding, transporting valuables, some investigation. No patrolling warehouses. I think you'll like it and they'll like you. But of course I've been wrong before. We'll see. Call me tomorrow."

She gave him her business card. In a few minutes all was shipshape again and she was ready to leave. As she reached the door, she turned to him. "Thank you, Johner. You've been a friend."

On an errant impulse, she reached up to kiss his cheek. He turned his head quickly, and his mouth found hers. The kiss lasted only a moment; he raised his head, smiled, and said softly, "There. That's a big return on a little investment of time." She raised her hand to his cheek, caressed it lightly, and was gone.

Johner leaned against the door, his eyes shut, waiting for the pounding of his heart to subside. 'God, what have I got myself into. She'll never look at me; she could have anyone she wants. How could I want her so much, so quick?'

And Sarah walked slowly down the street, feeling again his mouth on hers, hearing that velvet voice, seeing him cross the room naked, with feline grace.

Chapter 3

FRIENDSHIP

"Okay, Mom, what is it?"

John turned her around, a hand on her shoulder, to look into her face. "Something's going on. You've been spaced for twenty-four hours, ever since I got home. What is it?"

"John, how would you feel if we had a housemate?"

"Mom, for Pete's sake, is this some nutty way of telling me you've got a new boyfriend? Since when are you so coy? When I was a kid, and you might have had a reason to keep it from me, you sure never bothered. What goes?"

"No, no, John, not a "boyfriend"---God, what an awful word! Just a housemate. We've got a new guy at the shop; I happen to know he's a great cook, and we could sure use the extra

cash. I was moderately astonished by the size of your last book bill. What the hell are they teaching you there, anyway? Six hundred and fifty dollars for books?"

"The anatomy texts alone came to three hundred something. Color plates."

"Well, I'm not complaining; what it costs is what it costs. But rent money for the spare room might pay next semester's book bill. I hope."

"Actually, Ma, I think it's a hell of an idea. You wouldn't be alone here."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Afraid for my safety, are you?"

"No, Ma, I'm not afraid for your safety. Ha ha. But it might be nice for you to have someone to eat with and---. Woops, I almost said 'sleep with.'"

"Watch your mouth, smartass. And don't call me Ma."

"Yes, Mom. Anyway, I think it's a good idea. Invite him. Hey Ma, is he after your body?"

She turned away with a disgusted look. As she headed for the door, she said over her shoulder. "I've got to go to work. Try to remember in odd moments that I'm your mother, and deserving of a little respect."

"Yes, Ma."

She eased the car slowly around the corner; they both leaned forward, looking intently into the dim street ahead.

"Damn! I thought they might show up here," she said, her shoulders slumping in disappointment.

"It was a good bet, it just didn't work out this time." Johner reached out to give her hair a consoling touch, but he thought better of it before his hand connected. He laid it on the back of the seat; sure she hadn't noticed his aborted caress.

Be careful, you donkey! he admonished himself. She'll run like a deer if she thinks you have any intentions. You're living in her house and seeing her every day---don't blow it now. For Crissakes cool it. He turned his head toward her, relatively safe in watching her since her eyes were on the road. Watching her was his recreation and his consolation.

She pulled up at a stoplight. "Shall we knock off for the night? I can't think of any other brilliant plans. How about you?" She glanced at him and grinned. "I have a suspicion we've been outsmarted."

"Never. We're smarter than three two bit hoods. We're smarter than a dozen two bit hoods. They just got lucky."

"Johner, don't you ever get discouraged? Don't you have bad days?"

He looked down at his hands. "I have bad days."

"They don't show."

"Good."

She put her hand over his. "Are you going to tell me about it sometime?"

"About what?"

"What you have bad dreams about---I've heard you in the night. What makes you have bad days."

"The light's changed." He took his hand away.

“OK, Johner, but you can’t get away from me. We live together, remember?”

“I remember.” His voice was cold.

“Boy, you can really make me mad sometimes.” She shifted her grip on the wheel, stretching out her arms and taking a deep breath.

“Connor, I don’t mean to make you mad, but you push me. I don’t take to being pushed.”

“I’m trying to be a friend. I guess I’m not going about it right. It was a lot simpler when you sewed up my shoulder and I said thanks and we were square.”

“No, it wasn’t any simpler then. We just didn’t know enough about each other to see it. It’s never simple.”

“Yes---that’s right---I guess that’s right. Johner, I still don’t know anything about you. You’re full of contradictions. Last week when you were questioning that guy in the bar, you were as brutal as anyone I’ve ever seen. And then you say things like you just did, and I wonder if you can be the same man. Which one are you, Johner?”

“I’m whatever my life up to now has made me, just like everyone else.”

“There! That’s just what I’m talking about! The man who brutalized that poor soul in the bar last week couldn’t *possibly* have said that.”

“Poor soul? That son-of-a-bitch is a vicious little rat who deserved twice what he got, and you know that as well as I do! Poor soul! Jesus!” He shook his head in disgust.

“But I felt sorry for him anyway. You went about it with such a will. I swear you enjoyed it.” She paused. “Did you, Johner?”

“Are you asking me if I’m a sadist?”

“Maybe.”

He didn’t answer right away. “Maybe I am. I did enjoy it. I do. It’s a trip; I suppose it’s revenge, really. Revenge on everybody who ever stepped on me. That ‘poor soul’ paid for someone else’s sins that time, but he has plenty of his own on his conscience.”

“I’ll tell you something funny, though. I don’t enjoy it as much as I used to. I think I must have whatever it is that makes me want to do it just about all worked out of me.” He grinned at her. “I’m starting to mellow out in my old age.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this ‘old age’ thing of yours, too. What the hell is that? How old are you, anyway?”

“I don’t know.”

She looked at him. “How does that happen?”

“I grew up on the street. I guess I’m somewhere around fifty, but I don’t know within five years.” He was embarrassed by his confession; she could see it in the lines of his body as he sat looking down at his hands.

She turned the car up the driveway and pulled into the garage. They got out and he came around the car quickly to go into the house, not looking at her. She put her hand on his arm to stop him, and then to his astonishment she put her arms around him. He pulled her closer to him without conscious thought, his face buried in her hair.

“Johner, I care about you. It’s important to me to know about you. I want to know.”

He let her go at once, though every fiber of him was screaming to hold on to her; she mustn’t know how he felt. She went before him into the house, turning on lights in the kitchen, checking the answering machine, doing all the ordinary things that he was incapable of

thinking of at the moment. What he thought of was how she felt against him, of her breasts and her belly pressed to him, of the scent of her hair, of the softness of her.

With a mumbled goodnight, he headed for his bedroom, where he could be alone to remember exactly those few moments that might be all he ever had of her.

And Sarah slowly got ready for bed, stopping often to remember how his hard body felt against her, how he had pulled her close to him. But---he had let her go at once. He was her friend; that's all he wanted to be. That was best, she knew---he was such a complex and difficult man. And she was past wanting the pain and stress involved in any new relationship. Best not to want him any closer. Best to let friendship be enough.

Chapter 4

DINNER

"Jeez, Mom, he's sure ugly! Scared me half to death when I walked into him in the hall."

"Sure he did. Ha. Do you think he's ugly? I hadn't thought that. Rugged looking, yes, but he has his own charm."

John looked at her with speculation, suddenly alert. There was more here than he would have thought. Sarah usually liked her men big, fast, and good-looking. At least she used to; she hadn't shown any interest in the opposite sex for several years. This guy certainly didn't fit the stereotype for looks, but Sarah had always been unpredictable. John resolved to watch this situation; he'd know more when he saw them together.

Sarah changed the subject abruptly. "It's certainly nice to see you, but what about hitting the books?"

"I've got two extra days this week, some kind of staff get-together in the department; so I thought I'd see how you're doing. And it appears you're doing OK. How's the new housemate working out? Did he turn out to be a lazy no-good bum?"

"Just the opposite. He cooks straight from Heaven. You'll see, he's out buying groceries right now. He won't let me shop; he says I don't have the least idea what to buy. I guess he's right; I just mostly go for the frozen food locker. TV dinners are what you were raised on, and look at you. You turned out all right." She grinned at him.

"I'm healthy, but you destroyed my palate for fine food forever."

"Wait 'til you taste what Johner's got going tonight before you say that. You'll appreciate it, trust me."

"Mom, when you decided to take in a roomer, did you have to get one with the same name as me? Three people in the house, and two of them with the same name. What are the chances of that happening?"

"Sorry about that, I didn't pick him for his name. As a matter of fact I didn't pick him at all." She smiled a little. "He picked me, sort of. He took me in and sewed me up after I got into a little difference of opinion with a couple of guys."

"Sewed you up? Ma, what happened that you needed to be sewed up? I can't believe you got hurt in a fight with only two guys!"

“Actually, there were three, and I was careless. It was just a little cut; he sewed it up in a couple of minutes. Did a great job, too. If you go into surgery, you could get some instruction in stitching; the scar is hardly noticeable. And don’t call me Ma!”

John put his fork down on his plate and pushed his chair back from the table. “You certainly cook as advertised, Johner. Thanks for a great meal. Sure beats the cafeteria food at school.”

“My pleasure.” Johner grinned at him; a little shyly, Sarah thought. “It’s a kick cooking for your mother. She seems to like it so much.” He glanced at her, then dropped his eyes quickly.

“Well, should we go out and take a look at the car before it gets dark? Sounds to me like a pretty small problem. Connor, don’t touch the dishes. We’ll do them when I get back.”

When they had left, she began to pick up the dishes, contemplating meanwhile the way Johner seemed to fit in with the two of them. Conversation at dinner had been easy; John and Johner found themselves interested in each other’s opinions on a number of topics. She had wondered at first if they were doing it in an effort to please her, but as the talk continued it was evident that they liked each other. Good, she thought; and then wondered why it was of any importance. ‘Nothing lasts; this time next year he’ll be long gone, and it won’t matter at all.’ The thought didn’t make her happy. She shook her head impatiently, and began to run water in the sink.

By the time they got back, she was almost finished. “Hey, Connor, what’s the deal? I asked you to wait!” He seemed genuinely upset.

“You cook, I clean up. That’s the way we do it, isn’t it?” She wrung out the sponge and laid it on the counter.

“But I---“

“Isn’t that the way we do it?”

“Yes.” A grin.

“OK.” The grin was returned.

John watched the interplay with great interest. More than the words, the inflections and expressions on faces spoke volumes. He thought to himself; That ties it up! He’s in love with her, so much so that it’s practically killing him. Poor son of a gun! And she---I’m not sure about her. I think maybe she is too, only she just doesn’t know it yet. This should be very interesting.

He looked from one to the other, grinning broadly. “Well, what should we do now? Television, anyone?” Two loud groans told him that some other alternative would be preferable. “OK, I get the picture. What, then? What do you two do in the evening?”

They looked at each other, smiling. “We work a lot of nights, and we work out twice a week,” Sarah said. “But when we’re home---we read.”

“You---read?”

“To each other, mostly. We’ve been going through my bedroom bookshelf, book by book.” She looked a little defensive. “It’s fun. Johner hasn’t had a chance to read most of this stuff, and---well, it’s fun.”

“Yeah, it sounds like a barrel of laughs. Well, if you two don’t mind, I think I’ll just go out and look for something to do that’s a little more physically active, and less---I don’t like to say

boring, but---well, boring. Something like dancing.”

She smiled and waved him off. “Have a good time. We’re up to the last chapter of “Great Expectations”.

“Ugh! Dickens, yet! Well, goodnight, and thanks again, Johner, for the dinner. It was great. And thanks a lot for fixing my car! Love you, Ma.” He kissed her quickly, and disappeared through the door.

“Nice kid. You did good.” Johner smiled at her.

They went into the living room and sat down in what were becoming their accustomed places. Johner picked up the book, then put it down again. “I won’t say anything about getting old, I’ve been criticized for that.” His eyes laughed at her. “But did what John said give you the feeling that we’re getting duller and duller just while we sit here?”

An amused chuckle answered him. “I know what you mean. But the truth is, I don’t want to go dancing. If that means I’m getting old, so be it. I want to sit right here and read the last chapter of “Great Expectations”.

“So do I. Shall we?” and he picked up the book.

Chapter 5

REVELATIONS

“Johner, where did you learn to read?” She handed him the book that she had retrieved from the shelf in her bedroom. “If you grew up on the street, it’s a wonder you ever did.”

“I lived in an orphanage when I was very small,” he said. “The sisters taught me the ABC’s, and we had started the part about making words with them when I left.”

“Left?”

“I was---‘adopted’. By a man who wanted a bed partner, not a six year old son.”

“God, Johner---I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago. I didn’t stay with him long. Three days, if I remember right. I couldn’t find the orphanage again, so I just---lived.

“I don’t know why I’m telling you this. It’s ancient history, long gone and forgotten. Not a very interesting subject.”

She put her hand on his arm. “It’s interesting to me. And I still don’t know how you learned to read.”

“Well, I had a start at the orphanage. It didn’t take me long on the street to see that those who could read had a big edge, and I needed all the help I could get. So I used to collect stuff to read; anything printed that I found in the trash, newspapers, books, anything at all. I knew the letters, no one else was going to teach me, so I just hunkered down, and eventually I figured it out.”

“You’re telling me that you taught yourself to read. Living on the street, a small child, and you taught yourself to read.” She shook her head.

“Well, it took years. I wasn’t a small child any more by the time I could read everything. There were a few other things that took priority, like eating, so it went by fits and starts, whenever I

had the time.”

When she looked up at him her eyes were full of tears.

“Jeez, don’t cry!” He was embarrassed. “I did fine. I was big and strong, and I did OK. Now, let’s talk about something more interesting than this!”

“I told you before, Johner, I care about you. I don’t know exactly why, but I have this feeling that you’re---family.” She looked down at her hands, a little embarrassed.

For a long minute he said nothing. Then he laughed shortly, without mirth. When he spoke, his voice was harsh, its usual velvet timbre gone.

“You mean like a big brother? Or maybe a father? Afraid I don’t fit the role. Find someone else to fill your stupid fantasies.”

She looked up at him, stunned. His face was hard; his eyes coldly steady on hers. She stuttered, “I---I’m sorry if I--if it’s not---acceptable to you. Sorry.” She turned her face away from him and began to busy her hands with the book in her lap. In a minute she got up and without a further word left the room.

It was some hours later when he knocked softly on her bedroom door. “Connor?” No answer. “Connor---please?”

The door opened; she looked at him silently.

“Please, Connor, I’m sorry. Don’t be mad at me.”

She opened the door wider and gestured for him to come in. As she turned her face to the light he saw that she had been crying. “God, Connor, I never want to do anything to make you cry. I’m sorry!”

“What happened? I’ve been trying and trying to figure out what I said that made you turn on me like that. I can’t figure it, Johner. Can you explain it to me?” Tears spilled onto her cheeks.

His arms went around her involuntarily. He pulled her head down onto his shoulder, one hand cradling it, the other arm close around her, holding her tight against him. “Don’t cry, don’t cry, it’s all right, it’s all OK, I’m sorry, don’t cry---.” He kissed the top of her head, losing all caution in his distress at her tears.

“I’m not crying! I don’t cry!” She raised her head and sniffled.

He smiled a little. “You’re crying.”

“OK, so I’m crying. Women cry. I am a woman, aren’t I?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. Then he said softly, in his velvet voice, “You’re a woman.”

She moved back, out of his arms, and walked over to the bed. She settled down with her back against the headboard, pillows piled behind her. “Come over here and sit down, Johner. I need to understand what happened. Please, explain it to me.”

God, what was he going to say to her? How to explain the knife in his heart when he heard ‘family’? Brother? Father? No! God no! Let him be lover, husband, even friend; slave, if the truth were told. But not family!

He moved slowly across the room, and sat on the end of the bed, his mind racing madly to come up with something, anything that would satisfy her.

As the silence lengthened and his mind refused to help him out, he took refuge in a familiar place. He began to get angry. Godammit, she was pushing him again! Gratefully, he felt the

icy fingers of rage freeze the pain he felt. He looked up at her, on his face the cold, closed look that had stunned her a few hours before.

She saw, and recognized that he was angry again for no reason that she could understand. For the second time. She was off the bed in an instant, facing him in a defensive crouch. "NO! I won't do this! I won't have this! Get out of here! Get out of my room! Get out of my house!"

Her body was tense, her face strained and angry. She was so little, and so courageous, and God! How he loved her! His heart hurt as he looked at her, and his rage collapsed suddenly and left him defenseless. He crumpled onto the bed, his face buried in the covers, struggling to suppress the first tears he had felt in thirty years.

Sarah straightened slowly. Whatever crazy reason he had for his anger, it was over. His shoulders were shaking. What was wrong? It dawned on her in a moment that it was tears he was fighting; and a rush of warmth and sympathy washed over her.

"Don't, Johner, ---don't." In a moment she was beside him; her arms went around his shoulders, she lifted his head to press against her breasts. Her fingers slid under his chin, to pull his face up to her. He resisted, burrowing his head into the warm angle of her neck.

"It's all right, I understand, I won't leave you, I'll stay with you. Sh-h-h, now, don't feel so bad, it's OK, it's OK," she crooned to him, rocking him in her arms.

His arms went around her and he held her to him. In a moment, as he came to control of his tears, he raised his head to look at her. Her face was so close---her full-lipped mouth that he had longed to kiss was so close, that his hard-held control deserted him at last. Slowly he began to close the distance between them. She didn't move, didn't flinch; then there was no more distance, and he gave a little moan as his mouth covered hers.

The kiss was intoxicating; her mouth was so soft, so sweet, so yielding. But when through his daze of pleasure he realized that she wasn't returning his kiss, that she accepted it without response, he ended it abruptly.

"I shouldn't have done that," he muttered, his head down, not looking at her.

"Why not, if you wanted to? I'm not fragile. I've been kissed before."

There was a flash of returned anger. "Because your charity is not what I want!"

She said nothing for a long moment; then, quietly: "What do you want, Johner?"

He freed himself from her embrace, stood up and turned away from her. He threw his head back and took a long breath, staring upward blindly, unable to speak. What could he tell her? What lie could smooth over this snarl of anger and tears and evasions?

Then, slowly, his tense pose relaxed. When he turned to her his face was emptied of emotion; he looked only very tired. "There's nothing left but the truth." he said. "What I want is you. Since the very beginning."

His shoulders slumped, and he turned to the door. "I'll get out of your hair. It'll take me a day to find a place, but I'll be out of here tomorrow."

"Johner?"

He turned back.

"Why don't you ask me what I want?"

"I guess---whatever it is that you want, I know from that kiss---it's not me."

"I thought---well, there was a reason for that. I thought it was just an impulse you had. I've always thought you just wanted us to be friends. I was scared, Johner. Scared to let you know

how I feel. Could we try it again?" She got up and came toward him. When she reached him, she slid her arms around him and turned her face up to him.

"Kiss me, Johner."

He bent his head and his mouth found hers hesitantly. But this kiss was different; her mouth opened under his, and he felt the tip of her tongue reach into his mouth, to stroke softly the inside of his lower lip. His arms tightened around her, and as it came to him that she was really kissing him, delirious pleasure surged through him, and he kissed her as he had dreamed, his tongue exploring her mouth, his hands moving over her body. It went on and on, and he had no desire to stop. Her mouth was so sweet, so hot and wet and willing.

His mouth left hers at last only to move over her face and down her neck to the edge of her shirt, then back to her face again. His words were slurred by the contact of his mouth with her skin as he whispered, "God, I want you so much. I love you, Connor. I love you."

His hands were warm on her, sliding over her, touching her with gentleness and ardor. One hand moved low to her buttocks, and with the other hand on her back holding her against him, he lifted her up, into his embrace, pressing her hips against his surging manhood. A soft sound was drawn from him then, and his eyes closed in pleasure as he felt her warmth pressed tightly against him. Then he opened them to look at her with quick anxiety.

"OK?" He asked softly. But her face told him what he wanted to know. Desire was plain in her heavy lidded eyes, her flushed face, her mouth half open to accommodate her panting breath. As he looked down at her, it came home to him at last. "Connor? You want this. You want this as much as I do. You want *me*."

She nodded. "Yes---oh yes, I want you; I have for a long, long time. I love you. I have for a long, long time." She reached up to kiss him softly, her mouth trembling a little, her eyes starry with unshed tears.

Then she smiled. "Johner, there's the bed, right over there; why are we way over here?"

Chapter 5a

Adult

As Johner looked from Sarah to the bed, wonder warred with exultation in his face. He scooped her up in his arms; but before he began to move toward the bed he looked down at her lying in his arms and was arrested by the sight of her there.

"God! I don't believe it---is this happening? Is it?" He began to kiss her face and her neck, unable to keep from touching her in every way, all the time. As he kissed her, he walked slowly to the bed, his attention divided between his present delight in the kisses and the joys that awaited them when he reached his destination.

Sarah's arms were around his neck and she returned his caresses, her eyes closed, her breath coming quickly. "It's got to be true, I couldn't stand it if it weren't," she breathed into his ear. "Oh Johner, love me---kiss me---take me to bed---"

But when he reached the bed he set her on her feet instead of laying her down. "Before you lie down---I---could I---I want to undress you---please, let me?" He looked down at her with anxiety, and when she didn't speak his hands moved as if without his volition to the front of her blouse, and he began to unbutton it. As he worked at it, he looked into her face. "OK?"

He said softly. "Please, Connor, I want this so much. I want to make you naked---for me---I want it to be me that does it---." He stopped in mid-sentence; her opened blouse had slid from her shoulders.

Sarah stood still, watching his reaction, her eyes on his face, loving the expressions that chased each other across it.

His eyes were on her breasts; he brought his hand up slowly. It hovered, not quite touching a nipple that lifted and hardened while he watched. He whispered, "I remember your breasts; I remember how beautiful---." His fingers began to stroke her softly, caressing the rounded surface, touching the erect peak. His other hand joined the first, and he held both breasts. He was still for a moment, looking down at her breasts in his hands. "Oh Connor, I love you."

His hands moved down her sides to her waist, and he began to unbutton her jeans. As he did so he slid to his knees before her, and as he pushed her jeans down around her ankles he leaned into her, a soft sound escaping him, and pressed his face against the triangle of golden brown hair at her groin. His trembling hands slid up the backs of her legs to cup her buttocks.

With his face still hidden against her he said, "I want you so much---I love you so much. Connor, talk to me; is this OK? Tell me you want me too---please, Connor, help me."

Her hands came down to the sides of his head, and she turned his face up to her. "I love you, I want you---very much. I love the feel of your hands on me; I want to feel your mouth on me; all over me. I---oh, Johner, when you touch me I'm crazy to have you inside me!"

He looked up at her, thrilled at her words. "I needed to hear you say it, babe, --- because this is so unbelievable. God, I can't quit touching you---you're so beautiful---." His hands never left her body as he stood up. He pushed her gently back until she sat on the bed, then he knelt again to remove the remaining clothes from around her ankles. When he was through, he sat for a moment looking at her body, rapt, then leaning forward he buried his face in her lap. "I love you---I love you." His breath was coming fast now, he was trembling all over; his excitement level was very high.

He lifted his head and stood again, but before he did he reached down to his waist and lifted his T-shirt over his head. Then as he stood up, he stripped himself quickly out of his pants.

Sarah watched him strip; the sight of his nude body took her breath away. She was trembling also, and almost helpless with desire; she whispered, "Oh, Johner, come here to me---I need to touch your body." Her arms reached up for him, and he dropped beside her on the bed, rolling to lean over her, his mouth finding hers to kiss her deeply. Both were lost in the kiss instantly, their mouths melded in heat and craving. It went on and on, while their hands explored, each half-aware through the rapturous kiss of the fiery trails left by the other's hands.

At last Johner's mouth lifted, and slid slowly over her chin and down to the pulse beating in her neck. Sarah's hands came to hold his head and moved it down until his mouth touched the peak of her breast. As his lips closed around it she gasped and shuddered with passion and pleasure. His mouth was hot on her, and as his tongue slid around the tip of her breast like liquid fire she arched her back and moaned wordlessly.

Johner was stunned and unbearably excited by the depth and intensity of her response to his lovemaking. Nothing in his previous experience had prepared him for this ecstatic response, that of a woman in love. Her every moan, every quick-drawn breath, sent waves of pleasure through his body. Only half-aware of what he was doing, he began to make an instinctive effort to contain his excitement, to prolong their pleasure in each other; for this was making love, not having sex, and he wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything.

He moved away from her breast finally, his mouth moving over her torso. His breathing was ragged now, his excitement barely contained, and her hands moving over him left trails of fire wherever she touched him. He was agonized with longing to plunge himself deeply into her, to hear her cry out in ecstasy. But he hesitated, unsure, unable to decide through the haze of his frenzied need whether the time was right. He loved her so, this first lovemaking must be right for her; but he was working in the dark now, beyond any experience he had ever known.

Sarah solved his dilemma; her hands on his head lifted his face to hers, and with soft words in his ear, panting and breathless with the urgency of her need, she made his decision unnecessary. "Johner---please, please! Come inside of me, oh please---I want you so."

He lifted his body over hers, and her legs opened, welcoming him into her. He lowered himself slowly into the heat of her, unbelievably excited by the fact of this ultimate intimacy. As he felt himself entirely sheathed in her warm flesh, he waited a moment to see that she was all right; then with a groan he relaxed over her, feeling her warmth surrounding him, reveling in the sense of where he was, what was happening between them.

Her arms came up around him, and then her legs. He felt them fasten around him, holding him to her, and joy flooded through him like a tidal wave. He began to move slowly then, feeling the wonderful slick heat of her body as her interior muscles clasped him, holding him in her, reluctant to let him leave her. She moaned and moved with him, alive and responsive under him. As he felt her response, he realized that he wasn't going to last very long in spite of his desire to prolong this experience; the incredible feeling of her enclosing him, the movement of her body under him, and the soft sounds she made were going to be his undoing.

But again Sarah rescued him from his dilemma. "Oh God, Johner, please---I can't wait, it's too much---take us over the edge---." Her voice trailed away into a wordless sound, as he deepened and quickened his strokes in response to her appeal. With a fierce joy, he let go of his unaccustomed restraint and let sensation take him.

When her body convulsed in climax, and he felt the turbulent contractions clutching at him, he was stunned anew; nothing in his experience had prepared him for the fervor of this manifestation of her pleasure. As he went over the edge into ecstatic orgasm, the contractions of her body and her involuntary outcry added the last possible touch to his pleasure, making bliss explode through his body, drawing all that there was out of him so that he emptied himself to utter exhaustion.

When he returned to consciousness, swimming up from the depths of exhausted satiation, he found her still under him. He quickly shifted to lift himself off her and rolled to the side, murmuring an apology. When he left her body she made a little cry of protest; then she followed him when he moved, molding herself against him, one leg lifted and laid over his hips, her full length pressed tightly against his side.

His arms were around her, holding her close to him, and he stroked her hair. After a few minutes, when his breathing had returned to normal and he had recovered his composure, he spoke in a velvety half whisper, leaning down close to her ear. "Oh Connor, it was so wonderful. I didn't know it could be like that. So much more than---I don't know how to say it. I guess I just never knew anything about it at all, until now." Then his voice changed; apprehension sounded in it. "Connor, are you OK? Was it OK?"

"OK? Oh Johner, I didn't know it could be like that either!" She turned to look up at him, and her hand came up to stroke the side of his face. "It was---perfect! I'm happier than I've ever been in my life." She smiled a little smile, shaking her head, speaking half to herself. "I truly didn't know it could be so good."

He smiled also, relieved. "You know, I never made love before, Connor; I've only fucked. I was scared; it was like---like the first time I ever did it." He bent and kissed her forehead. "It happened so all of a sudden; I didn't have time to think about it. I wanted it to be perfect for you, but I just had to wing it, and I was scared."

"I hope you'll be scared the next time; the results are spectacular!" She laughed up at him. "Babe, it was wonderful. It's not something you need to think about, your instincts are exactly right. No one has ever made me one half so happy." She snuggled closer and ran her hand over his chest. "Your body is so beautiful. It turns me on, Johner; I just have to look at you and I've got sex on my mind."

"Now that's what I like to hear! You have my permission to look at me! A lot!" He grinned and stretched luxuriously. "I'm the most contented man in the world. And six hours ago I was the unhappiest man. Figure that!"

Then his brows drew together and his face became serious, as he thought hard about what was inside himself; it was an exercise not common in his past life, although the last few months had made it more familiar. "Connor, what I'm holding here in my arms is all of my happiness. You're all there is in the world to me. I live for you."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Johner, I love you so much! When you talk to me like that I'd do anything in the world for you." Then she shook her head and smiled up at him, tears forgotten. "You're way more than I deserve; big and sexy on the outside, and so warm and soft and loving on the inside. What a combination! Let's face it, you're perfect!"

"Good! I've got you fooled!" He grinned down at her. "May you never wake up and face the truth!" His face sobered. "But nothing could be more than you deserve! Look again, Connor; I'm the bottom of the barrel, you know that. My luck in having you is unbelievable! I'm lying here beside a beautiful, loving woman who wants me. Me! I'm not sure this whole thing is not a dream."

"It's not a dream, Johner. Want me to prove it?" Her hand moved down his body and curled around his penis. She began to stroke it softly.

"Oh!" He lay very still, trying to grasp that she would do this for him; and then his eyes drifted closed in rapture and he gasped, "Oh---yes, Connor, yes. Oh, Connor---." His hand came up to her breast. "Oh babe, how I want you---always, always."

Chapter 6

UNDERSTANDING

He opened his eyes, just to make sure. Yes, she was there. The warm weight that he felt against him, the band of warmth laying across his hips, was her. Somehow with his eyes closed he couldn't be sure; it seemed so wildly unlikely. But it was true; she was here, lying warm against him. This present hour of contentment was the blissful outcome of the previous hours of agony and tears.

He shifted his position slightly, not because he was uncomfortable, but because he knew it would make her move. He needed to feel her alive and moving against him. And she did move, stretching and then snuggling closer, raising her knee that lay across his groin a little higher. God, that felt good. He shifted once more; maybe she'd move that knee again.

Instead, she raised her head little to look at him. "Do you want me to get off you? Are you uncomfortable?"

"Jesus, no! I don't want you to move away from me, I want you right where you are. I just thought maybe you'd move your leg again. It feels pretty good when you do."

"You mean---like this?"

"Yes---yes, like that---God---oh yes." He moved with her to make the contact closer, shuddering with pleasure. "Oh, Connor, what you do to me."

"I can feel what I'm doing to you. It's pretty impressive for an old man."

He laughed, and rolled his body over hers.

"You know what surprised me?" He took her hand, carried it to his mouth, and kissed it.

"You're so soft. I know you're in good shape, I watch you work out; but in spite of it you're still so soft---your shoulders, your arms, your hips, your breasts---. I love to touch you. Your skin is silky, and you're---so soft." His hand came up to stroke her breast.

She turned to kiss the top of his head, where he lay within the curve of her arm, his head on her shoulder. "I'll tell you what surprised me; you're so gentle. Johner, I've never been made love to with such---such care. You touch me as if I were breakable, and I absolutely love it."

"You are breakable. I think about that. You're little and breakable, and I'm big and rough, and I've led a rough life; I haven't always been gentle with women. But I wanted to be gentle with you. I want to show you in every way I know that I love you." He stopped for a minute. "I love you. I never said that in my life, before you. Not to anyone."

"Oh, Johner, that's sad." Her hand turned his face to hers. "But you've said it now, and it's too late to take it back, you hear?" And she kissed his eyes and his mouth. "Was it hard? To say it to me?"

"God, no! I wanted to say it all the time, from the first day I lived in your house. Remember the day I moved in, when you stubbed your toe and dropped a whole stack of books? You swore a blue streak, and hopped around waving your stubbed toe, and you were so damn cute! I wanted to grab you, and kiss you, and tell you how much I loved you. But I just picked up the books and kept my mouth shut. I wanted to be with you so bad, any way I could, and I knew I didn't stand a chance with you as a man. So I shut up and swallowed it."

"You stood more than a chance! But you were always so casual; it didn't seem to make any difference to you whether I was around or not. I used to wonder when you were going to tell me that you were going out with someone, like a guy would tell his buddy. I thought you just wanted me as a friend, so I tried to be one. The one time that I did put my arms around you, you gave me a little hug, and then let go right away."

"I remember that hug. I did let you go right away; I had to, or I would have kissed you. But it nearly killed me. I didn't sleep at all that night. I didn't want to; I just wanted to remember how you felt against me. I wanted you so much, Connor. There were a bunch of nights when I didn't sleep a lot; you were right there, right on the other side of the wall. God, I wanted you in the nights!

"I remember the friend bit, too. You kept saying that you wanted to be my friend. It drove me crazy; friendship was not what I wanted from you."

She smiled. "Now I'll tell one. That first morning, when you got out of bed, my jaw dropped a

mile. Your body was so beautiful I nearly followed you into the bathroom. You sat at the breakfast table with no shirt on, and I wanted to bury my fingers in your chest hair. Your body figured in my sexual fantasies from that day on.”

“Oh really? Hm-m, sexual fantasies, huh? Tell me one.”

“I will not. Some things are not meant to be shared.”

“Well, if I’m in them I got rights! You’re the one who mentioned it anyway.”

“And I’m sorry already. I’ll probably never hear the end of it.”

“You could be right about that.” He chuckled and tightened his arms around her for a moment.

After a few minutes, he said. “Connor?”

“M-hm.”

“Could we talk about what happened before? Before this, I mean. About the---fight, or whatever it was.”

“Oh, yes, I want to talk about that.” She slid out from under his head, and sat up facing him. “I think we need to find out what happened.”

He raised himself on his elbow, and looked down at the bedclothes. When he didn’t say anything, she said softly, “What happened, Johner? Why did you get so angry?”

He looked up for a moment, then back down before he spoke. “I loved you so much, I wanted you until I thought I’d die with it, and then all of a sudden you tell me you want me to be your father! God, Connor, it hurt so much I just got mad.” He still looked down, away from her.

“I didn’t say that! I said you felt like family!”

“Well, there are only two possibilities, father or brother. Take your choice. Either one killed me.”

“There are more than two, Johner. Try husband.”

He froze for a long moment, then he sat up and turned to face her. His face was wrenched with emotion, and she thought he was very close to tears. His voice was husky as he said, “Is a husband family? I’ve never been a husband, I’ve never had a family. I didn’t know.”

Her arms went around him, her hand drawing his head down on her shoulder. “Oh, my dear one, of course a husband is family. So is a lover.”

“Johner, family is who you love.”

Chapter 7

TEASING

“OK, Ma, when did it happen?”

“What?”

“You know what I mean. When did Johner finally get what he’s been dying for since the day he walked in here. It’s obvious he has, he looks incredibly smug. And so do you, for that matter. I’m a big boy now, you can tell me.”

Sarah was embarrassed. "For God's sake, John, what do you want me to tell you? When? A while ago. There, are you satisfied?"

"Yeah. So is he, I bet."

"God! Leave me some privacy! John---you knew how Johner felt? How did you know?"

"It was pretty easy; I saw how he looked at you, once. Just once was plenty. He was so crazy about you that I felt damn sorry for him. You could see that it was killing him."

"And was I as easy to read?"

"I thought you just hadn't tumbled to how you felt about him yet."

She laughed shortly. "I knew. I just didn't dare admit it. He was so goddammed *friendly*. I thought he thought I was just a great landlady."

A door closed behind them. "That's exactly what I did think. And you are a great landlady. Among other things." Johner put the grocery bags down on the counter. "John, there's a couple more in the car. Will you---? Thanks."

When John was out the door, Sarah was swept into a vigorous embrace. "M-m-m-m!" He nuzzled into her neck. "I want to make love to you for two and a half hours, Connor. Send your son to the movies."

She giggled. "He's too old for that. He'll catch on."

"Good. He'll learn about life. The best part."

As John entered the kitchen with the groceries, Sarah moved out of Johner's arms, turning away from him. But Johner put his arms around her again from behind, pulling her against him, grinning over her shoulder at her amused son.

"Don't mind me!" said John, grinning back. "Mom, can I have a buck for the movies?"

"No one likes a smartass, John."

"Talk about a smartass, you should see the look smirking over your shoulder. He's disgustingly self-satisfied."

Sarah tried to free herself, without success. "Johner, will you behave!"

"How do you want me to behave? Will this do?" and he buried his face in her neck, making exaggerated biting motions, and growling fiercely.

John collapsed with laughter, pointing at his mother wordlessly. "Oh Mom---your face!" he said, when he had recovered somewhat, "You'll have to choose between Johner and your dignity! Is he going to do this to you at work too?" Then he bent over with laughter again at her horrified reaction to this thought.

Sarah, laughing unwillingly, finally disentangled herself from Johner, who was now contentedly kissing her neck in between chuckles. "All right, if you two are through amusing each other, can we get these groceries put away? My God, Johner, are we feeding the entire block? I never bought four bags of groceries at once in my life."

"That's because you can get a lot of TV dinners in one sack."

John collapsed again.

"You can go as soon as we finish the dishes. I know you're dying to get out of here. Have you

got a

“It’s general restlessness, but I take violent exception to ‘adolescent!’”

Johner interposed before hostilities could begin. “Well, whatever the right word is, I won’t be too sorry to see you go. I wouldn’t mind being alone with your mother.”

“No kidding! I never saw two people more besotted. And I’m accused of adolescent behavior! Johner, I can’t even give you eighteen years old, sixteen is the absolute top.” John laughed and shook his head. “And Mom, you’re right up there with him. I’m expecting to see you blush any minute now.”

At which his mother obliged him by blushing; an event which amused John and Johner far more than she could see any possible reason for.

As his laughter finally subsided, John kissed his mother and started for the door, then stopped. “If it makes any difference to you two, I just want to say this whole thing is OK with me. I like to see people happy.” He stepped through the door, then stuck his head back inside. “---even relatives.”

“He’s a good kid,” said Johner, still laughing a little. “And he’s got a great sense of humor.”

“Oh sure, you two can spend the rest of our lives egging each other on to laugh at me! What have I got myself into?” As she looked up at him, further words were arrested; she stared in alarm at his expression. “Johner? What?”

He pulled her to him fiercely and buried his face in her neck, straining her to him with all the force of his powerful arms. He said nothing, just held her, rocking her back and forth.

“Sweetheart,” she said softly, “I love being held like this, you can keep it up as long as you like. But I’d like to know about it if something is wrong, Johner.”

His words were muffled in her neck. “Nothing is wrong.” Slowly his frantic grasp of her loosened, and his head came up. He continued, speaking hesitantly, “You said something. You said, ‘the rest of our lives’.” His voice took on urgency. “Connor, is this for the rest of our lives? Is it?”

“Yes, of course it is.”

His whole frame slumped as he relaxed back onto her shoulder. His voice was thick with his emotion. “God, I’ve been afraid to ask.”

She held him to her, one hand stroking the back of his head, kissing his cheek, his ear, whatever she could reach. “I love you, Johner. I never thought for a minute that this was anything less than the rest of our lives. How could I ever let you go?”

He raised his head to look at her, and searched her face for a moment; then his mouth came down on hers in a passionate kiss. Without breaking the kiss he swept her off the floor into his arms, and started for the bedroom.

“I almost hope you have some other secrets you’re not telling me about, if it inspires you to action like that.” Sarah smiled at him and reached up to wipe a trickle of sweat off his face. “You’re wonderful in bed, Johner. Absolutely the best. I’d keep you around with no other reason. But there are others---” She grinned, “although I can’t think of any right now.”

“You’re not fooling me for a minute. All this malarkey about how great I am in bed is just a cover to keep me happy so I’ll cook.”

"No, it's to keep you happy so you'll take me back to bed."

"Try to stop me. I'm not the only one who's great in the sack." He paused for a moment, and his face sobered. "Do you know that you drive me crazy? I can't get enough. I don't think I ever will."

"I hope not." And she pulled his head down for her kiss.

Chapter 8

TROUBLE

"Mom! What happened?"

"Is he gone yet?"

"He's sitting at the kitchen table, staring at his hands. I couldn't get three words out of him. For Pete's sake, what happened?"

"Nothing that concerns anyone else. I want him out of here. He knows that, what's keeping him here?"

"The one thing he did say was, 'Ask her to talk to me.' Will you?"

"No."

"Mom, please. This is important stuff; you can't just refuse to talk about it. Just tell me, what happened?"

"John, leave me alone! Just get out of here and leave me the hell alone!"

"Did he hit you? Answer this one thing."

"No he didn't hit me. Now will you get out!"

Johner was still sitting at the table, staring at his hands. He looked up as John walked in.

"She won't talk to you." Johner's head went down again. "Or to me either. You'll have to tell me what happened. She's pretty mad."

Johner didn't seem to hear. He pushed his chair back from the table. "I guess that's it then." He raised himself up stiffly, without his usual smooth movement, and walked to the door. When he turned, there was no expression on his face at all. "Tell her--I'm sorry." he said, and the door shut behind him. John stared at it for a moment, then crossed the room and followed him out. By the time he stepped out of the garage to look, Johner was across the street, walking rapidly away.

Suppertime came and went; when the ten o'clock news was over, John fixed himself a sandwich, and another for his mother.

He knocked on her door, then opened it immediately. No point in waiting for her to tell him to stay out, he thought. But she didn't say anything, just turned her head to look at him. He put the sandwich on the table beside her bed, and stood looking down at her.

"Thanks, John. That was good of you." She sat up, but made no move toward the food.

"Are you ready to talk now, Mom?"

She smiled at him. "You're being very kind, my dear. But I don't really have anything to say. It's over, that's all. Nothing lasts; I should have remembered that, shouldn't I?"

Please, Mom, I'm part of this family too, and this is important to me. Can't you tell me what happened?"

"I guess you are involved, aren't you? It certainly affects your home life." She laughed a little. "It'll be a lot quieter now."

"I can't believe this happened. You love this man. You're angry now, but you love him. I haven't seen you like this with a man in my life. There have been a lot of men, but they weren't like Johner. What the hell happened? Come on, tell me about it, Mom."

"All right. It's not much to tell. At work today I was having a good time with Lou Peabody. We were laughing and kidding; actually, he was kidding me about Johner. This was just before we left for home. I met Johner at the door; by the time we got to the parking lot I knew there was something wrong. He wasn't talking at all. So I poked him a little, just a friendly poke, to wake him up." She paused, and looked away from John. "He turned on me like a crazy man. He grabbed me by my arms and slammed me up against the car, and started to yell at me about---I don't know exactly, something about the way I was acting, trying to get men to look at me? or me looking at them? I don't know---it was so crazy I didn't even get angry for a couple of minutes. But he didn't stop, he was so mad he wasn't making any sense, and he was hurting my arms. So I broke his hold. He raised his fist, and I thought he was going to hit me, so I took defensive action. It was quite a little brawl." She laughed shortly. "He's very good. If it hadn't stopped when it did, I'd have gotten hurt."

"What stopped it?"

"I don't know. He just stopped. He just turned and walked away. I got in the car and drove home. I stopped for a few minutes on the way, I didn't think I was driving very well and I had the shakes a bit, so I thought I should cool off. When I got here, he was sitting in the kitchen. We didn't talk. I said that I wanted him out, and I went to my room. That's all."

"I know what stopped it. He could see that he was going to hurt you. He adores you, Mom. He wouldn't hurt you if it was to save his own life."

"Oh, John, he could break my arms and it wouldn't hurt as much as what he did today. He destroyed what we had together---it's gone---it's gone!" The last words were a bereft lament; her eyes filled, she looked at him blindly, and the tears came.

She cried until John was afraid for her. He put his arms around her and spoke words of comfort, but he doubted that she even heard him. She bent over in a storm of grief, holding her stomach and rocking her body as each sob convulsed her.

After a long time she quieted, and he laid her down on the bed and covered her. She pulled the quilt up around her throat, and sighed, and was instantly asleep. He put out the light and softly closed her door behind him.

He went through the house without stopping, out the back door, and into the car. With no clear idea of how he was going to do it, he knew only that he had to find Johner.

But he didn't find him. And the days that followed were equally luckless. Johner didn't come back to work. George Roberts received a phone call on the first day; Johner said only that he and Connor had had a disagreement; and that, with apologies, he thought it was best if he didn't show himself at work again.

When John inquired about what factual material the company had on Johner, George shrugged and said that his address and phone number were Connor's. There was nothing else. The federal government was very secretive about vital statistics since the big computer data scandals; he found no help there. The police politely informed him that they didn't look for full grown able-bodied men who had walked away carrying nothing that didn't belong to them. Johner disappeared into the millions who lived and worked in Westcoast, and there was no way to find him.

Sarah went on. She went to work every day, she fixed food, even if she ate little of it, and she went to bed every night, although John wondered how much she slept when he looked at her face in the morning. But those things that supported her life and her work were all she did. Those things, and she watched television. On the nights that she was home she sat down in front of the set as soon as there was nothing else claiming her attention; and until bedtime she watched, seldom looking up, and as seldom smiling at what was intended to entertain her.

Johner's room remained as it had been. He never came back for his things, never sent word about where to send them. The door was shut, and the room was apparently shut out of her mind also.

John became more concerned for her as the days went by, and his summer break drew down to its end. He left his summer job a few days early, planning to use the time in the search for Johner, although his hopes were not great. He had not told his mother of his long effort; she had said not one word about Johner since the night of the disaster, almost three months before, and John hesitated to bring it up. But now he was leaving soon and he was greatly concerned about what would happen to her when he was no longer here. It was time to talk about it.

"Mom, I want to talk about Johner."

They were sitting at the dinner table, the remains of two TV dinners before them. Sarah smiled. "Did the TV dinners make you think of him?"

John was very much surprised at the casual tone of her voice. He had expected a battle, but her face showed only mild interest. "No, not exactly. I've been meaning to talk to you about him."

"Talk away. I'm listening."

"I've been looking for him. Ever since he went away. I want him to come back, Ma. I want you to take him back. You're dying without him."

"You exaggerate, John. I'm not dying, I'm not even sick. I'm living without him, is what I'm doing."

"Barely. You're just barely alive. Mom, I can't find him. I've done everything I can think of and then some. I don't know what to do next, and I can't stand the thought of leaving you here alone."

"I can take care of myself. I've been doing it with some success since before you were born."

Go back to school and quit worrying.”

John knew suddenly what to say next. “Will you do something for me? Think about Johner. Just sit there in your chair, and let yourself think about him. He wants you, Mom. He’s dying without you. I know he is. God, I hope he’s still alive. When he left here that day he looked ready to die. Have you thought about how he’s doing? He has all the grief you have, and he has all the guilt too. He knows every day and every night that he did it, that he’d still be here with you except for himself, it’s all his own fault. God, he’s suffering. And he’s worrying about you, wondering if you’re OK, feeling the guilt twice as much because he knows you’re suffering too. And he’s wondering if you’re getting over it, and thinking that maybe you’ve found another man. And that thought is killing him. And then he’s feeling bad about that, because he should be glad if you’re getting over it. Mom, I never saw love in my life like he feels for you. He’s dying from this. He’s dying for you.

“Just sit there for a few minutes and give him this much. Think about him, Ma.”

He saw in her face that she had decided to do as he asked. He saw her thoughts turn inward, her eyes close. She leaned back in the chair, and her body relaxed, her hands in her lap, as she thought about Johner.

After a little while tears slid slowly down from her closed eyes. She sobbed once, and then her eyes opened and she looked at him, her gaze intense. “Oh John, I want him! I want him so much. Why doesn’t he come back to me?”

As she looked at him, he saw something dawn in her eyes. She got up from her chair and picked up her keys from the counter.

“I know where he is.” And she was out the door.

The street hadn’t changed. The streetlight still shone down on the spot where she had left three incapacitated bodies behind. And over there was the front door of the building.

She went in without looking at the mailboxes, and climbed the stairs. Here, it was this one. She knocked lightly.

He was sitting in the dark; he hadn’t got up yet to turn the lights on. There was really no need; it would be time to go to bed soon.

When the knock came, he almost didn’t get up to answer it. When he did get up it seemed more than he could do to face anyone. But he kept moving toward the door, almost without intending to.

When he saw her, for a long moment he didn’t think anything at all. He just looked at her, not believing. Then he thought ‘Did I go to sleep in the chair?’

She said nothing, only stood in the doorway, waiting.

He put out his hand, slowly, and touched her cheek. She was real. His hand trailed over her cheek, along her neck, and lightly touched her breast. She was real. She had come back to him. Then his arms went around her and he pulled her to him, burying his face in that beloved familiar place in her neck while he took strangled breaths and held back the tears.

After a minute he began to kiss her. Her hair, her ears, her eyes, her cheeks, her nose, and at last her mouth. His mouth was gentle on hers; it opened softly, and his tongue just stroked her lips, caressing them with delicate touches. It was she who asked for more, who drew his tongue into her mouth, who began to stroke his body with her hands. As she touched him,

she felt the welcome surge of his erection pressed against her belly. Without any words she showed him how welcome it was, how much she had missed his touch on her.

They stood embraced, still in the open doorway, kissing and caressing one another while desire eddied through them both, quickening breath and making tremors pulse over bodies. As emotion drew to a high point, Johner picked her up in his arms, and kicking the door shut behind him he carried her to the bed. Before he lay down beside her, he reached out and turned on the small bedside lamp. She smiled up at him, remembering that he liked to make love with the lights on. Remembering---so many lovely things. This massive, rough featured, unpolished man was as wonderful a lover as there could ever be.

Still without words, he began to undress her, unfastening her clothes as he kissed and caressed her. She reached for his belt buckle, anxious to feel his skin against hers, wanting after so long to enjoy again the sensation of her breasts moving against his soft thatch of chest hair. But he stopped her, putting her hands firmly back on the bed. Then he leisurely finished the job he had started, sitting up to remove her shirt and pants, skinning her underpants off, then stopping just to look at her. He pressed her shoulders back against the bed, signaling for her to stay there. Then he got up and stood beside the bed, looking down at her, as he began to take off his clothes.

When he was finished, and that beautiful body was bare before her, he continued to stand looking down at her.

“Please, Johner, please.”

He came to lie beside her then, his big body pressed against her for its full length. He spoke to her at last, his voice husky and velvet soft. “Have you come back to me? Oh, Connor, have you come back to me?” Tears stood in his eyes.

“I was dying without you. I love you, I love you. Please, Johner, make love to me. Oh---oh yes, please, touch me there, oh---“ His hand was on her breast, rubbing softly across its peak. His fingers closed on the nipple, pulling gently, rolling it between them, while she moaned softly.

He began then to do other things, to show her with his hands and his mouth how glad he was at her return, how much he had missed her, how he had longed for the touch of her body. And she responded gladly, with pleasure in the sensuous love he was making, and pleasure also in his joy, as he renewed his acquaintance with old delights.

When John came into the kitchen the next morning, Johner was cooking breakfast.

“She found you in one night. Great. I look for three months, and then she goes out at ten o’clock one night and brings you home. How the hell did she do that? Dammit, Johner, I’m glad to see you!” John was enveloped in Johner’s bear hug, and hugged back with real pleasure.

“I was starving to death slowly on a steady diet of TV dinners. Did you know they have TV *breakfasts* now? It’s degenerate!” He sobered for a moment. “I am really glad to see you, Johner, for Mom’s sake. She was dying without you.”

“I was---dying too. She told me that it was you who said the magic words that made her come looking for me. Thank you, John. In my life I can never repay that debt.”

“Sure you can. Cook dinners. I think forever would be long enough.”

Chapter 9

RAINSTORM

“Johner, you’re so thin!” She looked at his body lying beside her. Always sleek, it was now without any padding of fat at all. “You’ve been working out to excess. Not eating enough, either; your body fat is just about non-existent. What have you been doing to yourself?”

“Working on the docks. It took a lot of energy, and it made me so tired at night that I could sleep. At least most of the time. And sometimes I was too tired to fix something to eat. I guess it did get me in shape, at that. I didn’t notice.”

“Well, I noticed. You’re too thin. Eat, you hear? And I think we’ll both sleep better now---now that we’re sleeping together again.”

“Having you in bed with me; that was what I missed the very most, I think. I don’t mean the sex; I missed that plenty, I ached for you in the nights. But I missed having you in my arms when I went to sleep. I missed you so much, Connor. I wanted you all the time, whatever I did, wherever I went.” He pulled her closer to him, so that her body was tight against him; and he began to stroke her back.

“You know, I’ve never lived with a woman before, not like this, not to go to bed with every night, and have breakfast in the morning, and talk with, and just be with.” He reached down to kiss her lightly. “I’ve shared quarters with women, but they were just a nuisance when I wasn’t hitting the sack with them. I tried to stay out of their way as much as possible. They were always talking, and they were never happy with what they had.”

She groaned. “Jesus, Johner! I bet they weren’t. If a person is ‘just a nuisance’, that person might feel just a mite unwanted; that might make the person ‘never happy’.

He lifted his head to look at her “Are you telling me it was my fault?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Oh. I never thought about it before. I haven’t shared quarters with a woman for years; it got so it wasn’t worth it just to get laid. ---Oh---you’re saying I just wanted to get laid, so I didn’t treat them like people.”

“That’s right.”

“That I was selfish and crude and insensitive.”

“Couldn’t have put it better myself.”

“Oh.” He lay still, staring at the ceiling, thinking about what they had said, and reaching into the past for memories. After a minute he said, “I think you’re right.”

“You damn betcha I’m right.”

“If I’m so awful, how come you love me?”

“I didn’t know about this.” She grinned. “I may have to reassess the situation.”

His body stiffened; there was a pause. When he spoke again his voice was hard: “Don’t say that. Don’t threaten me, Connor. Don’t ever fucking threaten me!”

She sat up and turned around to look at him. “What?” Her voice was sharp, as immediate anger rose in her at his tone.

He said nothing for a moment. Then he spoke more softly, his face twisted with a difficult

effort at control of himself. "Wait---wait, Connor. ---I don't want to have a fight. I'm trying to cool it. I'm trying hard, Connor---you help too."

She looked at him for a moment, appraising his attitude. Then her face softened, and she said, "OK, Johner. I'll try too."

His tension relaxed slowly as he saw that she wasn't angry. He sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. His head went down into his hands. "God, I don't know what I'm going to do. How am I going to keep you?"

"That first morning, when we had breakfast together, I knew that this was something different. To me, women had always been just for screwing. But you were something else; I wanted to talk to you, to know you. Jesus Christ---do you know how that blew me away?" He shook his head slowly, as if the memory still amazed him. "When I kissed you at the door, I wanted to lock it and just keep you there with me. By the time that door shut between us I was in love with you, but it took me a while to figure out what it was. Hell, Connor, nothing like it had ever happened to me before; I'd have laughed my ass off at the idea of being in love.

"Connor, this---what we have---is my whole life; there is nothing else. I want you so much, I need you so much, that I---I just go crazy at the thought that you'll leave me, that you'll find someone else. I'm scared to death that what happened that day in the parking lot will happen again; when a man even looks at you, I feel like doing murder. And when you smile back---." He took a hard breath, and looked up at her.

"What am I going to do, Connor? How am I going to keep you? The fact that I'm afraid you'll leave me will drive you away from me." He shook his head. "It's Catch 22."

She shook her head also. "It's my problem too. When you get angry at me, my head screams 'no one controls me, no one!', and I'm angry instantly. So, we both have a problem."

She put her arms around him, and lifted his face to hers "What we have to do is find a way to stop this thing before it gets us both so angry. You made a great beginning a few minutes ago. Johner. I never saw more effort spent than you put into controlling yourself. Thank you for that, babe. If you can do that, and I can come halfway, we can solve this." She kissed him softly.

His face lightened. "Do you think so? Oh, God, Connor, do you think so? He pulled her close to him, his face buried in that familiar place between her chin and her shoulder. His voice was muffled as he said, "I've been so scared, ever since I came back."

He began to kiss her. His mouth slid over her, to the hollow at the base of her throat, and down to her breast.

"God, I love you so much, I want you all the time---" That velvet voice was further softened by a hint of tears. "Just love me, please, please love me."

Without his making any overt gesture that would have embarrassed him, it was clear that George was glad to have Johner back. He gave them their assignment and said gruffly, suppressing a smile, "Now get to work. You two have wasted enough of this company's time. Go!"

Lou Peabody hooked Sarah's arm as they were leaving. "Glad to see you smiling again, Toots. I thought I was going to have to step in to put that smile back on your face!"

"For God's sake, Lou, when are you going to quit calling me Toots! And what makes you think

you could put a smile on my face?" Sarah laughed up at him.

Johner looked from one of them to the other. His face showed nothing, but Sarah looked at him quickly, and then reached to squeeze his hand. He looked at her for a moment, still expressionless, then smiled like a sunrise, all over his face. Sarah smiled back delightedly, then reached to hug him quickly, in spite of Lou's interested gaze. "It works. Oh, babe, it works!" she whispered into his ear.

When they were in the car at last, and had privacy, she said exultantly. "Well, how about that! It works!"

"It sure did that time. When you grabbed my hand, my brain said, just like it was supposed to, 'She wants me. She loves me. She's going home with me tonight', and it was all right. Just like that, it was OK. I never thought that this brainstorm of yours would work, but when you touched me, when you give me that signal, I knew you were thinking about me, not him, and I knew what you were thinking, and it was OK.

"Hey Connor, there's a motel." And he turned the car into the parking lot.

"Johner, we're working. Johner, don't you turn off that ignition. Don't you dare!"

But he did.

Chapter 10

PARTY

"Tonight will tell the tale. If the Brainstorm can work tonight, we'll never have to worry again. So far it's worked great, but you understand I know a lot of these people very well, and I've known them for a long time. I'm going to get hugged and kissed and probably flirted with. People will be drinking, and they do things—well you know what I mean. You're sure you want to go? We can stay home if you'd rather."

"I want to go. We need to find out if it's going to work. I won't be drinking; no need to pour alcohol on the fire." He paused. "You know, Connor, I'm not really---I haven't spent a lot of time with---civilized people. I'm not big on manners, and that kind of thing. I hope I won't do anything stupid, that'll make you sorry you went with me." He looked down, embarrassed by his confession.

"Babe, you'll be fine. These people are not so far from you as you think. You get along fine with the people at the shop, and these people are just more of the same. You'll like them, and they'll like you." She smoothed the heavy silk turtleneck across his chest. "You look marvelous. I knew that this shirt would look great on you; the blue matches your eyes exactly. Put on your jacket, and let's go."

"Not until I look." He turned her around to face him, and stepped back. "Connor, you are a beautiful woman. You look terrific. God, how did you ever happen to me? You could have any man in the world." He shook his head in wonder.

"I don't want any man. 'I want you. I love you. I'm going home with you tonight.' It's the Brainstorm litany!" She smiled at him. "Now put on your jacket. We're going to a party! The Westcoast Association of Security Officers annual bash."

They made one circuit of the room together, Sarah performing introductions, stopping for greetings and small talk.

"There, now everyone knows that you're with me, and if I'm lucky most of the women will leave you alone." She grinned up at him, enjoying the disconcerted look on his face.

"Women don't exactly fall all over me, Connor. I don't think you've got a lot to worry about."

"Oh yeah? Well, we'll see. Let's dance."

Johner was a marvelous dancer, something she had found out in the kitchen at home. His innate grace and catlike balance showed to great advantage on the dance floor. She saw more than one woman's eyes following them. 'Just wait until a few more drinks go down,' she thought. 'They'll be all over him.'

After a few dances they split up, and Sarah made the rounds again, catching up with old friends, laughing and talking, but always with the Brainstorm in mind. Whenever she was in conversation with a man, her eyes roamed the room until she found him. When their eyes met, the message was given. In his mind, the Brainstorm played over. 'She wants me. She loves me. She's going home with me.' After the third or fourth time, he grinned and gave her a quick thumbs up.

As a little time went by, she found that if she wanted to locate him she should look on the dance floor. She found him by the blue turtleneck; he had taken off his jacket. And he was dancing with a different woman every time she looked. She grinned to herself. 'Told you so.'

On one of her regular room scans to locate him she found Johner talking to a beautiful blonde woman who was standing very close to him, looking up into his face with interest. 'Oh my God! Lydia Brady!' Sarah started immediately to his rescue.

When she arrived, Lydia looked at her with surprise and disappointment. "Sarah! Don't--- please don't tell me that this beautiful hunk of man belongs to you."

"Sorry. He belongs to me. How are you, Lydia? It's been a long time; I didn't know you were back. If I had known, I'd never have let him wear that shirt."

"You're right, it was the shirt. But I'd have discovered him anyway. He is something! Tell me, does he like it when you---" and she proceeded to describe in plain English an act that was usually spoken of with a slang expression that made the point without graphic detail; when it was spoken of at all, which it wasn't in polite company.

While Johner stood in stunned silence, Sarah answered without even blinking. "I haven't tried that yet," she said thoughtfully, "I'll have to put it on my list."

"Jesus Christ, ladies! Don't hold back! Just say whatever comes into your heads!" Shaking his head, he grinned at them both, then changed the subject. "What's this about my shirt? What's wrong with it?"

Lydia put her hand in the middle of his chest. "Nothing's wrong with it, believe me! Nor with what's under it." Her hand moved across his chest, then drifted downward, and didn't stop at his belt. Sarah stepped smoothly between them before things went any further. "OK, Lydia, that's off limits."

“Just checking. Johner, you and I could---.” She looked up at him, fishing for encouragement; when he looked back with no expression at all, she sighed. “OK, I got it. I guess I’ll have to go looking for the second best piece of beefsteak on the floor. ‘Night, all.” And she drifted away.

“What in the holy hell was that?” Johner grinned after her.

“That was Lydia Brady. She specializes in shock. And from the look on your face when she said---what she said, it worked. You came about as close to looking shocked as I think is possible for you.”

“Damn right I was shocked. I never heard anyone say it right out like that, and I’ve been in some very rough places.”

“Well, then she succeeded partially. But her intent was to get you into bed; it works with a lot of men. She says something like that, and they start to drool immediately. I didn’t notice you drooling, though.”

“If you want me to drool, just start taking off your clothes. I’ll be happy to oblige.” He smiled at her. “I love you, Connor. I want you, not some bimbo who talks dirty.”

“I’m glad to hear that, because the competition is fierce tonight. I should have a Brainstorm litany; you have danced with every woman in this room!”

He blushed. She laughed delightedly and put her hand up to caress his hot cheek. “Oh, Johner, that’s so cute! But I told you, didn’t I? You underestimate yourself, babe. You’re a very attractive man; you’ve got some kind of thing that just oozes sex all over.” She laughed again as he looked embarrassed by the compliment.

“They just kept asking me!” He shook his head. “Jesus, Connor, I’m no ladies man, I’m not used to being able to pick and choose; but I could have. They didn’t just ask me to dance, two of them---no, three of them asked me to fuck them! No hinting around; just flat out. I felt like I should look behind me to see who they were talking to!”

“And what did you say when they asked?”

“I said ‘No thanks’. At least I think I did. I hope I said thanks. Anyway, I said no.”

“I hope you said thanks too. But the important thing is that you said no. I don’t share well, Johner. I’d be very likely to get mad. Although I can understand why they asked. I would too. In fact, I do. Shall we go home?”

He looked down at her with his love in his eyes, and smiled. “‘She wants me. She loves me. She’s going home with me tonight.’ Let’s go home. I want you too.”

Chapter 11

ANXIETY

The warehouse loomed large at the end of the deserted street. Darkness filled the corners and doorways; the one streetlight made little leeway against midnight.

Johner pulled the car slowly in to the curb, lights out. He turned off the ignition and spoke softly, “Let’s go, Connor. They’re in there, and you know they won’t be happy to see us. Remember, all we have to do is identify the merchandise; don’t be a hero. Be careful, and watch your back.”

“Johner, I’ve been doing this for fifteen years. Don’t give me instructions!”

He grinned at her. “Sorry. I’m always nervous for you when we do this kind of thing. Just trying to protect my interest; if anything happens to you, it happens to me too.”

She leaned over the gearshift to kiss him lightly. “I forgive your preaching. I know why you do it, I worry about you too.”

As they prepared to leave the car, both automatically checked their weapons and radios.

Johner frowned. “I still think we should be wearing vests. These fuckers are liable to be mad.”

“Well, I’d be happy to have them, only they’re forty miles away at the shop. It’ll be all right.”

“Huh! Famous last words.”

It had gone very well, if a firefight can be said to go well. Shots had greeted their cautious entrance to the room; there was no question of negotiation, nothing to do but defend themselves.

Now there were two men down and not moving. After a few minutes of complete silence, Johner leaned cautiously out from behind the packing case, whispering over his shoulder, “Maybe there weren’t three of them.” But another shot boomed in the big empty space, and Johner spun around and went down without a sound. Sarah returned fire automatically, and heard the scream that resulted, but her attention was only on him.

“Johner. Johner?” He didn’t answer. She crouched over him, unable to check on him until she was sure the shooting was over. She scanned the big room for movement. It was almost empty, only a few boxes and barrels scattered haphazardly, just visible in the gloom left by the one ceiling light. From behind a pile of cartons the body of the man she had just shot sprawled, and the two other bodies hadn’t moved; she could see no sign of life.

“I think that was really the last one. Johner?” She looked down at last, unable to keep from checking on him any longer. He was lying on his side; she couldn’t see where he was hit. She rolled him onto his back.

“Oh God, Johner!” The wound was immediately evident; his chest was soaked with blood.

She rode with him in the ambulance, trying to stay out of the way of the paramedics, as they worked rapidly and efficiently over him.

One of them looked over at her, “It’s a good thing we were so close when we got the call. He was bleeding to death.”

She said nothing, digesting that information. The man watched her face for a second, then said, “There’s a chance he’s going to be OK. Don’t give up.”

Sarah thanked him with a strained smile. “Does he need blood right now? We’re the same blood type.” Both men looked up with interest. “Are you sure? Absolutely positive?” “Yes, of course. We’ve given blood together, people always comment on it. Our blood is exactly the same.”

“I’m wondering about anything transmissible in your blood. Are you---sleeping with him? If you

are, he's probably already got anything you've got."

"We live together. I'm not aware of anything."

The men looked at each other. "Direct transfusion?" "I've never done it." "Neither have I, but this man is going to die without it; we gave most of our saline to Ed on that last call, and what we had is all gone." "OK, let's do it." They asked her to sign a release form, "---To cover ass, we're taking a chance here."

She laid down on the second Gurney, and they did the job with dispatch. When the blood was running, one of them said to her, "It'll be another ten minutes to the hospital; this will probably save his life."

Sarah lay on the Gurney and prayed to a God she had no close acquaintance with, 'Oh God, please don't take him I need him I love him so please God let him stay here he's so dear and I love him I love him---' The prayer went on and on, while slow tears slid from the corners of her eyes, and her life-giving blood flowed into him.

She sat in the waiting room for four hours while Johner was in surgery; after a few minutes she wished that she were back in the ambulance, where she could see him, and where she had communication with those who were working on him. She stood, and sat, and paced; she cried a little, but not much. They might say she could see him, and she couldn't be crying.

When the doctor finally came out to talk to her, he was smiling. "He's going to be all right. It'll be a long pull, but he's going to be fine."

Her resolve not to cry wasn't proof against this news. Her face crumpled, and the man put his arms around her and held her with kindness while she sobbed out her relief and her thankfulness. After a couple of minutes, she got some control of her tears, backed out of his embrace, and looked up at him. "Sorry, I'm sorry, I just---".

"Hey, don't apologize, it's OK. Are you ready to hear about it?"

"Yes, tell me."

"The bullet missed his heart by about 10 millimeters. He's very lucky to be alive. And lucky that you were there for the transfusion; it saved his life. The paramedics took a big chance to do what they did for him; it wasn't exactly routine. But he owes his life to them, and to you.

"He'll be in the hospital for a while. We had to do quite a bit of repair, and his lung was involved, so there will be some time needed for recuperation. He's got a strong body, and he's in very good shape. That will help a lot." He smiled at her. "He's still out, but I think it would be OK if you went into the recovery room to sit with him. He should come to within the hour. Would you like to do that?"

"Oh, yes, please!"

His face was white, but he was breathing easily, and she was so glad to see him alive and breathing at all that the tears began again to slide down her face.

She reached under the blanket and captured his hand, raising it to her lips and then just holding it, looking at each finger, examining his nails, feeling the texture of his skin, absorbing the fact of his continued existence here in this world with her.

"Watcha doin'?" His voice was soft and the words were slurred.

She looked up to see his eyes open, his smile just showing.

"I'm just loving you, and thanking the gods that you're still here with me." She smiled back brilliantly, through her tears.

"I'm here. Can't leave you." His eyes drifted shut again.

Johner was not the world's most patient patient. After the first two or three days, when he was sedated and slept most of the time, he began to agitate to go home. By the middle of the second week, he was raising hell.

"Why the fuck do I have to stay here? I can lay in bed at home. Jesus Christ, these nurses are driving me batty! I don't want to pee in a bottle with some strange woman watching me! Ask the doctor when I can go home!"

"Johner, we've been through this. Not for at least another week." She laughed at the expression on his face.

"Well, then, ask him when I can get up. Just to go to the can! Jesus, Connor, this is undignified!"

"Maybe this'll teach you to stay under cover when you're in a dangerous situation. You deserve to pee in a bottle!"

"Thank you! Thank you very much! I sure appreciate your support, and I hope to be able to thank you more properly when I get out of this hellhole. Have you ever been spanked, Connor?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"Damn right! And I will follow through with great relish." He grinned evilly. "Come to think of it, Connor, it might be a kick to spank you. I understand some people find it quite a turn-on. Not that I need a turn-on; if I don't get home to bed with you pretty soon, I'm going to start thinking the nurses look good. And that is quite a stretch.

"Ask the doctor when I can go to bed with you, Connor. Or better still, why don't you just come over here, closer to me. I want to talk to you."

"Talk, my foot! I know what you've got in mind. Johner, you're a sick man, and injured too!" she laughed, "Try to keep your mind on recovery."

"I need a drink of water. Come over here and help me."

She moved closer to him, teasing a little, keeping just out of reach. "I think you can reach the water without my help."

"Connor, get your butt over here. I wanna feel you up!"

She laughed and moved next to the bed. "At least that was honest."

His hand moved over her, sliding over her hip and down her leg. "God, you feel good. I want you, Connor."

She leaned over to stroke the side of his face. "I want you too. I miss you in bed at night, Johner."

His hand moved to the inside of her thigh, and slid up. "Why don't you wear a skirt tomorrow? Then I'll show you exactly how much I miss you."

"I'd be pleased to show you the same, but I'm afraid of the strain on your incision."

"Damn my incision. Show me!"

She grinned at him, and slid her hand down his body under the blanket, carefully skirting the

bandage on his chest.

Go just a little further down---a little further---there! Oh Connor, right there! Oh, Connor---yes, oh yes---God---don't stop---oh, Connor!"

She grinned at him, and leaned down to kiss him. "There, now you'll sleep better."

"Thanks, Connor, I needed that. But it's not the same as sleeping with you. I want to go home to bed with you. Ask the doctor---"

"Johner, if you tell me once more to ask the doctor when you can go home, I'll scream!"

"---As I was about to say, when somebody interrupted, 'Ask the doctor when we can have sex.'"

"Pardon me? Isn't it a little late to ask that?"

A grin spread over his face. "You talking about what we just did? That's not sex, that's just a little entertainment. I want to take you to bed and touch you everywhere and kiss you all over and---well, you know the drill. He sobered quickly. "I miss you, Connor. I miss going to sleep with you in my arms. This place is not good. I want to go home."

"I'll talk to the doctor again. I think you'll do better at home, too."

The doctor agreed; he also could see that Johner was fretting to be gone from the hospital. So Johner got his way, and was borne triumphantly home.

On the first night, when bedtime came there was an argument about who was going to sleep where. Sarah could see that the trip home had tired him, and thought that he would be more comfortable alone, just for this one night, but Johner was having no part of it.

"Woman, get into this bed! I might as well be in the hospital if you don't. In fact, it would be better. The service is quicker there, and they don't give me so much lip."

Sarah capitulated; he was going to be very upset if he didn't get his way. "Okay, but just to sleep. No fooling around! You're exhausted!"

"When I make love to you, I am not fooling around! But OK, just to hold you while we go to sleep. I'm too tired to do you justice anyway." He smiled, and pulled the covers back with a flourish. "In, woman, in!"

Sarah climbed into the bed with no further words, secretly thankful that he had insisted. She slid up against him; her body spooned in front of his. Johner pulled her closer to him, and made a snuggling movement to bring her into full contact with his body. "God, this is what I wanted; this is what I missed so much."

"How's the wound? Am I leaning on it?"

"Christ, Connor, I'll let you know if I'm hurting!" He paused and his voice softened, its velvet timbre very much in evidence. "I just want to feel you lying soft and relaxed against me; there is no feeling in the world to match it. There---there, like that. Oh Connor, this is what I missed."

"I missed it too, Johner. I'm so grateful to have you back where you belong at last."

"Me too, Connor, me too."

Chapter 11a

Adult

Johner awoke to find her in his arms, her body spooned against him. She was sleeping peacefully, completely relaxed, a soft warm weight that was so dear to him. As he lay there, he silently thanked whatever gods there might be for the gift of this woman.

But his thoughts of her were not all prayerful, not after so long without the feel of her against him. Almost at once his penis lifted and hardened and began to press against her hip. And his hand, already holding her breast, began to move, his fingers touching her nipple softly, running around the areola, rubbing back and forth over the hardening peak.

She woke slowly, luxuriating in the feeling of his hands on her again, stretching a little, covering his hand with hers to let him know how much she wanted him to touch her. She turned, moving onto her back, so she could see his face.

“Morning, babe. I love you. And I love this. I want you so much.” She smiled up at him, lying still under his hand, feeling the heat that followed its movement spread through her body, waiting for what he would do next.

He smiled down at her. “Mornin’. I love it too, and I’ve missed it so much. I’m crazy for you, Connor.”

His hand moved down and into the vee above her thighs, and began to touch her very softly, running slowly over the outer lips of her vagina, touching her with gentle pressure, making her sigh with pleasure. After a few minutes she spread her legs a little, giving him room and permission to enter, to move deeper into her body.

She smiled tenderly into his eyes. “What a lovely way to wake up. I’ve missed your touch so much.” His fingers found the opening he was looking for, and slid gently inside. “Oh, Johner, I love it when you do this.” He watched her face as his fingers moved in her, seeing her breathing quicken and a flush begin to spread over her face. Her hips began to move in concert with his fingers, rising to meet them, her eyelids drooped half-closed, and she sighed and moaned a little as he continued to move in her.

As he watched the signs of her arousal his body quickened also; his desire for her increased at a headlong rate. “I want you. I need to be inside you; I think this is going to be quick. Sorry about that, it’s been too long. But Connor, I think you’ll have to do it. I can’t--I don’t think I can hold myself over you.”

Sarah opened her eyes and smiled up at him. “My pleasure.” She sat up slowly, hazy with desire from the feel of his hand inside her. “It is going to be quick. This time.”

Johner turned on his back, and she moved over him, straddling his hips, his erection standing up just in front of her. His eyes closed and his head was thrown back into the pillow as her hands closed around it. “God! Your touch is so wonderful! Oh yes---do that, do that to me. Do it more, faster, oh God, I love it---do it to me!” She kept doing what he loved, his excitement feeding hers, while she lifted herself up to her knees. Her hands still around his penis, she moved herself over it, until her hands were replaced by her body coming down over him. She felt his penis slide into her with delicious joy, and her interior muscles clenched around him, welcoming him into her body.

He gasped and moaned and whipped his head back and forth on the pillow. His hands reached down and grasped her hips, holding her down on his penis, while his hips moved convulsively up to drive himself even further into her, striving for more, more.

She began to move over him, wanting to feel him sliding inside her, wanting the lovely friction of him moving in and out of her. As she established a rhythm he let go of her hips, murmuring, "Oh yes, yes, do it, oh do it--."

They had both been celibate for too long. In only a few minutes, she felt his body stiffen, he cried out and his hips jerked up involuntarily as his climax came. Her body felt the pulses of his ejaculation with overwhelming excitement, and she came with him, swaying and moaning with pleasure in the moment of release.

As she came back to conscious thought, she lifted herself off him slowly, reluctantly; she wanted to lie down beside him. His arms came up to meet her and he folded her into them, holding her close to him while he kissed her eyes and her hair.

"You are the most wonderful woman in the world. No argument now, I don't want to hear it."

"I suppose that opinion must be correct, coming from the most wonderful man."

"Do you think we might be just a little bit nuts about each other? Do people notice?"

She grinned at him. "I don't know about other people, but the people at the office sure have. Don't you get teased?"

"I have a nickname. 'Valentino'."

She choked and broke up with laughter. When she could talk again, she said, "God, that's great! The women aren't nearly so original. They just want to know if they can have some."

"Some of what?"

"Don't play innocent. Some of you, of course."

"Oh really. Maybe we could make a buck; renting me out."

"Over my dead body!"

"I'd be a bust with anyone else, anyway. You bring out the best in me, Connor."

"I don't know if I bring it out; but Johner, it sure is the best."

"Uh-huh. The very best there is."

Chapter 12

COMPROMISE

Sarah woke in the very early morning to find Johner's hands moving over her. She turned over to face him. "Hey, buddy, what's going on?" she asked softly.

"I'm rested. I feel fine. I want you." Johner smiled at her and ran his hand down her side. "I love you, Connor. I can't ever seem to get enough of you. Your body calls me all the time." He began to kiss her neck and shoulders, as far as he could reach; but he was handicapped by his inability to bend over her without pain.

Sarah watched his efforts, and in spite of herself she began to giggle. "Whassamatta, babe? My body may be calling, but you seem to be having a little trouble answering."

He rolled himself onto his back, laughing. "God damn it, Connor! I'm trying to set a mood

here! But I can't do it by myself! Do you want to get laid or don't you? If you do, you better cooperate."

"Yes, I do. But you not only can't do it by yourself, you can't do it at all! You're not in any shape to do it; for this once, I think you're going to have to let me. Johner, just lay back, relax and get ready. I'm going to do it this time. All of it."

"My God, Connor---are there any other hidden talents you've been waiting to spring on me? This one was a big success, I want to tell you that right now! I may just lay here and be worked over every time. I feel like a sultan---'Here, slave, do me!'" He looked down at her where she lay in the curve of his arm, smiling up at him, and shook his head. "I gotta say you have a real good feel for what makes a man happy."

"We aim to please. Your satisfaction is my satisfaction. It sure was this time, anyway." She stretched luxuriously. "I feel wonderful. I've missed you so much, Johner."

"I feel wonderful too, except I'm tired again! Jesus, am I going to be like this for the rest of my life? It's been three weeks, Connor. When am I going to be OK again? I can't even make love with you, with you doing all the work, without being laid out by it."

"Johner, you've been hurt before, I know you have, I've seen the scars. You should know it takes a while to come back. I bet it'll be another month before you don't tire easily. You lost a lot of blood, and you had major surgery afterward." She grinned, "And you're getting old, don't forget that."

"Ha ha. But speaking of blood, Connor. When I left the hospital I had to sign a lot of papers, different kinds of releases and stuff. One of those papers was very interesting; it was a release of responsibility for a direct blood transfusion, from the ambulance company.

"Now, Connor, I don't know how many people there were in that ambulance. I wasn't noticing much. But I'm willing to bet there were two paramedics. There always are. And the only other person there was you, right? Now, I don't think I'm walking around with one of those paramedics' blood in me.

"Have I got your blood in my body, Connor? A lot of your blood? I overheard something about blood loss and how near I came to dying when the doctors were talking. Did your blood save my life, Connor?" He looked down at her, a sober expression on his face.

"Yes, they gave you my blood in the ambulance. They told me it probably saved your life. I'm so happy that it happened that way. Do you know how wonderful it feels to know that I had something to do with saving your life? It was like a gift to me from the gods. I was there when you needed me. I'll never forget it."

"And I'm walking around with your blood in my veins. Well, not walking much yet. But anyway---Connor, I feel different. I've got you inside of me. You're here, in here." And he held up his hands, and looked at them, front and back. "I've got you with me, wherever I am, whatever I do. I really, really like that!"

"You didn't need my blood for that. I've been with you all along. I'm always with you. I love you."

His head came down as hers lifted. Their kiss was as tender as any they had ever known. When Johner raised his head at last, he sighed deeply and pulled her closer against him.

"How did I ever get this? I don't deserve it. I've spent most of my life being a son of a bitch.

I've been heartless, and totally selfish, and I've treated other people like dogs. And yet this happened to me; this love, this---precious love that you give me. Oh, Connor, I love you---I adore you!"

She sat up and turned to him. "When you talk to me like that, I can't resist you. I want you. Lie back, sweetheart, I'm about to do it again." She leaned over him to kiss him, and her hands moved over his body with renewed excitement.

Johner recovered rapidly, now that he was at home where he was comfortable and happy. As the days passed, and the time drew near for him to go back to work, he began to think about Sarah, and the dangers that they faced daily in their job. His injury had made it very immediate in his mind, and as he thought about the jeopardy she was very often put in, he decided that he needed to talk to her about it. He didn't think she'd like it, and he was right.

"So what do you want me to do about it? Stay home and clean house? Fuck you!" They were sitting at the kitchen table, just finishing a leisurely Saturday morning breakfast.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, don't get hot, Connor. No one said anything about your staying home. I just wanted to talk to you about maybe not taking the most dangerous assignments. You could let some of the others get in the line of fire once in a while. Anderson's been sitting on his ass behind that desk for I don't know how long. How come you don't get any desk work?"

"Because I refuse to do it, dumbhead! Christ, if you think you're going to chain me to a desk, think again! Anderson likes it; don't ask me why, I think he's crazy."

"Maybe he likes being safe in the office, and pulling down the same pay as people who are out there dodging bullets!"

"Maybe he does. That's his business."

"Jesus Christ, you're touchy, Connor."

"Johner, I have a large problem with people trying to tell me what to do. I think you know that, or anyway you ought to. Now back off!"

"I can't back off. Please---please listen a minute! I'm scared for you, Connor. If what happened to me had happened to you, you'd have died. You're littler than me, and not as tough.

"If you die, Connor, I die too. ---I mean that. I won't live on without you; not for an hour. You're my whole life, my whole reason for living. How am I going to stand knowing you're in danger? How am I going to keep from going nuts? Please, Connor, try not to be mad, so we can talk about this. It's so important to me; I need to talk to you about it.

She looked at him, saw the pleading in his face. Her face softened, and she nodded. "OK, we'll talk. I won't be mad; at least I'll try. But I can't see where we can compromise on this; either I'm out there, or I'm not, and either way one of us isn't going to be happy."

"Can we start with this: you won't go out without me. On any assignment that has any chance of being dangerous, you won't go alone or with anyone else, you won't go at all unless I'm with you."

She thought a minute. "OK, I guess I can go along with that; we're usually together anyway, and I don't really trust anyone else to back me. All right, I'll promise that provisionally. We'll see how it works out. I'll let you know if I change my mind, before I do anything."

He drew a deep breath. "God! Thank you! That's going to help me sleep better. Now, can we try another one?"

"---What?" She was suspicious.

"You won't go out on anything even potentially dangerous without a vest."

She relaxed and smiled. "You've got that one. But only if you'll promise the same; I don't want another four hours in the waiting room wondering if you're dead."

"Done! Oh, Connor, thanks. Thanks for keeping your temper and meeting me halfway. I'll be a whole lot happier with just this much agreement from you." He grinned and looked up at her from under his brows. "Of course, what I'm really aiming for is for you to stay home and clean house."

"As I said before, and with the most sincere best wishes, ---fuck you."

Chapter 13

LOVING

They were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee, late on a Sunday morning.

"How did it feel being back? I didn't hear anything about being tired, but that doesn't mean a damn thing; you don't complain. Have you been OK this week? Tell the truth, now!" she frowned at him.

"I've been OK. More tired than I would have been before, but OK." He smiled. "Don't worry, Connor. I'm all right."

"That's easy to say, but I can't help it. I came so close to losing you. You don't know how awful it was, sitting in that hospital waiting room, wondering if they were going to come out and try to tell me kindly that you were dead. I won't forget those hours in my life." She shuddered.

"It's over. I'm all right."

"I know. I know. But I was so scared."

"I'm right here." He touched her hand. "I'm alive. I love you."

She looked up at him. "Yes, you're alive. ---Johner, you said something a while ago that stuck in my head. You said you wouldn't keep living if I died. Did you mean that you'd kill yourself?"

"Yes. That's what I meant."

"It's not true, though. You wouldn't really."

Johner looked down at his coffee cup. "Yes. I would."

"No! You mustn't even think that!" Sarah took his hands in hers over the table. "I can't believe that you would have such a---a dim-witted intention!"

He freed his hands. "It's my decision. I guess it's not anyone else's business." His face was closed.

"Johner, don't get mad. When you get that look on your face, I get mad too."

"Then let's talk about something else."

“No!”

He stood up. “I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t you walk away from me! Johner!” Her face was flushed and angry.

As he turned away, he thought suddenly of another time when anger had nearly destroyed them, and he stopped. Slowly he turned back. “Connor, I’m going to give this one more try. Now, you cool off, and I’ll cool off.”

He sat back down at the table, stiffly, without his usual grace.

She looked down at her hands, grasping her coffee cup tightly. After a minute, without raising her head, she said, “Thanks. I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

After a couple of minutes, Johner took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair, turning his eyes up to the ceiling, away from her face.

“Connor, you’re my life. Since I’ve known you, I’m different from what I was before. I can’t go back now, I can’t live again the way I did before. And if you go away from me, I can’t live the way I do now either.”

He shook his head. “It was so bad then. I didn’t know it, but I was missing every good thing there is. I---I guess this sounds stupid, but when you came to me, I found out what love is. ---Yeah, I was right, it does sound stupid, ---but it’s what happened. So now I know what it’s like; I can’t go back.”

“You wouldn’t have to go back! Now you know---Johner, that means now you can love other people too.” She leaned toward him, her voice intense. “For instance---you love John. I know you do; I’ve seen the love and the pride in your eyes when you look at him. He’s never had a father, Johner; but you’re his father now, and he loves you too. In the time that you’ve been here, I’ve seen him be more relaxed, more contented at home than he’s ever been. That’s because of you, because he knows you’re there, that you will look after me; because we’re a family, because we love him and he loves us.”

Johner took a deep breath, his eyes still firmly fastened on the ceiling. “A family. We’re a family.”

“Look at me, Johner.” His head came down slowly, and he brought his eyes to hers; there were tears in his.

“Jesus Christ, Connor, how could I live without you? How could I give this up and keep living?”

“If I die, Johner, you will still have a family. John will be here, and he will still need you. If I die, he will need you very badly; he can’t lose both of us at once! Could you do that to him?”

Johner looked stricken. He stayed still, frozen for a moment, then his shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. “---No, I couldn’t. I couldn’t. Oh God, Connor, please don’t die!” His head went down on his arms.

Sarah came around the table to him; she knelt at his side, and put her arms around him. “No, of course I won’t die, oh my dear, don’t cry! I love you, I love you, I won’t die, oh Johner, I won’t die!”

His arms went around her and he held her frantically, with all his strength, his face buried in his special place in her neck.

“God, I’ve got to have you! You’re all there is for me, Connor. Without you I’m nothing, nothing!”

She lifted his chin to look into his eyes. "Not true! With or without me, you are a man of strength, and courage, and intelligence, and loving tenderness; you have so much to give, Johner. I'm here, and I'll be here, all of our lives, but I hope you'll love many more people before you die." She paused, and then grinned. "Well, but don't be in love any more. That's only for me. That's special, just for me." She waited for a smile in return; and he gave it, smiling tenderly at her.

"You know that you're the only one. I adore you." His hand came up to just touch her cheek. Then his eyes dropped from hers, and he straightened, reached behind him to the counter and brought the coffeepot to the table. "Warm up? ---Sorry to be such a wimp, Connor. I don't usually cry all over people. I'm OK now. Thanks."

"Johner, people who never cry don't love anyone. People who love, cry; sometimes loving hurts, and then we cry."

"You're right; sometimes it hurts. But God, it's sure worth it." He took her hand, and brought it to his mouth, turning it to kiss the palm softly.

John walked in just in time to see that gesture. "My God, don't you two ever quit? You'll be the only teenagers in the geriatric ward! What's for breakfast?"

His mother frowned at him. "Breakfast is something that we eat in the morning. If you will consult your watch, you will see that opportunity is now over. ---Johner, what do you think you're doing? You'll spoil that child! He'll grow up to be a criminal!"

"He's hungry. If we don't feed him he won't grow up at all." Johner began to break eggs into the frying pan. "How many, John?"

Chapter 14

CONFLICT

"I don't believe this. I didn't think you'd like it, but this is way over the top, Mom."

Well, that's the way I feel about it. Jesus Christ, two years of very expensive education down the tubes. You can't do this!"

"Ma, if you don't want to help any more, I can certainly understand that. But I can do it, and I'm going to."

"Law school? I suppose you'll decide next you want to be a rocket scientist!"

"Mom, I think we'd better talk about this when you've cooled off a little. I don't think you're making much sense."

"There's nothing to talk about. You've decided what you're going to do. Do it."

Sarah didn't cool off. When Johner got home, John waylaid him at the door, and explained what had happened.

"When I told her I want to quit medical school, and transfer into law school, she just went off like a bomb. I should have known she would; she's got a particular thing about singleness of

purpose. Some things in the past have required that of her, in spades. Johner, I don't know what to say to her. She's just so mad!"

"I'll talk to her. I'm not sure I can do anything, but I'll try. When she's mad, she's mad."

"You got that right!"

Sarah came into the kitchen, and surveyed them both. "Well, are you two trying to figure ways around me? Forget it." She crossed to the refrigerator, and took out a beer.

"For Pete's sake, Ma, cool off! We're not trying to do anything against you. I just want a chance to talk to you in a sensible way about the plans I've got, and the reasons I have for them."

"Your plans don't have anything to do with me. The plans that I was involved in were made two years ago."

"Connor, give him a chance. He---"

"You stay out of this! This is a family matter!"

Johner's face went absolutely white. There was a moment's frozen pause; then his shoulders dropped, and he looked down.

"---You're right---it is. Sorry." And he turned and left the room.

John looked at his mother, expecting her to go after him. She began to rummage in a drawer. "Where the hell is the bottle opener. Nothing stays in the same place for five minutes around here!"

"Mom! You hurt him! You'd better go see if he's OK."

"He's grown up. He can take care of himself."

John shook his head. "You've got no call to be this mad. And you certainly had no call to turn on Johner like that. Did you see his face, Mom? I think you should go see if you can make it up to him, because he was devastated by what you said."

"I think you should mind your own business."

John threw his hands in the air. "I give up. See you later." And he walked out the back door.

Johner was in his own room with the door closed. Sarah turned on the television, turned it off; picked up a book, threw it down in two minutes. She went into the kitchen and opened another beer; when she returned, she saw the first one almost untouched still sitting by her chair. "Oh, for Chrissakes!" She turned and headed down the hall for Johner's room, and knocked.

He came to the door immediately, opened it, and stood looking at her. "Well, are you going to invite me in?" He swung the door wide, and gestured her inside.

"You know I didn't mean what I said, don't you. I was just so mad."

"It's OK, Connor. I understand." He just stood there, not smiling.

Sarah moved to him, and put her arms around him. "I'm sorry. I was mad."

"I know." He didn't return her embrace.

"Johner?"

"I guess I just need a little time."

“Are you mad? You don’t seem like it.” She looked up into his face, searching for answers.

“No, no, I’m not mad. I just need a little time---and space, I guess.”

She dropped her arms from around him. “What does that mean?”

“I need to be alone for a while. I need to think.”

She didn’t like that. “Well OK, just take all the time you need. Let me know if you ever get done thinking.” And she turned and left the room.

After two hours, he heard another knock on his door. This time, she smiled. “OK, Johner, I have an idea. Remember that lady psychologist we saw on TV last week? Remember what she said? “If you don’t know what’s bothering you, just say out loud, ‘I feel---’ and add whatever word comes to your mind. Remember?”

“Try that, Johner. Say ‘I feel---’ and tell me what comes to mind.”

He smiled gently. “I feel—calm. I feel---OK.”

“All right, Johner. I tried.” She stepped out in the hall and pulled the door shut behind her.

When he was alone, he turned away from the door. His head went back, his eyes shut, and he murmured, in his velvet voice, “Betrayed. I feel---betrayed.” A spasm of pain crossed his face. “Fool, fool to believe!” But in a moment his face smoothed, and he was calm again. A defense against pain perfected over the last few hours had taken hold.

He came to the kitchen in the morning, poured some coffee, and sat down opposite her.

“Good morning. Shall I make some breakfast?”

“I don’t feel hungry. I missed you last night. Are you punishing me, Johner?”

“No! No, I’m not. I don’t mean to do anything like that. I need some distance here, Connor. This is not meant against you in any way. I just need to get some time away. I don’t know how else to put it.”

She got up and came around the table. “Move your chair out, Johner.” He did, and she sat down on his lap. “I love you. I want you to come to bed with me at night. I miss your arms around me.”

There was no response. He sat quietly, looking down.

“Jesus, Johner, what do I have to do? I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Please, Johner, this is not like you, you’re scaring me!”

“Can you give me some time? I just don’t feel anything right now. It’s not meant to hurt you, I just don’t have it to give.”

She got up. “I guess if you don’t have it, you don’t have it. Sure. I’ll give you whatever time you need, Johner; but I love you, and I miss you.”

Chapter 15

RESOLUTION

The time Johner needed turned into days, and then into two weeks.

Sarah remained adamant about John's plans, refusing to talk to him about them at all. John drew John aside and assured him that money for school would be forthcoming. "I will see to it that you go to school. Don't worry. Maybe she'll come around, but anyway, the money is there."

John drew Johner into a hug. "Thanks, big guy, thanks." Johner stood passive in John's embrace. John pulled back and looked at him with concern. "Johner, what's the matter with you? Is there anything anyone can do to help?"

"I'm OK. I'm fine."

"No, you're not fine. And your situation with Mom is not fine. Johner, can't you just forget it? You must know that she didn't mean what she said."

"I know. She didn't mean to say it."

John looked at him suspiciously. "That's not the same thing that I said. Do you think she did mean it?"

"I think that a family is not something that happens because people want it to. It's a matter of biology." Johner's face was still passive.

"You are so wrong! What about adopted children? Well, there can be adopted parents too, and you're one!"

"Thank you, John. I know you mean what you say."

"But you don't believe it. God, how could she be so cruel?"

"Don't blame your mother, John. The world is the way the world is."

Sarah was beside herself; there was no getting any response at all from Johner. He was perfectly calm, and seemed not unhappy, but there was nothing, no emotional output from him at all. She lost her temper several times, yelled at him, stormed, but there was no response but a quiet apology for his inability to give her what she wanted.

What Sarah didn't understand was that inside Johner there was a little frozen ball. He thought it was somewhere in the middle of his chest, under his heart, but above his stomach. It wasn't a big ball, but inside were the words 'This is a family matter!'

He should have known; nothing lasts. The warmth and love that he had grown accustomed to were only a curtain drawn temporarily across the reality of his life. He had never really left that lonely place at all, that place where he had been alone since the very beginning. It was good that the little ball was frozen; if it thawed the pain might kill him.

But shut inside the ball with his pain were all of his other feelings; all of the love and sympathy and humor and fellowship that had made his life so happy for the past two years; and the anger was there too, the anger that had protected him from pain so many times.

He understood why Sarah was so frustrated; and as the days passed, he became more certain that the best thing for him to do was to leave her in peace. At the breakfast table, where big things always seemed to come down, he told her. "I've found a room, and I think it best if I leave. You'll be more comfortable if I'm not here, and so will I. I'll be leaving after lunch."

"OK, go. I can't live with this any longer. ---God! I can't believe I'm saying this; but I'm so sick with wanting you back with me, and not knowing what to do! All right, go!"

“We’ll see each other at work. It won’t be as though I’m going away.”

“Yeah, it’s as though you’re going away. You are going away.” She put her head down on the table, cradled in her arms. In a minute, she looked up. “Johner, don’t you want me at all any more?” Her eyes were full of tears.

“No. I don’t want anything any more. I don’t feel anything. I don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to? You mean this is voluntary? What in the hell is going on in that head of yours? You’re doing this awful thing to us because I made some stupid statement when I was mad, just to try to shut you up before you took John’s part against me? Johner, If you’re brooding about what I said about you not being family, you’re just a fool! Do you think that one statement made in the heat of anger can just—just rub out two years of being a family? You dolt! You absolute fool! Fool!”

Johner stood up. “Fool?” A lightning bolt of towering rage exploded out of the little frozen ball in an instant, and all the emotion held back went flying like shrapnel. “Fool? I’m not the fool! The fool is someone who can’t control her temper, who says things that destroy two years of loving and being together!” By the time he got to the end of the sentence, he was bellowing at her. He came around the table like a whirlwind, grabbed her by the arms, and holding her off the floor, began to shake her. Her head snapped back and forth, she flopped in his hold like a rag doll.

He yelled, “Fool! Fool!” Then he stopped shaking her as suddenly as he had begun---“Oh God, oh, my beloved fool!” His arms went around her, and he held her to him with shaken strength, while their tears flowed, and he kissed her everywhere he could reach.

John skidded around the corner, coming to his mother’s rescue; Johner’s voice could have been heard down the block. But as he took in the scene before him, he backed quietly around the corner again. Let them make their peace; it was about time.

In a few minutes, he saw them again. Johner came through the living room carrying Sarah in his arms, oblivious of John’s presence, kissing her eyes and her hair, her arms tight around his neck; and they disappeared behind Sarah’s bedroom door.

Chapter 15a

Adult

He woke to the feeling of her hands stroking him, just lightly touching his back, moving slowly up and down. She saw his eyes open, and smiled. “I know I should say I’m sorry I woke you, but I’m not. I wanted you to wake, to look at me and talk to me and smile at me. I missed that so much, Johner; you never smiled at me. Oh, I’m so glad to have you back, so glad to feel you again; your skin, your mouth, your arms around me.”

He rolled until he was mostly over her, looking down at her. “I thought that it was over forever, that I’d never feel your body against me again. Tell me you won’t leave me, Connor, tell me you belong to me!”

"I won't leave you. Never. I love you, and I will for the rest of my life. I'll never belong to anyone else."

Suddenly his love for her shook him visibly as he leaned over her. He began to murmur love words: "---I love you---my sweetest babe---I adore you---" His mouth was as soft as silk as it came down on hers, touching her with the gentlest pressure. He spoke against her mouth, his breath becoming her breath. "I want you again---I want you always, I love the feel of you, your breasts---and here. I love to touch you here---" He put his hand on the curls of her pubic mound.

Her breath caught as she felt his touch. "Johner, I never get used to feeling your hands on me. Touch me, babe, put your hands on me, I love it when you---Oh, Johner, do that, do that again, oh babe!"

"Do what? Tell me, love, tell me. What do you want me to do to you? I want to hear the words."

"Put your mouth on me, all over me, Johner. Put your mouth on my breast, here. Yes, like that, please---more, please, oh babe, I love this." His mouth was hot and soft on her breast. He drew the nipple into his mouth and sucked gently, his tongue moving over the end, making her writhe and moan. Her movement and the helpless sounds she made were so exciting to him that he had to feel her hands on him. He drew her hand down his body to touch his throbbing penis.

"Hold me, Connor, take me in your hands. Oh, yes! Yes, oh God, I want this. Touch the end, right there, oh right there, that's the place. Again! Again! Ah, God, Connor, you make me crazy!" Her hand moved on his penis, making him shiver and thrust his pelvis against her involuntarily. As she fondled him she moved closer to him, kissing his body, rubbing against him.

He reached up to put his hands around her head, pulling it down. "I want to feel your mouth there. Please Connor, put your mouth on me? ---Oh!---oh yes, like that, oh my God, that's wonderful, ahh, do it to me, do it, babe." He moaned, incoherent with pleasure, his hands still holding her head; but soon he lifted it away from him again. "Oh babe, I can't take any more---you're driving me crazy!"

"Now, Connor, now it's your turn." He turned to her and rolled over her body, covering her entirely. He began to kiss her; her face, her hair, her ears, moving down her neck to her shoulders; and on down her body, while she lay with eyes closed, absorbing what was being done to her. When he reached her pubic mound, he stopped and looked up. "Tell me, babe. Tell me what you want. I want to hear you say it."

She smiled down at him shakily, trembling with anticipation. "I want to feel your mouth on me. I want to feel your tongue touch me in my most private place. Be in my most private place, Johner, please!" He smiled up at her and did what she asked.

"God, Johner, you're so good at this! There---right there! Oh, babe, do that to me some more---more, Johner!" Her head went back into the pillow as her body arched toward his seeking mouth. "Don't stop, please don't stop, right there, again---again!" But he did stop. He moved up her body quickly, and his penis slid into her almost before she knew his mouth was gone.

He shivered with pleasure as her body enclosed him and he felt the tightening that told him of her desire for him. "Ah, that's so good!" His mouth sought hers as his body began a slow movement to bring them to the completion of their pleasure.

"Now---now, do it to me, ohh, Johner, oh, babe---again---again!" Her body came up to meet

his with every stroke.

As the level of sensation rose, words disappeared into low moans and murmurs. The contact, hot and wet, became more slick with the fluids of her excitement; sliding flesh was stimulated to agonizing levels. With every stroke, Sarah felt his penis harder, longer. Her legs curled over his hips, pressing him into her with frantic strength, and his hand came down under her buttocks, lifting her into his stroke, making the delicious contact complete.

Without conscious control the rhythm increased, Johner began to groan with every stroke, wordless sound forced from his straining body. "Uh!--uh!--uh!" His sounds of ecstatic pleasure electrified Sarah to bring her to new heights of excitement. She came first to her climax, her body convulsing with pleasure; as he felt the strong contractions of her muscles, he cried out, and emptied himself into her with delirious bliss.

Their straining bodies relaxed slowly, the waves of pleasure ebbing to a lower level of rapt satisfaction. Johner turned with her, turning them until she was nearly on top of him, still enclosing him in her body. They drifted for a few minutes, easing off, letting their bodies loosen and their breathing slow.

Sarah sighed deeply with satisfaction and contentment. "Johner, I'm so glad to have you back, so glad! Don't ever shut yourself away from me again. I need you, babe. I'd die without you."

"Christ, don't say that! It'll start a whole new argument!" Johner's face crinkled with laughter. "For God's sake, change that statement to 'I'd be very uncomfortable without you.' That'll give me the idea, and we won't have to go through the whole 'suicide or no suicide' thing again! I don't know how many more wrenching emotional scenes I can live through!"

"Well, you smug son of a bitch! You'll go through as many as necessary until I finally get you in line! If you weren't such a numbskull, life would be a lot simpler for both of us. I just want a quiet life, but no! you have to get shot, and get crazy. If you'd just settle for getting laid, we'd have it made. That I can handle!"

"I'll say you can! Would you care to handle it some more? I think it will cooperate, it hasn't been used for about ten minutes; anyway, why don't you try it and see?"

Chapter 16

FROM THE PAST

"---The spray that falls like a gentle rain, wetting one to the skin, falls still upon any traveler who chances to be at that beautiful place at this present moment. Sometimes a log, borne along by the current, teeters for a moment at the lip of the vast abyss, and then plunges downward on its long journey to Egypt and the sea."

Johner closed the book. "There. It was a good book. There sure are a lot of good books in the world. I won't get to all of them; seems a shame."

"There are. We'll get to some of them, though. As many as we can. Ready to go to sleep? Shall I turn out the light?"

"No. Not quite. I want to talk a little first." Johner put the book on the bedside table and turned to face her. "We need to talk about John. I know this is very hard for you; I don't understand why, that's part of what we have to talk about. Connor, this break between you and John can't go on; you're damaging your relationship with him."

Sarah's face hardened. "Johner, get off my back. This is not something you can do anything about."

"I know it's hard for you; but I will not get off your back. Connor, you're wrong, and you're going to have to back down on this one."

"Good luck making me."

He smiled a little. "I'll need it. But we've got to have this settled." He stopped for a minute and thought. "OK, let's go at it from another angle. What's your reasoning? Why are you so set against this?"

"That's none of---for Christ's sake, will you let up on this?"

"Ha! Nice save." He smiled again, then his face sobered. "What is it, Connor? Why can't you talk about this reasonably? I've known you pretty well for a pretty long time now, and I've never seen you act like this about anything. Tell me what it is. What are you afraid of?"

I'm afraid you're never going to leave me alone!"

"Stop it! Just stop it! I've had it!" Suddenly his voice was harsh. "You will talk to me about this, by God, and you will do it NOW!"

"Jesus, Johner, don't lose your temper! I don't want to spend another three weeks in the doghouse!"

"Then you will talk to me!"

"You can yell at me until you bust a blood vessel, but you should know me well enough to know that it's not going to scare me! Now how the hell do you think you're going to get me to do what I will not do?"

"You're right about the yelling. Sorry. I'm going to get you to do it by wearing you down. I'm not ever going to quit, Connor. You have got to talk about this, and I'm going to keep after it until you do."

Sarah's shoulders slumped. "You will, too. ---OK, OK! I'm sick to death of listening to both of you bitch about it. What was it you wanted to know? What I'm afraid of. I'm not afraid of anything, I just can't stomach John changing his mind after two years of effort, just changing his mind, just like that. What kind of idiotic behavior is that?"

"Well, it's not "singleness of purpose". John says you have a problem with singleness of purpose. Says that's the problem here. Says you've always been hard on him about this, never allowed him to change his mind. Connor, he says it's a hangover from some very bad stuff in the past.

"I know a little about that, from what you've told me, and things that John has let drop. It was very bad stuff, very bad; but it's over. This is something different. This is not about saving the world, Connor. It's about a kid who wants to go into law, not medicine; a real small, personal problem.

"Do you want him to be a doctor, even if he's changed his mind? Do you want him to grit his teeth and finish medical school, and internship, and residency, and spend his life doing what he didn't want to do? Do you, Connor?"

"No! No, I don't. I just want him not to change his mind!"

"Too late. It's happened. He can't un-happen it. So what do you want him to do now? What solution to this problem would satisfy you?"

"I don't know, Johner! I don't know what I want him to do now. I want it to be different!"

Sudden Tears spilled over and began to run down her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I've been

so bad about this. I don't know why---I don't know what to do! I'm scared, Johner."

"Now we're getting to it." The velvet was back in his voice. He held out his arms, and she slid over until she was within them. "Tell me about it, babe. I'm here, I'm right here. Tell me what you're scared of." His arms were around her, cradling her against him.

She spoke brokenly, through growing agitation. "I'm scared that he won't do it right, and I'll be responsible! I can't let it happen, everything will go bad, and it will all be my fault---my fault!" She began to sob.

"There, there, babe, ---I'm here, I'll take the load now, you've carried it long enough---" He stroked her back and murmured to her. "Let go of it, babe, let go. I'll take it, I'm here now to take it, you're not alone any more---I'm here, give it to me, I love you, I'm here---" He kissed her face and her hair and let her cry.

She cried for a long time. He reached over her to the bedside table and brought the tissue box to her, and she clutched it to her and cried; and as long as she did he held her and kept up his soft murmur of comfort.

Slowly she quieted, her sobs intermingled with long shaky breaths, her body relaxing, leaning softly against him.

"Go to sleep, babe. I'm here, I won't let go of you, I'm taking care of things now." She sighed, and snuggled closer, and was asleep in a moment.

"OK, John, I'm ready to talk about it." She grinned at the look on John's face. "You can thank the man, here. He's pulled another one out of the hat."

Johner stood beside her, grinning also. "Shut your mouth, John, you look like an idiot with it hanging open. They'll never let you into law school."

John shook his head. "Johner, have you considered running for president? I think the country needs you!"

Chapter 17

Old Friends

The doorbell rang at the most inconvenient moment possible. She was stirring the white sauce, and the cookbook said it must be stirred continuously. "Damn!" She pulled the pan off the heat, and started for the front door. If it was the Avon lady, she was going to get blasted.

It wasn't Avon calling. It was Johner, and he was carrying in his arms another man, a little wizened man who looked very unwell. Connor opened the door wide to let them in, staring at Johner with covert astonishment.

"Sorry, I couldn't manage the lock. Connor, this is Vriess. You've heard me mention his name many times, I'm sure." He looked at her meaningfully. "Right?"

"Sure, I remember. Glad to meet one of Johner's old shipmates. Come in, come in." She led the way to the kitchen, the place where most of the living in the house was done. Johner put

Vriess down carefully in a chair at the kitchen table, and sat down himself in another one.

“What can I get you? Coffee? A beer?” Sarah smiled at Vriess.

He smiled back hesitantly. “A beer would go good.”

“Johner?”

“Yeah, a beer.”

When Sarah returned from the fridge with two beers, Vriess was surveying the kitchen. “You live here?” he said to Johner.

“Yeah.”

“With her?”

“Yeah.”

Vriess put the bottle to his lips and took a long swig. “Christ Almighty! You lucky son of a bitch! You come out of the Betty without a scratch, and then you fall into this! You goddamn lucky son of a bitch!” He stopped talking suddenly and looked over at Sarah, embarrassed. “Sorry, ma’am. Excuse my language.”

“It’s OK, don’t excuse yourself. He is a lucky son of a bitch; that’s what I’ve been telling him ever since he walked in here.” Sarah grinned at him.

Vriess grinned back, and turned to Johner. “She’s OK!”

“She’s better than OK. And I am a lucky son of a bitch.” Johner stood up and put his arm around Sarah. As he did so, his glance lighted on the stove. “Connor? Are you cooking?”

“Yes. So what?” She moved defensively in front of the stove, shielding what was there from him.

“Let’s see.” He moved to see behind her, grinning broadly.

“Never mind. Just mind you own business!” She fended him off, laughing, shifting to keep herself between him and the stove.

“Hm-m, I see you’ve got the cookbook out. You were serious, weren’t you!” He turned to Vriess. “She can’t boil water; TV dinners are her specialty. I do the cooking around here.” He made a sudden move and got past Sarah’s defense. “What’s this? White sauce? What were you going to put it on?”

Sarah was laughing helplessly. “I hadn’t got that far yet. I thought I should start with something basic; you know, white sauce. The cookbook says it’s the basis for ‘a myriad of delicious sauces.’ And it would have turned out, too, but the doorbell rang right in the middle! What are you doing home anyway? I thought I had time to do this in private.”

“Connor, I’m going to be here for a long, long time. You don’t have to cook. Please.” He grinned at her and turned to Vriess again.

“Hey, looks like you’re about played out.” Vriess was slumped in the chair, his head hanging down. “Let’s get you in bed.” He picked Vriess up in his arms and headed for the hall, motioning Sarah with his head to come along. “He’s just out of the hospital. He needs to get horizontal.”

Vriess’s head came up. “I’m all right. Chrissakes, Johner, I’m OK!”

“Shut up, Vriess. You’re going to bed.”

Sarah moved ahead of Johner to open the door to his bedroom, crossed the floor to the bed, and turned down the covers. “Get him undressed, Johner. I’ll bring some pajamas.” She left the room, and came back a minute later with a pair of John’s pajamas. “Do you need any

other help? No? Then I'll let you get on with it."

When Johner returned to the kitchen a few minutes later, she was scraping the last of the white sauce into the sink. She ran water in the pan, and then came to sit across from him at the table. "Tell me about it."

"I finally remembered to go by the hospital to pick up that sweater you left there. When I came out, I saw Vriess sitting in a wheel chair outside. I hadn't got anything out of my mouth but 'Hello' when the nurse with him starts yelling at me. "So you finally showed up. I've got better things to do than stand outside with this unpleasant little man for two hours!" and she turned around and stomped into the hospital.

"It seems that someone was supposed to come by and pick him up, but they never showed. Well, I couldn't just leave him there. I hope it's OK with you?"

"Yes, of course it's OK. You certainly couldn't leave him there. What's the matter with him? I mean outside of the paralysis. What was he in the hospital for?"

"I couldn't get much but swearing out of him about the hospital. He liked it about as much as I did." He grinned at her, but sobered quickly. "I don't think he's in very good shape. He looks thinner and sicker than I remember him being."

Sarah nodded. "He doesn't look good. I'll call the hospital and find out who his doctor is. We'll need to know what to do for him."

"You're just going to take him in, aren't you? Just like that, no questions asked."

"Johner, he's the last person left of your old shipmates. Of course we'll take him in. He's helpless; he needs us."

"God, I love you, Connor."

"I talked to the doctor. He's very sick. He's not going to live very long."

Johner looked down at his hands. "I was afraid of that. God, I'm glad I happened to go by the hospital. He's been staying in a rooming house for disabled people. He hasn't said much, but I think waiting for two hours for someone to come and get him at the hospital is typical. It wasn't a good place."

"Poor man! He's had a terrible deal from life, but the last part will be better. We'll see to it."

"Thank you, Connor. Taking in my dying buddies wasn't part of the original deal. I don't know how to get it across just how grateful I am for this; there aren't any words for it." Johner took her hand, lifted it to his mouth and kissed the palm, his mouth lingering until she brought up her other hand to cup his chin, and kissed him softly. He looked down at her with adoration. "I love you more every day---every day."

She smiled and patted his face. "It's a question of human kindness; he's got no one but us. You don't owe me for this, Johner. We're going to do it together, and we'll like ourselves more when it's done."

John and Vriess got along like nobody's business. Vriess's stories delighted John, and he

loved having an appreciative audience.

"I think his happiest hours have been those spent with John. Whoever would have thought it." Sarah smiled up at Johner. "And John is having the time of his life. He's never been around anyone like Vriess since he was old enough to be accepted as an adult. When he was a kid there were people like Vriess, but they always shut up when he was around, and he knew he was missing the best stories. But Vriess is giving him the full treatment; he's not missing a thing.

"Some of the stories are about you, Johner. John's getting a new slant on you too. Is that worrying you?"

"Yes, to tell you the truth it is, a little. I wasn't someone that he would have liked, Connor. I wasn't someone that anyone would have liked." Johner turned his face away from her. "I'm not proud of my past life; I try not to think about it. What I have now---what we have---is so---" He stopped, shaking his head. "There's no way to make the two halves of my life fit together."

"They don't have to, Johner. You're here with me now, and it's the way you are now that's important. John understands that."

"Yes. Yes, that's right" His arms went around her, and he held her tightly to him, "Now is what's important."

Johner and Vriess didn't talk much about the days on the Betty, or about their shipmates. Those days were gone, and the people were gone too.

"But you sure came up smelling like a damn rose!" Vriess shook his head. "How in the hell did you ever get her? She's something else. She's a real woman!"

"She sure is. I don't know how it happened, I'm still amazed by the whole thing."

"Is it her doing that you've changed so much?"

"Have I?"

"Ha! You know damn well! In the old days you'd have dumped me in the trash and walked away."

He looked away from Johner, turning his head so his face couldn't be seen. When he spoke again his voice was very low. "Thanks, Johner."

Johner was seized with embarrassment. "Hey, it must be her doing. I can't figure why anyone would want to keep a bum like you around! I'd never do it on my own."

"Sure, you wouldn't. You didn't pick me up and carry me away from the hospital, did you. You didn't haul me all the way home and plunk me down in her kitchen, did you. You dumb shit, take credit for it! It's prob'ly the only thing that'll get you into Heaven!"

They laughed, both relieved at having got over the moment of emotion so foreign to their relationship.

Vriess died in Johner's bed, two months to the day from the day Johner brought him home. He didn't seem to suffer, the doctor agreed that he wasn't in pain; his paralysis simply crept

up and killed him. His last days were peaceful, he just ate less, and talked less, and at last quit breathing very quietly while Johner sat with him in companionable silence.

"It was good. It was a good way for him to go. I think we did good." Johner held Sarah in his arms, rocking her a little. They had just come home from taking care of the last arrangements; it was all over.

"Yes. We did good." Sarah reached up to kiss him.

"Do that again. I like that." He kissed her again, with rising passion. "We're alive, Connor. Let's go to bed. I love you."

Johner stretched and turned over to his side, propping himself on his elbow. "It's funny how death does that; makes you want to make love. Is that because you're trying to make a baby to replace the person that's gone?"

"I don't know. I didn't know that even happens. Is that true?" She sat up, her interest caught.

"I think it is. It's happened to me before." His face became still as his thoughts turned inward. In a minute he said, "I've seen a few people die, more than I like to think about, and it's been right there every time. I couldn't always do anything about it, but it's sure been there."

"I thought about going to bed with you all the way home, but I thought it was just because you're so sexy." She grinned at him.

"Well, that too." His eyes laughed at her. "I don't know how you ever resist me long enough to get out of bed."

"I don't either. Maybe I'll just stay here with you. John can bring us food on the weekends."

"If we don't go to work, there won't be any food."

"Oh. That's right. We'll have to get up."

"Maybe so, but not yet. Come here." Laughing, he pulled her down beside him, and rolled his big body to cover hers.

Chapter 18

REASSURANCE

"Connor?"

"Mm-hm?"

"Tell me you love me." He raised his head and looked down at her where she lay tucked between his arm and his body, with her head on his shoulder.

She turned her face up to his. "I love you, Johner, I always will." She brought her hand up to caress his cheek. "Why do you ask? I just told you and showed you too, half an hour ago, in every way I could think of, how much I love you. What's the deal, babe?"

He sat up and turned to face her, sitting cross-legged. "I'm never sure. I wonder if you'll keep on loving me. I wonder if you'll leave me. I wonder if most of what you feel for me is pity, or

kindness, or---or I don't know what."

"Johner!" She sat up also. "What brought this on, babe? What makes you so unsure of me? Have I done something to make you wonder?"

"No! No, you haven't. It's just that it's so unlikely you would ever love me. Connor---I'm the dregs. I'm the bottom of the barrel. I can't even say I was brought up in the slums; I wasn't brought up at all. I just got bigger. I can see why you might feel sorry for me, but I'll be damned if I can see why you'd love me."

"You don't see yourself for what you are at all, do you? You see a picture of what you were once. No, not even that. You see what you think you were once." She reached over to kiss him lightly. "I do love you, and I can give you reasons, but the final answer is just that I do. It's not a matter of logic or good reasons, Johner. It just is; it's there, and it's real."

"I told you not very long ago what I see when I look at you. I see your courage and your strength and the lovely soft tenderness that you show me when we're alone; and there are other things that make me love you, Johner. One big one is the love that you have, and that you show, for my son. I'll be grateful to you all my life that you have given John a father at last."

She went on, "George asked you to represent the firm at the convention, didn't he? He told me he was going to, and asked if I thought you'd do it. I told him he'd have to ask you. Did you say yes?" Johner nodded. "Uh-huh, I thought you would. Why do you think he did that, Johner? Because he has respect for your intelligence and your judgment and your good sense, and knows that you will be an asset to the company when you represent us; and so do I know it. He made a good choice. Everyone who knows you likes you and has respect for you, sweetheart." She grinned. "And the women covet your body."

He smiled and shook his head. "Connor, that's nice to hear, but I've been living in this body for many years, and women don't line up for it."

"Oh yeah? I know for a fact that there are at least four women at work who would line up just to be fucked by you up against the wall in the broom closet."

He choked with laughter. "Jesus, Connor, I don't do that kind of thing any more! I know better now! I don't fuck, I make love; in bed, where there's comfort, and I can pay attention to detail."

"Yeah, I know. Your attention to detail is one of the major reasons why I love you. If those women knew how great you are in bed, you wouldn't be safe out alone."

"Connor, I don't even look at other women. God, I think I'm supposed to at least look; but I can only see you. Loving you is the breath in my body; when that last breath's gone maybe I'll stop, but not before then."

"I still get shaky when you take your clothes off. I don't think I'll ever get used to touching your body; it makes my heart race yet. How long has it been? Two years? And we still feel like this —" he reached over to touch her breast, and she closed her eyes and put her hand over his, holding him to her.

"I know what you mean." Her voice was husky. "I want you whenever I look at you. I'm looking at you now, Johner."

"Connor?"

"Mm-hm?"

"Connor---will you marry me?"

There was a moment of silence. Then—"Yes, of course I will if you want me to---but what made you think of it? I never have once in these two years. It's just not something I would ever think of doing."

"I know." He turned to face her, lying on his side. "I know you've never thought of it. But I've been thinking of it since that first time I held you naked in my arms; that first night. God, I'll never forget that night. It was like Heaven, like going to Heaven. I wanted you so much for so long, and then all of a sudden you were there, in my arms, and you were kissing me, and wanting me! I remember all of it; how you looked lying there naked, the first time I kissed your breast, when you put your hand on my dick---and the moment when I first went inside of you; God, I remember that." His eyes closed for a moment, his pleasure in the memory written vividly on his face.

"But I know that you've never thought about marriage. In all the talk there's been between us there has never been a mention of marriage. It's not part of your idea of life, is it?"

"No, Johner, it's not. I don't have anything against it; it's just not what I thought I would ever do. There have been a lot of men over the years; I needed their strength, or what they could teach me, whether I cared about them or not. And mostly I didn't. Marriage was the farthest thing from my mind." She moved restlessly under the sheet. "But I'll marry you, Johner, if that's what you want."

"Is it what you want?"

She looked down for a minute, then back up to meet his eyes. "I hope I can be honest about this without hurting you, babe. I love you more than I can tell you, but I'm reluctant to do this, for some reason that I really can't explain, because I don't know what it is."

He smiled a little. "I'm not hurt, Connor. I could see that your heart wasn't in it. Let's forget the whole thing; it's not really important, is it? We'll go on the same way whether we're married or not.

"I think I can tell you why you're reluctant to do it, though; it's for the same reason that I want to do it. I want reassurance that you're mine, that you belong to me. And you can't stand the thought of belonging to anyone, of being owned. Right? It makes you crazy, doesn't it?" His little smile turned into a grin, as she looked sheepishly up at him.

"Yes, that's what it is. And yes, it makes me crazy."

"Well, we can't have that. God knows you're tough enough to live with now." He laughed and reached for her, pulling her into his arms. Sarah snuggled up to him, her head tucked under his chin, his arms close around her, holding her against him.

In a minute she spoke again. "You know, the reason most people get married any more is because of children. Inheritance, custody, those legal things.

"I wish I could have given you a child, Johner. I would have been happy and proud to do that. You deserve to have children; you're a great father. I've seen such an improvement in John since he's come under your influence. I wish---well, it can't happen, but I wish it could."

"You'd---have had my child? Oh Connor! That's---" He stopped, his voice choked. "That's the nicest thing---" His arms tightened around her, and he rocked her back and forth.

"Why, sweetheart, don't take on so! I'm only sorry that I'm not able to do that for you." She pulled back to look at him, grinning. "I guess we're a little old for that kind of thing anyway." Her grin widened. "At least you are."

“Never miss a chance, do you?” He laughed and kissed her. “But thank you; it really pleases me that you would think to say such a---such a sweet thing to me. I love you, Connor.” He thought for a minute. “I’ve never even considered having a child before. It’s never entered my head. But you know, I think I would have liked it. I guess that makes me damn lucky I’ve got John, doesn’t it?”

“And he’s damn lucky he’s got you. And he knows it. He loves you, Johner.”

He smiled at the ceiling and said, with evil intent: “You mean I’ve got a family?”

“Jesus Christ, Johner. Aren’t I ever going to hear the last of it? Yes, you’ve got a goddam family!” Her face softened. “And they love you. I love you. Don’t ever doubt it, babe. When you’re eighty three, I’ll still be here, still loving you, and still wanting your hands on me.”

Chapter 19

FIRE

When Johner looked up Sarah was talking to a stranger; the man’s arm was around her and he was looking down at her with familiar affection. Interested but not upset, Johner got up from his desk and started across the office. Before he got halfway there her head had turned to him, and she motioned to him to come to her.

“Johner, this is Howard Winters, an old friend. Howard, this is Johner. He’s my man.” She looked from one to the other, smiling at both of them. They were a study in contrasts: Johner tall, powerfully built, graying, his face scarred and ruggedly put together; Howard was tall also, but there the resemblance ended. He was blonde, with the regular features of conventional handsomeness and the smoothly built body of a swimmer; and he was ten years younger than Johner.

The men shook hands, and small talk was traded for a few minutes; then Howard departed, and Johner grinned down at Sarah.

“OK, what’s the story. He’s not just an old friend.”

“No, he’s not. We had something going once, but that was a long time ago. He’s looking to hire us, Johner. Have you got a problem with that?” She was a little concerned.

“She loves me. She wants me. She’s going home with me tonight.” He smiled down at her with open tenderness. “No. I’ve got no problem; a job is a job.” His grin broadened. “---But if he lays a finger on you I’ll kill him.”

They were hired to protect a new product against corporate espionage until it was perfected and ready for patent. Word of it had got out; Howard suspected that someone in his organization was in the pay of his competitors.

The job was a complex one, requiring a considerable amount of consultation, and Johner began to watch the interplay between Howard and Sarah with more than passing interest. There was no doubt that Howard was looking at Sarah with a view to resuming their old relationship. His eyes followed her constantly, and there was a caress in his voice when he

spoke to her. Johner and Sarah were settled in an office in the corporate building, so there was plenty of opportunity for Howard to pursue his objective, and he took full advantage of it.

As Johner got a handle on the job, he began to have a certain suspicion about the whole thing; he saw no evidence at all of any kind of espionage. He mentioned the matter to Sarah; she thought it was funny. "You mean you think he's hired us just so he can get next to me?" Laughing, she shook her head. "Johner, I know you think I'm pretty special, but come on! that's kind of extreme, isn't it?"

"Maybe he wasn't entirely focused on you. It's possible that he really was concerned about the possibility of espionage, but there's no evidence that it's happened. You've said yourself that you don't see why he's so paranoid about this job; I don't either, and his explanation of his suspicions is inadequate. I think that he could easily afford to hire us, so he thought he'd protect himself and at the same time he'd just see if he couldn't get you back. It's kind of a challenge for him."

"I just find it very hard to believe he'd go to all this trouble."

"Why? I went to the trouble of living in your house for six months, aching for you every minute, and without any hope of anything but looking at you and talking to you. But I got what I wanted so much; I still have it. He doesn't have a prayer."

"You're right. He doesn't. I love you more now than I did during those six months, and that's going some. I did some aching myself, you know."

"I know now, but it's still kind of hard to believe. How did I get so lucky, Connor?"

"Wrong pronoun. How did we get so lucky?"

Howard's attentions to Sarah progressed to efforts to get her alone. More than once she was obliged to firmly reopen office doors that he closed behind them.

"Damn it, Connor, do I have to put a sign on your back saying 'TAKEN'? He doesn't take no for an answer, does he?" They were in bed, talking over the day's events before going to sleep, as was their usual practice.

"Sorry about that, Johner. I've told him plainly that I'm not interested; he's just not used to being turned down. He's got a big ego problem; I couldn't take that when I knew him before. He's an OK guy otherwise, but he sure thinks he's God's gift to women."

"Well, I'm God's gift to you; and he'd better believe it. I'm getting annoyed."

She smiled at him. "Johner, you are God's gift to me. A gift that's more than I ever expected. I love you. I don't want you to be annoyed, but it's kind of nice to know that you feel a little possessive of me. Just a little bit, mind you, and not if you're going to be angry at me about it. We've had that!"

"I feel more than 'just a little bit' possessive! God damn it, you're mine! When he looks at you the way he does, it's all I can do not to grab you and kiss you, just to let him know who's the one you love."

"That's not such bad idea. You could do that right now. I wouldn't fight it." She looked at him out of the corner of her eyes.

"Connor, are you flirting with me?"

"No. This is not flirting; this is a flat out invitation. Kiss me, Johner. Then we'll see what else

we can work up.”

“I don’t have to work it up! Look, see that? And I haven’t even touched you yet.”

“That’s impressive! And it looks very inviting. Can I feel it?”

“Please. Oh, yes, I like that a whole lot. You can do that for a long time---oh, Connor, that’s good---that’s so good...”

The next day Johner had a heart to heart with Howard.

“I don’t want to be rude, Howard. You’re my employer at the moment, and I owe you a day’s work every day; but I do not owe you any liberties with my woman. You can talk, and you can look, but accept a friendly warning. Don’t touch her. I’ll break your spine.” Johner smiled genially, and clapped Howard on the shoulder in a friendly manner for the benefit of anyone who might be watching, since they were standing in a large and busy office.

Howard smiled back, also conscious of curious looks. “I’ll keep your warning in mind. Of course, it all depends on what she wants, doesn’t it? I guess we’ll have to let her make the final decision. I don’t want to be unkind, but look at the two of us. Quite a contrast, in every way, isn’t there. If you were a woman, and had to choose between us, what would you do?”

“I’m not a woman. But she is, and she’s the best there is. I have no doubt that she chooses me; we’ve been together for more than two years, and I know her very well. Don’t touch her, Howard.”

They parted, both still smiling.

“Why do I have the feeling that the friendly conversation I just saw between you and Howard wasn’t as friendly as it looked?”

“You’re right. It was a friendly threat. I told him I’d break his spine if he touched you.”

She laughed delightedly. “No! Did you really? My hero! What did he say?”

“He made a comparison between us that he thought would put me in my place; but I knew who you’d choose, and I told him so.”

“Dead right! Give you up for that creep? Not likely!” And in the full view of the entire staff, including Howard, who was standing in front of his office, she reached up and kissed him with fervor and at some length.

They decided later that it was probably the kiss that did it. Howard had made no secret of his pursuit of Sarah; everyone knew about it. The conversation between the two men had been observed by practically the entire office force, and the consensus was that Howard had been warned off. Howard was not over popular with his employees, and when Sarah made it clear publicly what her choice was there was actually some applause.

Howard's ego was bruised; he didn't bother with subtlety. That evening Johner got a call from George, asking him to come with Sarah to his office in the morning.

"What the hell has been going on over there?" George was not happy. "We've been fired! In forty years in this business, I've never been fired. Sweet Jesus, what the hell happened? That asshole over there says he suspects you of stealing! Of all the stupid things I ever heard---!"

Johner couldn't help it. He began to laugh. "I guess you could call it stealing!" George's head snapped up. "He had a girl, eight years ago. Now I've got her, and I wouldn't give her back!" Sarah hooted, and in a minute they were leaning against each other, helpless.

"Oh, for God's sake! Is that what all this foofarah was about? Settle down now, you two. Stop it now! This is a business office!" George glared at them. "Connor, what is it about you? I don't see the attraction, myself. Skinny little thing." This remark was not calculated to help them regain composure; their laughter redoubled.

George shook his head in disgust. "Damn it all, can't you people act like grownups? Now get out of here; I got work to do!"

Chapter 20

INFATUATION

"It would appear that she's smitten. That's pretty flattering to you, Johner. I'd say that she's approximately thirty years younger than you." Sarah was grinning from ear to ear. "I've always told you that you were more attractive than you think, but the romper room set? This is a new high---or low, depending on how you look at it."

She put her hand up and ran it over his short cropped hair, then reached up to kiss him lightly. "I think you're embarrassed! Well, you should be; she's just the right age for John! Maybe she'd accept your son as a substitute. What d'you think? Shall we introduce them?"

Johner looked uncomfortable. "This whole subject is an embarrassment to me."

"But think what an opportunity for me! How often do I find something to tease you about that really gets to you?" She choked with laughter as he glared at her. "OK, OK, I'll quit. You've squirmed enough." She laughed again and put her arm through his as they moved through the parking lot to their car.

The subject of the conversation was the new receptionist in the office. George had hired his great niece to fill the position. "I don't want to hear a damn word about this from anyone; the family has had problems and she needs the work!" He was feeling defensive about his decision to hire a relative.

The men on the staff were doing no complaining; the opportunity just to look at her was enough to make them enthusiastic. She was undeniably beautiful; blonde, blue eyed and willowy. And after two weeks on the job, she was unmistakably in love with Johner.

He had no idea how it had happened. He ruminated about it while he fixed dinner, and over desert he asked if they could talk about it. "I'm concerned. I know you think it's funny." He grinned down at his coffee cup, "Well, it is, in a way. But I don't think it's funny to her, and it's goddam uncomfortable for me."

"Connor, I don't know what the hell I did! I came across her crying in the back office, and I

couldn't just turn around and leave her there; damn it, I felt sorry for her! I offered her my shoulder to cry on, but that's all! I swear, it was nothing more than a little sympathy!" He glanced up at her, looking for her acceptance of his statement as truth.

"Babe, it's all right; I know you didn't do anything to make this happen." She was smiling at him in amusement. "Don't look so guilty! You're a sucker for anyone in distress, I know that."

"I'm way old enough to be her father! It never crossed my mind that there could be any reason not to offer a little comfort." Johner shook his head. "And the funny thing is, you wouldn't think she'd be looking for a father figure; her father's the problem. He's a drunk, and he's violent. He's been beating her and her mother both, ever since she was a child."

"Did she tell you all this during your sympathy session in the back office? Maybe I should be a little more suspicious!" She couldn't resist teasing a little.

"No, no! ---God, Connor, don't make me feel any guiltier than I do! George told me. He took me aside yesterday and told me the whole thing. The father's in the can now; assault. Her mother pressed charges for the first time in twenty years; and now of course they're both scared to death of what will happen when he gets out." Johner shook his head. "God, it's so bad, what people do to each other. ---I think about the things I did---I'm so sorry for a lot of things." His head went down, but not before she saw his face twist in pain.

She reached her hand to him across the table. "Don't, babe! You're not that person any more. You can't change the past, but you can make the present better, and that's what you're doing."

In a minute he raised his head and smiled at her. "Yeah. Thanks, babe." He reached behind him for the coffee pot. "Want some more? ---Anyway, about Heather. Wouldn't you think she's had enough of fathers?"

"Yes, you'd think so---but on the other hand, maybe that's why she fell for you. You're the exact opposite of what her father is; so with you she can have a great boyfriend and a great father all at once."

"Connor, for Chrissakes, don't call me a boyfriend! I'm nobody's boyfriend, and never have been! Even when I was seventeen I was a man, not a boy."

"Well, sorry, I didn't mean to insult your masculine image! But doesn't it make sense about you being both father and boyfr---lover?" She was laughing at him, but his attention had been caught by something else she said. "How do you figure I'm the exact opposite of what her father is? What am I, a wimp?"

She laughed again. "No, not a wimp, a gentle man; there's a difference. Johner, I don't think you have any idea how different you are from what you were. Part of the reason that women find you so attractive now is the contrast between the big roughhewn man that you are physically, and how gentle you are on the inside. Women react to that combination, believe me. I sure did." She smiled tenderly at him.

He shook his head, mystified. "OK, if you say so; I'm not going to try to understand that. Anyway, I think what you said about Heather is right; I suppose I must look pretty good next to her father. But anybody would, Connor! There are guys around the office twenty-five years younger than me, and God knows better looking. Why me?"

"Those guys didn't hold her and let her cry. They didn't show compassion for her pain."

"They didn't have the opportunity---but in honesty I gotta say that a lot of them wouldn't have anyhow. Too concerned with their masculine images. In spite of what you say," he grinned up at her from under his brows, "I'm not concerned about my image; you get over that as you get older. I've got enough history behind me now to be sure that I'm a man; I don't need to prove

it.”

“You sure don’t need to prove it to me. I’ve had ample evidence.”

He grinned. “Yeah, I guess you should know if anybody does. But I don’t mind proving it to you. In fact, I kind of enjoy it.”

“Kind of? You kind of enjoy it? From what went on last night, I’d say it’s pretty clear that you ‘kind of’ enjoy it! I think you reached a new high in moaning and groaning; I’m afraid the neighbors are going to start complaining!”

“Let’em complain. It’ll be pure jealousy.”

“That it will. Johner, I suppose it’s still too early to go to bed?”

“It’s never too early to go to bed. Or too late. Or too anything. Let’s go.”

Heather’s interest in Johner only grew as the days went by. It was obvious to everyone, and Johner took a lot of heat about it, but George didn’t think it was funny. “What the hell are you trying to do? Corner the market in beautiful women?”

“George, please! I don’t like this any more than you do, but I don’t know what I can do about it. It’s damn embarrassing.”

George gave one of his infrequent grins. “Yeah, I suppose it is. But damn it all, she’s my great niece! I know you haven’t done anything, but you’d better not, or I’ll ruin whatever’s left of you when Connor gets through.”

Johner grinned ruefully. “She wouldn’t leave enough to bother with.” He thought about that for a minute. “But you know, George, maybe Connor’s the person to handle this situation. Hm-m.” He wandered away down the hall, deep in thought.

He took Connor out to eat that night to their special occasion restaurant, where the food was so good that even Johner was willing to pay the exorbitant bill once or twice a year. Connor ate her dinner with great pleasure, but she knew that Johner would be presenting another kind of bill; he was salving his conscience because he was going to ask her for something that he felt guilty about.

When dinner was through, she smiled at him over her coffee. “OK, Johner. I appreciate the lovely dinner, ---but just exactly what is it you want me to do for you?”

“How in the hell did you---“

“Oh, come on, this isn’t the first time you’ve softened me up before you dropped the boom on me.”

“Jesus Christ, Connor! Am I just a clear pane of glass? I didn’t know I do that! You must be bored to death with me, if you know everything I’m going to do!”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Believe me, I don’t know everything; in fact I can’t figure out what it is you want from me this time. So why don’t you tell me.”

He looked down at his folded hands. “I think you’re the best person to talk some sense into Heather.”

She sat up straight. “What! Are you crazy? I’m the last person! I love you, dummy! I’m supposed to tell her that you’re not worth loving?”

“Come on, Connor. I don’t want you to tell her that. I just want---well, you know, woman talk! I

don't know what you say to each other, but I'll bet if you think about it, you'll know the exact words."

"Woman talk? What the hell is that? Jesus, Johner, this time you've really thrown me a curve!"

He put both hands on the table, and leaned back in his chair. "Well, I can't do it! I don't even say good morning to her any more. I can feel the emotional pressure from fifteen feet away; if I get alone with her I'm scared she'll throw herself at me. I don't want to have to peel her off me, Connor."

"God, I don't want that either; I'm not completely sure you would peel her off. It must feel pretty good to have this beautiful young girl nuts about you, doesn't it? Come on, Johner, admit it; it feels good."

He smiled, and spoke a little reluctantly. "Sure it does. I'm human, and I'm getting old. It's a real shot in the arm, if you want to know the truth. But Connor, all the young girls in the world aren't worth five minutes of my time with you. However good she may look to me, and I'll admit there's a certain amount of attraction there, do you think I'd risk what we have for some little bit of fluff? Not in this world."

He reached across the table for her hand. "Connor, nothing, no one, could ever come between us. Not from my side."

"And not from mine." She turned her hand up to grasp his.

They were silent for a moment, looking at each other.

"OK." She squeezed his hand, then picked up her coffee cup. "I'll talk to her. I don't have a clue what to say, but I'll think of something."

Chapter 21

WOMAN TALK

"Sarah, if it's about that memo, I'm sorry; I'll get it done within the next hour. I've just had so many---" Heather stopped; Sarah was shaking her head.

"No, it's not about the memo. Sit down, Heather." Sarah shut the door and sat down beside her at the big conference table. "It's about Johner."

Heather's face paled dramatically. She looked up at Sarah, then down at her hands clasped tightly together, then back at Sarah. "What---what?" Her eyes were terrified.

"I'm not mad; don't be scared. But we need to talk about it." She took the girl's cold hands in hers. "It's no secret how you feel about him, Heather; your face gives you away every time you look at him. And I understand, I think we feel just about the same way. I'm absolutely nuts about him too." She smiled, and saw with satisfaction that the terror in Heather's eyes was subsiding a little. "He's hard to resist, isn't he? I've been crazy about him almost from the moment I first saw him."

Tears slowly welled up in Heather's beautiful blue eyes, and began to roll down her cheeks. "I know he belongs to you. I know that. I just---I just can't help it!"

"I don't think you can help it. I'm not blaming you for this in any way." Sarah reached over with a tissue and wiped tears from her cheeks. "He doesn't 'belong' to me, Heather, that's not the

way we see it; but he and I have a lifetime commitment to each other, a very deep and serious one. You don't need to feel any guilt about your feelings; this is not going to cause any trouble between us."

"I don't know what I can do! How can I just stop I-loving him? I can't leave my job, my mother---" She began to cry again.

"No, no, I understand that you can't just leave your job to get away from the problem. And you feel the way you feel; it's not something any of us have a lot of control over. But something needs to change, Heather." She smiled. "For one thing, Johner is just miserable. He's so embarrassed about the whole thing!"

"Embarrassed?" Heather looked nonplused. "I don't understand."

"Well, you know he's old enough to be your grandfather, and you haven't exactly made a secret of the way you feel. What do you think the other guys in the office are saying to him about now?"

"Oh." Heather's face turned slowly red, then redder. "Oh. They're teasing him."

"That's putting it very mildly."

"Oh, Sarah, I never meant to make any trouble for him!"

"Of course you didn't. Who can understand the sense of humor of men when they get in a group? It's beyond belief! He probably deserves it, at that. He's just as bad as the rest of them; when they get on someone they can really make life a burden."

"---Uh, what---what are they saying, Sarah?"

"There is a great deal of talk about warming bottles, and changing diapers is right up there. Yesterday there was some discussion of roller skates, and what you could do on them. You understand that these remarks all have a double meaning, and the second one is not repeatable. Your uncle George overheard just one remark. Someone nearly got fired; they've been a lot more careful since then. They watch for him."

"What does Johner say?"

"He gives back as good as he gets. You can't let them think they're getting to you. But he's getting damn tired of it."

Oh, Sarah, I didn't know. I feel so bad that I've made trouble for him; I wouldn't do that for--- for anything!"

"Well, what we need to do now is figure out how to rectify the situation."

"How to what---?"

"Um---make things better."

Heather brightened slightly. "Can I do something?"

"You can change the way you're acting, even if you can't change the way you feel. Do you know how you look at him? It's sort of---soulful, I guess. Try a cheerful smile when you see him, instead. And for Pete's sake, laugh a little! The guys are always joking, laugh at them! You could be having a pretty good time at this job if you give yourself a chance, Heather."

"OK, I'll try." She sounded doubtful. "But---could I come talk to you sometimes? You're so easy to talk to."

"Sure, Heather, any time at all. It's a deal."

"So I told her she could come and talk to me, any time at all. Jesus, Johner, the things I do for you! She is not the brightest bulb in the chandelier!"

“You are a wonderful person, and you are my angel.” His arms came around her, and he began to kiss her neck and her ears.

“Johner, we are not at home. Johner! At least shut the door!”

But she was too late. Heather appeared in the open doorway, and stood rooted there, watching Johner make laughing, intimate love to Sarah. His back was to the door, but when Sarah saw her she put her hands on Johner’s shoulders to push him away. He only laughed and grabbed her hands, taking them behind her back, holding her prisoner while he kissed her. He murmured against her mouth, “My babe---I want you; I want you under me.” His voice was low and throaty with desire, his hips moved against Sarah’s.

Heather’s face turned bright red, then white.

It was over in a few seconds. Heather disappeared from the doorway, Johner still unaware that she had been there.

Sarah relaxed suddenly, practically falling out of Johner’s arms. “Well, now you’ve done it!”

“Done what? Got you going? I sure hope so.”

“Johner, Heather was standing in the doorway for that whole performance you just put on.”

“Whoops.”

Sarah looked thoughtful. “Now that I think about it, maybe that was just what she needed. Or maybe not, depending on how far her daydreams had gone with you. If she had progressed as far as going to bed with you, this may have made her crush worse; but I’ll bet she hadn’t gotten any further than a romantic kiss. She’s so young. If romance was her ideal, the scene she just saw may have been earthy enough to turn her off. Let’s keep our fingers crossed.”

Johner was totally mystified. “What? Would you say that again in English?” When she began to laugh, he shook his head. “If I live to be five hundred, it won’t be long enough to understand the first thing about women.”

By the time three days had passed, it appeared that either Sarah’s talk or Johner’s demonstration, or perhaps the combination, had done the job. Heather’s attention had turned to three young men who were more than willing to take up her time. By the fifth day, when Johner walked by her desk she didn’t notice him.

She never did come to Sarah for that talk.

Chapter 22

A FAVOR

It was evident that George had something on his mind. Johner couldn’t remember him ever closing the door to his office, but he closed it today, shutting the two of them inside.

George appeared to be at a loss for words. “Ah---Johner, I---well, the truth is, I want a favor. A personal favor.”

“George, I’ll be very happy to do anything I can for you, personal or otherwise; I hope you

know that. What do you need?"

"I don't like to ask this, Johner, but I need for you to intimidate Clifford Dexter; that's Heather's father. There's trouble in that house, and I can't stand by and let him beat those women. Someone has to put the fear of God into him." George looked down at his hands on his desk. "There was a time I would have taken care of this myself, but---not any more. I'm too old, Johner." He looked up, reluctantly meeting Johner's eyes. "I need your help."

"I'm glad that you asked me, George. Just let me know what you want; I'll do as much or as little as you say. Want me to break his arm? Or just make him hurt some? Or maybe you just want me to scare hell out of him?"

"He's a hard nosed bastard, you may have to do him some physical damage. Johner, I can hire someone, but I just don't feel good about doing that. These women are scared enough, I don't want to send someone in there who's going to scare them worse."

"No, no, George, don't hire someone. I'm fine with it; I did something like this for a living for years. The women know me; they won't be scared of me. I won't do anything in front of them."

"Thank you, Johner." George shook his head. "I've always known Dexter was a drunk, but not that he hit her. If she'd come to me before, we could have taken care of this years ago." He frowned. "She's got family; that's what we're here for. Damn it, why didn't she come to me sooner?"

"Well, we'll take care of it now. I'll let you know what happens. Is he out of jail?"

"He gets out tomorrow, and he's already threatened to beat hell out of Marie. She hasn't told Heather; didn't want her to worry. But I think they're both at risk; he's beaten both of them before."

"Maybe I'd better be there to meet him when he gets out. Can you tell the women not to meet him? I'll bring him home." Johner thought for a minute. "I'm going to tell him that I work for you. We don't want him to think that Marie hired me. Is that OK?"

"That's fine."

"He could come after you."

"I'm not afraid of him. I can still defend myself if I need to. He's an amateur, and I haven't forgotten everything I knew. Johner, I'm in your debt."

"No. I owe you, George. For a lot of things." The two men shook hands.

Sarah was not happy with the arrangement. "Johner, I can't believe you're going to do this. This kind of thing is the very thing you're trying to forget!"

Johner nodded. "You're right, it's not something I look forward to; but George needs my help." He shrugged. "I'd never turn him down on anything he asked; this is something I can do to show him how grateful I am for his kindness to me. He's a good man, Connor. He accepted me on faith, on your say-so, and he's never questioned my honesty or my loyalty, or failed to support us, whatever happened."

"That's true; I just hate to see you doing something that you're going to feel bad about, and I know you will." She put her hand up to his face, and touched it lightly. "Babe, I'm sorry you've been put in this position, but I can see why you're going to do it."

"Thanks, Connor. That helps; you always understand. I love you."

When Johner came home from his unpleasant errand he looked grim.

"How did it go?" Sarah looked up at him searchingly.

"Not very well. He is a hard-nosed bastard, like George said." Johner's head was down. "I had to hurt him."

"Oh babe, I'm sorry."

"And I'm not sure I did scare him off. He's not a coward. A mean son of a bitch, but not a coward. That's the worst combination."

Sarah put her arms up, and Johner came into her embrace gratefully. His head went down to rest against her neck, and he held her to him with tenderness, murmuring his love and his gratitude. "My babe, I love you---thanks for being here for me, I love you so much---so much!"

In a minute he looked up at her. "It's probably not over, Connor. He's mad, and he's not afraid. I'm wondering if they're all right---if I should I have stayed around there. I just wanted to get home so bad."

"Do you want to go back?"

She saw decision in his eyes. "Yes. I shouldn't have left." He kissed her quickly and turned for the door, his hand reaching for his keys.

Sarah waited for four hours. After the first half hour she wished she had gone with him, but there was nothing to do now but wait.

It was well after two in the morning when Johner get back.

"You've been gone a long time. Is everyone all right?"

"No, everyone isn't. Clifford Dexter is in the hospital. Marie was treated and released in the emergency room. I don't want to talk now, please, Connor. I want to get in the shower. And then I want to go to bed. OK?" He wasn't looking at her. "Please, just go to bed. I'll be there when I've showered."

"OK, Johner. I'll be here when you want to talk about it." She put her hand on his shoulder. He didn't look up, and he didn't return her caress.

Sarah waited for an hour; when he didn't come to bed she got up and went looking for him. She found him in the kitchen, sitting at the table, drinking coffee.

"OK, let's talk about it, Johner. You've got to sleep sometime; it looks to me like you're not going to until you get it out." She got a cup, sat down opposite him, and poured coffee. As she sipped, she watched him over the rim of the cup. His face was expressionless; with Johner that was not a good sign.

"What happened?"

He didn't answer right away. Then---"I broke his jaw."

"I guess you must have hit him pretty hard."

"Too hard, Connor. And too many times." He got up suddenly and with three long strides was out of the room.

Sarah sat for a minute looking at the empty doorway, then got up and followed him into the living room. He was sitting in the dark, barely visible to her in the trickle of light from the kitchen.

She sat down beside him on the sofa and turned to face him. "Johner, I see that something bad has happened to you. Listen to me now. There is nothing that is so bad that I won't understand, nothing that will make the least difference in my love for you. You can tell me anything, Johner. Tell me."

When he began to talk his voice was a monotone. "Nothing has changed. Nothing. I am the same. Whatever made me think there could be a change?" As he continued his voice began to have some expression. "It's a joke. I am what I am. The bottom of the barrel. Slime. Street slime." He laughed softly, bitterly.

"What happened? Tell me."

"I nearly killed him, Connor. I would have if Marie hadn't stopped me. Connor---" he paused, his head went down into his hands; his voice was harsh. "I enjoyed it! I got off on it! It was just the same---Christ, it was just the same! I've been lying to myself, and to you. I'm the same---animal---I've always been!"

Sarah knelt beside him, and put her arms around him. "Not true, not true! Johner, you have to trust me on this. You are a different man! Wouldn't I know? Do you think I could live with you and not know?"

He was stiff in her arms, holding himself away from her. "Don't, Connor. I can't touch you."

Sarah reached up to turn on the light. She put her hand under his chin, and turned his face up to hers. "Look at me! And listen! OK---maybe you haven't changed. Maybe you're still that crude, cruel man in some part of you. Maybe you always will be. But Johner, it makes no difference to me. I love you. I love what you are, whatever you are. And I want you. I want your arms around me. So be---whatever you are! I want you anyway. You're my man, Johner. That's it, that's the last word."

She smiled at him, her mouth a little tremulous. "Please, love me. Don't pull away from me; I love you so."

His arms came around her then, he held her to him and rocked her back and forth. "God, I love you---but Connor, I don't deserve you! How can you want me? I'm---muck, the dregs, the bottom layer!"

"Stop that! What you are is my man. You're mine, I'm yours. That's all there is."

He spoke softly, to himself really. "That's all there is? I wish that were true. I wish I could believe that."

Chapter 23

INSIGHT

Clifford Dexter got out of the hospital in a few days, and went home to Maria and Heather. Heather reported to George that he appeared to be a chastened man; the beating administered by Johner had gotten his attention. He made no violent moves, and no threats, although he continued to drink a great deal of whiskey through his wired jaw.

As days went by, Johner began to smile again and to make jokes; after the first few days he

resumed making love to Sarah, but she felt a reserve in him that didn't go away, that didn't even lessen. She was reminded of the days before they became lovers, when his reserve had shut her out of his inner life.

In those days, he had had something to hide: his love for her. Now Sarah wondered what it was that he was hiding; that it was painful to him she had no doubt. He wasn't sleeping well; she woke up often in the night to find him gone. On the nights when she went looking for him, she found him in the kitchen, drinking coffee. But as time went by, she got up to join him less often. He had almost nothing to say to her during these nighttime vigils, and she had a strong feeling that she was intruding on his thoughts.

He began to lose weight, and Sarah's concern for him quickened. At last she could stand it no longer, and when she woke once again to find him gone, she followed him to the kitchen.

He sat down across from him and leaned toward him. "Johner, I want you to level with me. Something is wrong with you, and it's not getting better. I'm scared for you.

"I know it's about what happened at Dexter's house that night. I want you to tell me what happened, Johner. Now. Start right now." She took both of his hands in hers, holding him tightly when he tried to pull away. "I mean it. Tell me, right now."

His hands relaxed in hers as his body slumped wearily. "OK---OK. I'll tell you what I can." He shrugged. "I don't know what happened. That's the trouble."

His eyes fell from hers as he began to speak. "I got back there almost in time. I could see when I pulled up that there was trouble; the lights were all on, and the front door was standing open. When I walked into the kitchen he had Marie backed up against the kitchen counter. There was blood on her lip. He had only hit her once; he was just getting warmed up. Heather was scrunched down on the floor in a corner, with her arms over her head. He was standing between them, I guess trying to decide which one to hit next." Johner stopped for a moment, his head hanging down low over the table. His next words were very soft, almost a whisper.

"I just started hitting him, Connor. I just started hitting him!" Sarah saw tears begin to fall on the tabletop, although there was no sound of them in his voice. "I just felt so happy! I could do it, I could beat him up, I could kill him! I was getting the biggest charge out of it; it felt like the greatest thing in the world. I could kill him!" His voice was louder now. "---And Connor, I was going to. I would have, if Marie hadn't stopped me. I was down on the floor over him, and I was beating on him with both fists. I can't tell you how---how elated I felt!

"What kind of man does that, Connor? What kind of man feels---joy! It was joy!---at beating another man to death?"

Sarah's fingers tightened on his. She took a deep breath, and gambled on an intuitive insight, something which had come to her forcefully while he told her what had happened. "Maybe the kind of man who saw his father beat his mother? The kind of man who was a small child and watched helpless while his father hurt his mother? Maybe that kind of man, Johner?"

He said nothing for a moment, still looking down, not moving; then his head came up slowly, his eyes wide. "Maybe. Maybe that kind of man. I---remember." His eyes gazed over her head now, sightlessly, seeing the past. After a silence of many seconds he began to speak, hesitantly, with a kind of wonder in his voice. "He---he killed her. She didn't move---she never moved, and he went away and left me there with her, and she never moved." His face crumpled, and his sobs were those of a child.

Sarah came around the table to take him in her arms. She cradled his head against her as he sobbed. In a few minutes he calmed somewhat, and he pulled her into his lap and buried his

face in her neck, his place of comfort. His sobs subsided into long shaky breaths. He sat quietly, holding her close, taking consolation from her nearness and her warmth, until his breathing was normal again, and he had come back to the present.

"I remember it." He spoke against her neck. "It happened. He killed her, and I never saw her again."

Johner's head came up; his face was calm, his manner thoughtful. "I never saw him again either. I wonder what happened. What do you suppose happened, Connor? Did they catch him? Did he go to jail? Or did he just walk out of that kitchen and disappear?" He paused, his eyes sightless again, looking into the past. "It was in the kitchen. She was standing against the stove. I can see the stove, Connor. Isn't that funny?"

He sat up straighter. "I want to know what happened. I want to know where I came from."

Chapter 24

BEGINNINGS

In the weeks that followed, Johner found out a lot about the charitable institutions of the Catholic Church. His search for the orphanage, which he remembered only vaguely, was not an easy one. The secretary at the local diocese was as helpful as he could be; but the events that interested Johner were nearly fifty years in the past. The church administered many orphanages, foster homes, and rescue facilities, and Johner could tell them neither the year of his stay, nor his full name.

"If you could remember something about the place---was it near the ocean, on the top of a hill, did it have a fence around it---" Father Gallegher waved his hands in an inclusive gesture, "Anything at all, there are a lot of old people in the parish who might remember, if we knew what to ask."

"Nothing, Father." Johner shook his head, then stopped and looked up, "---No, wait, there was a great big tree in front of the building; a really huge tree. I remember the sisters talking about it, they liked it for some reason."

Father Gallegher's round face lit with a smile. "Now that's a clue! Someone will surely remember that! I'll put out the word. I make a lot of visits to old people, and they'll talk it over among themselves, too. The grapevine will be busy this week!"

Sarah watched Johner's search with mixed emotions. One thought kept returning to her: 'Be careful what you wish for, you might get it.' Sometimes the truth hurt, and Johner had been hurt already almost past bearing. The image of that little boy standing all alone over his mother's dead body, waiting in vain for her to wake, was ever present in her mind.

When she remembered all of what she knew about Johner's life, and then looked at what he was at the present time, she was overwhelmed with admiration for his strength and courage. How many men could have preserved their souls through his adversities? That his ability to love had survived his life history was a miracle, one for which she thanked the gods. Now she only hoped that the knowledge he was searching for wouldn't hurt him again. He deserved better of fate, but Sarah's life experiences made her apprehensive; fate wasn't always fair.

Johner waited patiently to hear from Father Gallagher. While he waited, he explored other sources. He and Sarah spelled each other at the computer, scanning old newspapers, looking for notice of the long ago death of one obscure woman in a megacity of many millions. The chances of success were vanishingly small, particularly since he had no name, but he persevered. He searched the church records for notice of her funeral. He found someone at the police department who was willing to search police records for a fee.

Sarah found it difficult to respond positively to the search. "Johner, I wish you the very best success at this project, but I can't say that I'm hopeful. It just seems like such a long shot. I'm more than willing to help all I can, you know that, Babe, I'll look at newspapers 'til I go blind, I'll help you for the rest of my life if necessary, but I don't think you've got much chance of success. I can't tell you that I have a positive attitude when I don't."

"No, you can't do that. I understand, Connor. You're going far beyond the call of duty even to help, and I'm grateful for that. I know the chances are that I won't find it, but I just have to do this. I suppose that eventually I'll run out of steam, but I haven't given up yet."

When the breakthrough came, it was from an unbelievable source. John, searching legal records for a precedent in a child custody case, came upon Johner's family. "It's got to be the one, Mom. Read it and see, but I believe it's the one!"

"OK, John, I'll read it, but we won't say anything to Johner unless we're sure. This is just too far out to be true!"

When she had read it, she was convinced that John was right. The circumstance seemed to be exactly right; the time was within the period they had decided was correct. There was no question; Johner had to see this.

She waited for him to get home from the library impatiently, unable to sit still. When he finally opened the back door and walked in, she was pacing the kitchen floor.

"God, I thought you'd never get home!"

"Is something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing wrong---but I've got something here that you've got to see. John brought it this morning."

"Where is he?" Johner looked around the room.

"He had to go back; he had a class, but he knew you had to see this right away."

"What, for Pete's sake?"

"Sit down, Johner, and read this" She handed him the big law book. He looked up at her questioningly, but sat down, opened the book to the marked page, and began to read. As his eyes traveled down the page, he stiffened and bent further over the book. "Jesus Christ!" He turned a page. "My God!" He read further. When he finished, he just sat, looking at the book with eyes that didn't see it. In a minute he looked up. "This is it, babe; it's got to be it!"

There was a murder of a wife by her husband; the man had been apprehended and had confessed to the murder. There was one child of the marriage, aged four. The body was

discovered by a neighbor who had heard a child crying for several hours, and found him sitting by his mother's body. And finally, in the absence of any known relative, custody of the child was awarded to the Catholic Church, and the child was housed at St Jude's Orphanage, run by the Little Sisters of Charity. The man's name was John Reilly, and his wife's name was Maureen. The child was John Reilly, Jr.

"John found this?"

Sarah laughed. "Can you believe it? He was researching child custody precedents. He was blown away when he read it, and so was I. It's got to be the right one, doesn't it? It just has to be."

"I know how to find out."

"How? I've been thinking and thinking, trying to think of some way to tie it down, but I can't. Even if the child was at the orphanage, it doesn't prove it was you."

"But if the orphanage had a great big tree out front---" Johner grinned at her.

Johner, Sarah and John all went together to see Father Gallagher, "If you go without me I'll resign from the family! I'll be home this evening. Make an appointment for then!" John said on the phone when Johner called him in jubilation. So Johner fixed dinner while they waited for him, and they both pushed the food around their plates.

"Well, that was a waste of food, but at least it kept me busy for an hour or so." Johner got up and began to scrape the dishes. They worked together to clean up, and they had just finished when John walked in. Johner swept him into a huge hug. "Boy, you can have anything you want. Name it!"

John grinned. "An Alpha Romeo."

Johner grinned back. "I've changed my mind."

Father Gallagher looked up as he finished reading. "God was looking over your shoulder, son," he said to John. "This is taking coincidence to the point of the miraculous! And God was certainly looking after you, Johner. I'm certain that you've found it; there can't have been two cases with so many points of correspondence. But how will you make sure? There's really no proof here that this child was you, although I have to say I believe it was."

Johner smiled. "That's where you come in, Father. We need for you to find out if St Jude's Orphanage had a great big tree growing out in front."

"Of course! That's it!" Father Gallagher reached over and pounded Johner's shoulder. "That's it!" His grin was huge. "I'm a detective story addict, and this is as good as anything I've read. And I haven't had such a good time since the Bishop had shingles!" His round face turned red as he bubbled with laughter.

"I'll get right on it, Johner. No problem, now that we have some facts to go on! I should have something for you in a couple of days at most. Now, let's all have a cup of tea. Mrs. Flaherty made oatmeal cookies today, and I've already had my quota, but she can't refuse to put some out for company!"

St. Jude's Orphanage was long gone, but it had had a big tree out in front. The tree had held the record for the biggest tree in the state of some variety which the old man who verified the facts couldn't remember, but it was "A big tree, yessir, a great big tree! The nuns took good care of that tree, yessir! They was damn proud of it!"

Johner was satisfied, as was Father Gallagher. They sat over teacups and cookies in the rectory study, talking over their long search.

"Well, Johner, you've found what you were looking for. Now that you have, how do you feel about it?"

"I don't know exactly. I guess I'm glad on the whole to know, in spite of the fact that my father wasn't exactly a model parent or a great human being. Murder isn't something that you want to have in your family tree; but now at least I've got a family tree---of sorts, anyway."

To Sarah he revealed more of what he felt. As they sat at the kitchen table he told her what he had found in searching law enforcement records. "He died in prison. About twenty years ago. I'm glad he's dead, Connor. I'd have to go to see him if he was alive, and I don't want anything to do with him, so it's good he's dead. It's over; all over. They're both gone, but I know what happened, and that's a good thing.

"I've got a birthday, Connor. July 14. And I'm only fifty-one; that's at least two years younger than I thought." He grinned at her. "Enough with the age jokes now. I'm just a kid, really."

He took her hand over the table, holding it in both of his. "I've got a last name, too. Reilly. John Reilly; but not junior, I'll never use the junior. Feels kind of strange, you know, like it's someone else. I'll use it when I have to; I've made up last names when it was absolutely necessary to have one, and I've been in a lot of fights over not having one."

"I thought of something about your name." Sarah smiled and reached over the table to touch his face with her free hand. "I'll bet 'Johner' is a baby-talk contraction for 'John, Junior'. Your mom loved you, Johner. She used your own baby-talk name that you made for yourself, because she thought it was cute."

Johner looked up at her, and as he looked tears welled up in his eyes. His grip on her hand tightened, and his voice was husky when he spoke. "God, Connor---thank you!"

He stood up, came around the table, and picked her up in his arms. "Woh! What's this?" She put her arms around his neck, snuggling into his embrace. He carried her into the living room and sat down on the sofa with her on his lap. "Connor, how do you know these things? Do you have any idea how much these ideas mean to me? How did you know what made me beat on Clifford Dexter? You just opened your mouth and told me that my father beat my mother. How did you do that?"

"I don't know. It just came to me while you were telling me how good you felt while you were hitting him. Why would you feel good? I know you, Johner. You don't feel good about hitting people any more. There had to be a reason. I don't know---it just came to me."

"Well, thanks, babe. Finding out why it happened made all the difference. I'm not really sorry that I hit him, he had to be stopped. But I went too far, and it was the way I felt about it--- Christ, Connor, I don't want to take pleasure in hurting people. I did get off on it, for years, but I thought I had changed; then when it happened that night I thought that nothing had changed at all. God, I was sick about that. But I am different now, aren't I, babe?" There was urgency

and a little fear in his voice. "Aren't I?"

"Of course you are! You're a different man now. But remember what I told you, Johner. I love you without conditions. If you weren't different, I'd love you still. You're not ever going to get rid of me, babe. There's nothing you could do that would get rid of me." She smiled brightly at him. "You might as well relax and enjoy it."

His arms tightened around her. "I do, babe, I do."

Chapter 25

JOHN

"Johner, have you noticed anything about John the last couple of times he's been here?"

"You mean how preoccupied he is? Sure I've noticed. He's in love, I'll bet anything, since a couple of months ago. He's been staying at school over the weekend quite a bit, and that's not like him. But you're right, the last couple of times he's been home he's different. I'd guess that the course of true love---."

"That sounds right. But why hasn't he told us? He's usually up front with his love life."

"Maybe this one is more serious? I dunno, we'll have to wait and see; it'll come out eventually."

John was watching Johner peel potatoes. "Johner---want to go for a drive?"

"What? What's going on, John? That's a fairly strange request."

"I think I need to talk to you---in private."

Johner looked at John searchingly. "OK, sure, John. Want to go right now?" He wiped his hands. "Let's go."

John drove to the local park, and turned into the parking lot. When he had stopped the car and turned off the ignition, he sat looking at his hands on the steering wheel.

"OK John, get it out. In some kind of trouble?"

John looked at him nervously. "No---not the kind of trouble you mean, anyway. I'm not in trouble with the law or anything like that." He hesitated, looking back at his hands. "I met a girl."

"And that's trouble? Should be just the opposite, I'd think."

John looked up, his eyes lighting. "It's the greatest thing, Johner! I'm nuts about her, and she---likes me too. But---" It seemed very hard for him to go on.

"Yeah, there must be a 'but'; otherwise we wouldn't be having this talk. Tell me about her, John."

"I met her in the law library, about three months ago. She works there; she's in her last year, in English Lit. She's just beautiful, Johner, and so bright, and funny, and so---" John's hand's tightened on the wheel.

"So desirable?"

"Yeah. But Johner, she had some trouble---." He stopped, unable to continue, his head down. "What is it, kid? Just say it; this is me, Johner. You can tell me."

John looked up. "Yeah, I can. She was raped, Johner. It was very bad, and she's afraid now---afraid of men---afraid of me. God, Johner, I love her! How am I going to fix this? I have no idea what to do."

"Christ, the things that people do to each other. It's understandable that she's frightened." Johner frowned and shook his head. "Well, John, you've got a problem, all right. Is she getting some kind of professional help?"

"Sure, she's had a lot of therapy, and it's helped some, but---not enough. I don't know what to do, Johner. I have a hell of a time staying cool when I'm with her---and the hardest part is that she wants me too! She's OK until it gets to a certain point, and then---she just freezes."

"I'm sorry, John. I can imagine how it must be; it must be terribly hard on both of you."

John turned toward Johner. "I think you can imagine it. That's part of the reason I wanted to talk to you about this; I saw you wanting Mom for months and months without ever making any move at all. How did you manage that, Johner?"

Johner looked straight ahead, his attention turned inward. "It was hard. I think I succeeded in keeping my feelings to myself for such a long time because I loved her so much. It was so important to me that she was happy that I was willing to do whatever it took. But I spent a lot of sleepless nights, John. A lot of nights."

"Yeah. I know about that, too." John's head went down. "What can I do? I just don't know where to go from here." He looked up at Johner. "I thought you might have some ideas. I don't know why, exactly, but I thought---" He stopped, at a loss for words.

"You want me to tell you what I would do in your circumstances. OK---but John, I haven't any special knowledge here; as long as you keep that in mind.

"First, have you talked this whole thing over with her?"

"We've talked about it some. It's hard for her; she can't talk very much at all about what happened to her. And we've talked a little about our situation, but after all, what's to say about it? I want her, and she can't do it. That's the whole story." John shrugged.

"No! That's not the whole story. You want her, and she wants you, and you've got to find a way to make this thing happen, so both of you can be happy. That's the whole story, and you need to talk to her about this until that's clear to both of you.

"It's not just about what you want, John. I know you didn't mean that, but that's what you just said. 'I want her, and she can't do it.' It's not just her problem; both of you need to change to solve this.

"I'd make sure first of all that she knows she's not to blame. She probably feels guilty as hell that she can't do this for you. Then---talk and talk about it. That's what I would do. You can't do anything else, really, if you think about it. Tell her how much you care about her. Tell her how sorry you are about what happened to her. Tell her that you want to make her forget that awful thing, by being so happy with you. Tell her you love her, over and over and over. And tell her that you'll wait forever for her.

"Now here's the tough one. Don't make love to her. No physical stuff. You can't talk love enough, never stop that; but don't touch her in a sexual way. Put your arms around her, hold her---that's comforting, and she needs comforting; but that's all. Tell her you're not going to make love to her, and that when she's ready, she can make the first move. And then don't! If you weaken and break your word, you've broken her trust.

"If you could make her comfortable enough with you that she could talk about the rape, that would be ideal. How? I'm no authority, John, but I seem to come back to the same thing. Talk about it. Keep after her. Tell her how important you think it is for your future together that she gets this whole thing out to you. Keep telling her that you won't push her all the time you're pushing her, if you see what I mean. Tell her she's got all the time in the world to get herself to the point of telling you, but she's got to tell you. And tell her you love her and you'll wait. Keep telling her that all the time.

"If you keep telling her you love her, while you make no physical move on her, it will promote trust. And that's what will solve this, John. When she totally trusts you, you're over the hard part. God, I sure sound like I know what I'm talking about, don't I? And I don't, really. I'm just going by my gut."

"Your gut's good enough for me, Johner. Everything you've said makes sense to me. It sounds like it'll be tough as hell, but it makes perfect sense."

"John, how come you wanted to talk to me in private? Aren't you going to tell your mother about this?"

John looked embarrassed. "Well, Jeez, Johner, she's my mom! I dunno, it just seems like sex isn't the right thing to talk about with your mom!"

"I see. It's all right to tease her about her sex life, but yours is off limits, huh? You never let her alone for a minute about her and me; come on, John, get over it. Your mother will have more sensible things to say about this than either of us, probably. Talk to her. I'll be present or not, whatever you want, but talk to her!"

"OK, you're right, I need to get over it. Let's go talk to her!"

When Sarah and Johner had retired after the talk with John, they discussed the situation.

"Johner, after all this time, you still amaze me. So you just came up with a complete treatment plan for this serious problem, off the cuff?"

Johner was alarmed. "Didn't you mean what you said to John? You don't think I should have said anything?"

"No, no, babe. You were right on. What I said to John is true, it sounds exactly right. I'm just amazed that you knew precisely what to do. How on earth do you do that?"

"I just went with what I felt. I dunno. I just---I dunno. So you think it was OK?"

"I think it was inspired. I guess it remains to be seen if it works, but I don't see how it could possibly do any harm. You've given John a hard row to hoe, though. It's going to be tough as hell on him."

"Tell me about it! It was worse for me, though. I didn't even get the chance to put my arms around you."

"You can now." She looked at him innocently, fluttering her eyelashes.

He rolled to lean over her, laughing and looking down at her with love. "I sure can. And I sure do, whenever opportunity knocks. Listen---I think I hear her knocking right now!"

He bent his head to cover her mouth with his.

Adult

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He bent his head to cover her mouth with his, but in a moment he lifted his head from the kiss, laughing too hard to concentrate on it. "Hey, what's with the eyelashes? If you want to get laid, you just have to say so, babe. The eyelash thing isn't necessary!"

"I did say so---you obviously got the message! If I can make you laugh in the process, that's a bonus." She grinned up at him.

"Oh, babe, you can make me laugh, or cry sometimes too, but always I love you with every breath I take." He smiled tenderly at her. "God, when I think about the time I spent looking at you and loving you and wanting you until I nearly died of it! Those days were the hardest I ever spent. Lying in bed at night, knowing you were right next door---I used to try to imagine what you looked like at that moment, whether you were wearing anything, or if you slept nude; that was a big question in my mind. I spent a lot of time thinking about that, thinking about your body, how beautiful it was, how much I wanted to look at it bare, and touch it---. I thought all the time about how it would feel to go inside you. That drove me right up the wall---God, I wanted you so much!"

"Once in a great while I dreamed about you, about making love to you. It'd be Heaven right until the end. I'd wake up convulsed with an orgasm that shook me to the soul; then when I'd realize it'd been a dream, I'd want to cry. Sometimes I did cry. I needed so much to feel you in my arms, under me, moving with me---. When it turned out not to be real---it was bad. But it was better than not having you at all, and I always wanted to dream it again.

"Sometimes I thought I should just get up and go into your room and lie down beside you, and ask you to make love with me. I knew you wouldn't be scared, you knew me too well after the months we'd lived together, and I thought you might feel sorry enough for me to let me make love to you. By that time I was willing to take you on any terms at all. If the worst you would have done was kick me out of the bedroom, I would have tried it; but I was afraid you'd kick me out of the house. I wanted you so bad, Connor, but I couldn't chance losing you altogether!"

"I had troubles of my own." She reminisced, smiling. "I knew you slept nude; I washed your clothes, remember; that was one of my chores. You should have asked for that chore, then you would have known that I slept nude; no nightclothes in the wash.

"I laid awake nights too; I thought about your body, how beautiful it was, how much I wanted to touch it, to kiss it---. I thought exactly what you did, Johner: if I just went into your room and climbed into bed with you, would you turn me down? Most men wouldn't; but even then I knew you weren't like most men, and I couldn't chance it. If you did, it would probably destroy what little we had together. I couldn't gamble on that."

"Christ, if I had known!" Johner shook his head. "If I could have done this" he caressed her breast with his long fingers, "or this---" his hand slid down the side of her body, to cover her pubic mound, "God, how I wanted this, to touch you here!" His mouth came down on hers with new urgency; the memories made excitement surge in him.

Sarah pushed at his shoulder. Their familiarity with each other made him roll over without breaking the kiss, knowing what she wanted. When she was on top of him she lifted her head. "This---this is what I wanted so much." And she began to kiss his body, her mouth moving over his chest, her tongue touching his nipples, one and then the other, making him shudder. She continued to move down his body, using lips, tongue and teeth to explore its surface. He began to pant, writhing under her exploring mouth.

Her tongue moved into his navel, sliding around it, delving into it. His body bucked, his hands came down around her head. "Oh, Christ, Connor, you'll drive me crazy! ---Go lower, Connor, lower! Please, don't stop, go lower. Take me in your mouth. I want to feel your mouth on me, please---please. Ah-h, God, like that, Connor, like that!" Her mouth and hand were moving over him, her tongue sliding over the sensitive tip of his penis, her hand very softly kneading his testes. His pelvis tipped up to meet her mouth, he moaned her name over and over, "Connor---Connor---Connor!" She knew his excitement level was explosively high, and she didn't stop. Her head came up just long enough to say "Come, Johner, come for me!" Then she bent again to her work.

His hands clenched in the bedclothes, his body moved convulsively against her mouth and her hand. "Oh babe, I'm gonna come, I'm gonna come!" She slowed a little, bringing him down just a bit, making the ecstasy last. He moaned and bucked and writhed, and she kept up her slow stimulation, keeping him on an edge, balanced just short of climax. "Jesus, Connor, let me come, I'm going crazy! Do it, babe, do it---please, please!"

She knew his body very well. She kept him there, begging for release, for a long time. When she thought he couldn't stand any more she began to move faster, her tongue swirling and circling around the head of his penis. He was far beyond words now, gasping for air, and as he felt his climax begin, his body arched up, pushing vigorously against her head, his hands holding her tightly to him. He cried out wordlessly, a long moaning wail, as he emptied himself in a prolonged series of convulsive contractions.

His body relaxed slowly, subsiding back from its strained arch, his hands dropping to his sides, his breathing slowing. After a few minutes, Sarah raised herself to smile down at him as his eyes opened.

"God, woman, one of these times I'm not gonna survive it!" His voice was hoarse, his speech still blurred with what had just happened. "You make me nuts! No one ever made love like you do! Not ever!" He reached up to caress her cheek.

"Have to keep you happy so you won't roam."

"You know damn well I won't roam. You just do these things because you know it keeps me your slave!"

Her smile became tender. "No. I do these things because I love you, and I know they give you pleasure."

"They do that, all right. Jesus! They do that. And speaking of pleasure---" He rolled over to lean above her. "I know several things that give you a bit of pleasure; but I'm thinking of just one at the moment." Slowly his hand moved over her body, brushing lightly over her breasts, her ribs, her stomach; and slowly it moved to her triangle of golden-brown hair.

"How come you like this so much? H-m-m?" His hand slid slowly between her legs, and his fingers found the opening they were looking for. "Do you want me to go inside you? Tell me, babe." His fingers moved over her, all around the opening, teasing. "Oh, all ready for me, aren't you? Did making me squirm like you did get you going too? I think it did. I think it turns you on to watch me lose my marbles, doesn't it?" His fingers never stopped moving. "Gets you hot to see me go nuts? Feeling all hot and wet, are you? Tell me, babe. I do nothing

unless I hear the words.”

Sarah’s early tendency to be silent in lovemaking hadn’t survived his insistence that she tell him what she wanted; he wouldn’t do it if she didn’t say it. She murmured, “Sure, babe, it makes me hot to see you go crazy, and to know it’s because of what I’m doing to you. Sure it does.” Her body began to move under his hand, her pelvis raising, nudging against his fingers. “This makes me hot too, babe. This gets to me in a big way. Please, babe, put your fingers inside of me, way inside. I want to feel them moving there, and your thumb moving too, just where it feels the best. Make love to me, babe. Go inside me.”

And he did. His fingers entered her body and began to move with practiced skill, and his thumb touched gently again and again on that small knot of nerves placed conveniently where his thumb could reach it. Under his expert ministrations her body gradually tightened, her muscles flexing, until she was rigid, panting with shallow breaths, her head arched far back, her face flushed. He watched her carefully, easing off when she neared release, keeping her at the edge, her body under his control, her pleasure at his fingertips. At last he let her come helplessly to her climax, unable to stop herself from groaning in her extremity. He greeted the powerful contractions of her interior muscles with delighted satisfaction, and savored the gradual lessening of them as her body relaxed, and her breathing slowed.

As her eyes opened, and she came back to the present, he looked tenderly down at her and said, “God, I love to do that. It’s so great to watch your face while I’m making it happen to you.”

Her hand came up to stroke his cheek. “I love being helpless under your hands, Johner. I love the feeling that I have no control, that I’m in your power.” She smiled. “That’s got to say something about my trust in you; I don’t usually relish not being in control.”

“You got that right! I guess you must love me, after all.” He turned his head to kiss the palm that she held against his cheek.

“I guess so.” She reached up to pull his head down, and kissed him softly.

“God, we’re so lucky, Connor.”

“Amen, babe, amen.”

Chapter 26

CARLIE

“Mom, Johner, this is Carlita Menendez. Carlie, this is my mom and dad, Sarah and Johner.”

“Hi, Carlie,” Sarah smiled as she shook Carlie’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you at last. We’ve been hearing good things about you for quite a while now.”

“John said you were beautiful, and for once he wasn’t exaggerating!” Johner smiled down at her from his great height.

Carlie was beautiful. Huge black eyes looked out from a small face topped by luxuriant black curly hair. She was very little, smaller than Sarah. But her smile was sweet, and her handshake was firm. Sarah liked her immediately.

Johner led the way to the kitchen, where he had dinner nearly ready. “You’ll have to sit in here if you want to eat my dinner. If I cook, people talk to me while I do it!” Johner grinned at

Carlie. "OK?"

"Sure." She smiled back. "You're cooking dinner?"

"Didn't I tell you?" John looked slyly at his mother. "My Mom is the greatest cook in the world---as long as you give her a pile of TV dinners and a microwave. I nearly starved to death before she found Johner. He does the cooking in this household, and believe me, it's better that he does."

Sarah was indignant. "You ungrateful wretch! I raised you on TV dinners, and you grew up perfectly healthy." She turned to Johner with a sly look of her own. "I will admit that it's handy to have Johner around, just to cook. And sometimes it's pretty good."

Johner waved a wooden spoon threateningly. "That's it! No dessert! People who make snide remarks about the cook get no dessert! I have spoken!"

Carlie looked back and forth between them, unsure whether this was fun or not. John reached across the table to take her hand. "Don't pay any attention to those two. They're madly in love, even if you'd never know it to listen to 'em right now. Wait'll you come around a corner and catch'em smooching. My ears were red the whole first year Johner lived here."

"It was good for you. Taught you how it should be done." Johner grinned, still waving the spoon.

"Johner! You're spreading spaghetti sauce all over the kitchen! Put that damn spoon down. I have to clean up in here, you know." Sarah smiled up at him, her face belying her severe tone.

Johner leaned over and kissed her, holding it for just a moment, then looking into Sarah's eyes for a second more. "There, that's how it's done. Pay attention, you two."

By the end of the meal, Carlie was relaxed and laughing; and when she and John went for a walk after dinner for a chance to be alone, she told him what she thought of his family.

"John, they're wonderful! I've never had fun with older people before. In my family---well, no one kissed anyone in front of us kids. I'm not sure they ever kissed at all, to tell you the truth. My mother put up with my father, I guess because she had to, but he was drunk a lot of the time; and he was always, drunk or sober, the macho man of the family. ---I didn't like him much. I'm not sorry he's dead, and I think my mother isn't sorry either."

"It's sad that you didn't have a father you liked, Carlie. I guess that can be worse than no father at all, like I had for most of my life. I've told you already that Johner isn't really my father; but I feel like he is. I love them both. They're the best!" John stopped walking and turned Carlie to face him. "Carlie---honey, I told them about you, about what happened to you."

She looked up at him, shocked. "You told them? Oh, John, I never thought you'd tell anyone! Why did you do that?" Her eyes filled as she looked at him.

"Don't, cry, honey, please. I did what I thought was best, and I think it turned out to be best---what we're doing now, this new arrangement we have, is straight from Johner. It was all his idea. He's a really smart man, Carlie, and the kindest man I ever met. I needed help, honey; I was totally lost. I had no idea what to do, but Johner knew right off. Please don't be mad at me; I've been scared to tell you, I knew you wouldn't like it, but I think it was really the right thing."

“What did you tell them? How much?”

“Just the bare fact, nothing else.”

“Oh. I guess that’s not so bad.” She looked at him thoughtfully. “And he gave some good advice. I guess I should be glad you told him.”

“Thanks, honey, for making the effort to understand.” John put his arms around her, and she responded immediately, snuggling closer in his arms, her body tight against his. His head went back, his eyes closed; but he stood still, not tightening his arms, making no move to advance the embrace.

“How’s it going, John? If you think I shouldn’t be asking, shut me up. I won’t be hurt.” Johner smiled.

“No, no, Johner; you’ve got a right to ask. It’s going very well, I guess. Carlie is very happy with our new arrangement. I told her tonight that you both knew about what happened to her; when I told her how much I needed help, and that this whole thing was your idea, she was OK with it.

“I think it’s working so far, Johner. If I live through it! It’s damn hard sometimes, but Carlie is much more understanding of that than I thought she would be. We’ve talked about how hard it is for me, even. You know, there’s nothing we can’t say to each other any more. Boy, have we talked! We’ve been through all of the things that people usually try to hide; there’s nothing left that we don’t know about each other. So when one of us feels uncomfortable or unhappy about something, we just say so. It’s great!”

Johner smiled, amused. “It’s called intimacy, John.”

“Is that what that means! Well, I’m all for it, then.” John grinned. “I’ve got a lot to thank you for, Johner.”

“No. You’ve done it; I just pointed out the path. It’s a great feeling, I agree. Intimacy with another human being makes us not alone any more.” Johner looked away from John, up at the ceiling. “I guess I know about as much as anyone about being alone. Your mom has made a new world for me, and I thank the gods for her every single day of my life.” He looked back at John and smiled, a little shyly. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to get sentimental.”

John touched his arm. “Don’t apologize. I guess I’m finally growing up, Johner; that didn’t embarrass me at all. I was glad you told me.”

“I guess you are growing up. That’s good, ‘cause you’ve got a ways to go yet with Carlita. By the way, John, your mom and I both like her very much. Good choice, son.”

“Johner, that’s the first time you’ve ever called me that. As long as we’re being sentimental, I feel like I am your son, and it feels damn good!” John moved to hug Johner, and Johner held him for a minute, then spoke softly. “I love you, John.” John looked up at him with affection and replied, “I love you, too. I guess that’s the way it’s supposed to work in families, right?”

Chapter 27

PATIENCE

John lived through it, but Sarah and Johner wondered sometimes if he would; he got thinner, and so did Carlie. They visited often on weekends; Carlie was still using Johner's bedroom, but John confided that things were progressing, and he was hopeful, if not contented. When the time came to make plans for summer break, John asked for a family conference.

"Can Carlie come to spend the summer here? She can get a summer job here as well as there, and neither of us wants to be separated for so long. Would that be all right with you two? I know that puts you out of your bedroom, Johner." John grinned. "But let's face it, you don't use it a whole lot anyway. And Mom has her own bathroom; you'd keep your privacy. Carlie would be glad to pay rent, and chip in for food."

"Carlie is welcome to stay here, and paying for it is not necessary." Sarah frowned at John. "Did you tell her she'd have to pay?"

"No, no, I told her she wouldn't! But she made me promise I'd offer. She doesn't want to be any kind of drag on you people. She's very nervous about this whole thing; thinks it's an imposition or something. I had to talk her into letting me even ask.

"She's especially nervous about your bedroom, Johner. When she's stayed overnight she's seen that you store your clothes there, and she thinks it's going to make life difficult for you."

"Hell, I lived out of a footlocker for twenty years. Connor can move over a little, I don't take up much room."

"Wha-a-at? If I hadn't got a king size bed I'd be sleeping on the floor! Jesus, he thinks he doesn't take up much room! I don't believe it!" Sarah looked at him with laughing eyes. "You weigh two hundred and forty pounds; if you think that doesn't take up much room, you must be nuts!"

Johner drew himself up with dignity. "I was referring to closet space. If you think that I'm taking up too much room in your bed, I can find another place to sleep. There's always the broom closet at work, and according to what I hear I wouldn't have to sleep alone there either!" He looked down at her haughtily, but his eyes laughed at her.

"Try it. I'll kill you." She laughed, leaning toward him, and his arms came up to hold her.

John was disgusted. "Stop! Damn it, you two, can't you ever think about anything else?"

"Anything else than what, John?" His mother grinned at him from Johner's arms.

"OK, OK, you're not embarrassing me. After living with you two for years, nothing embarrasses me. Let's get back to business here. This is a family conference, not a love-nest!"

Johner didn't let go of Sarah, but he answered. "Isn't the conference over? I thought it was all settled. Carlie lives in my room for the summer; or at least until you can talk her into sharing yours, John. Now can I get back to what I started here?" He began to kiss Sarah's neck.

"No!" Sarah squirmed in his hold. "We're not finished!"

"You squirm like that and I'll show you what's not finished!" Johner held her tighter against him.

Laughing, Sarah pushed at his shoulders, trying to free herself with no success. "Johner! Will you behave!"

"Mom, that's just an invitation for him to misbehave. God, you should know that by now!"

John was right. The family conference degenerated into laughter and horseplay.

Carlie loved living in Sarah's house; the atmosphere of easy fellowship and the pervading sense of love's presence was totally unlike anything in her experience. She was amazed and mystified at the relationship between Sarah and John. "How long have they been together, John?"

"I don't know exactly, about four years."

"And they still feel this way about each other? They're just like kids!" Carlie shook her head. "I never saw two people so much in love; and they're pretty old, John."

"Tell me about it. I've been calling them teenagers for years."

"I think it's the nicest thing I ever saw. It makes me believe in love. That's something I haven't ever really thought existed until now."

John looked at her quizzically. "Don't you believe I love you, Carlie?" Then, as he studied her face, "---Oh! You don't!"

"No, that's not true---I'm beginning to believe it. But John, what's happened to me since I met you is so different from all the rest of my life---and now this thing with your parents; I don't know, John, it just seems so unreal, like a movie or something. It's easier to believe in what I've known all my life than in this---love thing."

John put his arms around her and rocked her back and forth. "Honey, believe it, please. Believe in me; believe that I love you. It can be for us like it is for Mom and John, all our lives. We've got that chance---let it happen, Carlie!"

John always believed that seeing the relationship between John and Sarah was what tipped the balance; but for whatever reason, Carlie's fear and inhibition disappeared during that summer vacation. On a hot night in August, John was aroused from an uneasy doze broken by half dreams of Carlie; a soft tap on his door made his heart pound.

"John? May I come in?" Carlie's voice was as soft and hesitant as her knock.

John struggled to keep his voice casual. "Sure, honey, come on."

She appeared ghostly in the dark room, her white nightgown seeming to glide across the floor. She sat down on the foot of his bed, drawing her feet up under her gown.

John sat up to reach for the lamp. "No, don't turn it on." Her voice was still very uncertain. "I--- I thought we could talk a little. Is that OK?"

"What do you think? Don't you think I'd rather talk to you than lay here by myself thinking about you?"

He saw her teeth make a light spot on her face as she smiled at him through the dark. "Were you thinking about me?"

"Carlie, I'm always thinking about you. Always. But for some reason more so tonight. Maybe because you were thinking about me?"

"I was. I was thinking about---" She stopped suddenly. He thought she sounded embarrassed.

"Tell me, honey."

"Oh, John, I was thinking about when you washed the car this afternoon. I---was thinking about---how you looked without your shirt. John, honey---take off your pajama top."

John's heart was pounding with unbearable excitement, but he pulled his shirt over his head without haste, and sat quietly, saying nothing.

Carlie got up and moved closer to him, then reached out to turn on the bedside lamp. She looked at his body, her eyes moving over his smoothly muscled torso; then, slowly, her hand came out and touched his chest, moving over it with light touches. John's eyes closed, and he took a deep breath, letting it out slowly in a long shaky exhalation.

Her eyes came up to his face, away from what her hand was doing. "Is this too hard for you?"

"Carlie, I love every minute of it. If you want to keep this up for a week, I'll just sit here and enjoy it."

She looked down again at her hand. Its movement was more assured now. She stroked his skin with a sensual pleasure in its feel, her eyes following what she did. After a minute, she bent her head, and her mouth replaced her hand, kissing slowly from his collarbone down his pectoral to the nipple. When her mouth closed over it, he gasped and stiffened, but his hands stayed at his sides.

"Lie down, John." He slid down in the bed and Carlie pulled the covers off his body; his erection was very evident.

"Sorry, honey; I can't help that." His smile was strained.

"Don't be sorry, John. I'm not." He lifted his hips to help her as she pulled his pajamas off him, lifting the waistband over the evidence of his desire. Then she just sat beside him, looking down at his body.

"Carlie---please, honey, I don't know what you expect of me now."

Carlie got up, and looking steadily into his eyes she reached down and pulled her nightgown over her head.

"I expect---I expect you to love me." As she lay down beside him, she lifted his hand, and placed it softly on her breast.

Chapter 28

SPRINGING CALL

"Screw the breakfast dishes! Sit here with me and read the paper; it's Sunday." Johner's hand reached across the table to her shoulder, holding her in her chair. "I'll help when we're done with the paper."

"Deal!" Sarah poured another cup of coffee, picked up the comic section, and settled happily.

A few minutes passed in companionable silence, both immersed in the paper; then Johner straightened abruptly. "Jesus Christ, it's Call!"

Sarah looked up, puzzled. "What? Who called?"

No! That's Call, right here in this picture. Jesus, she's arrested! We've got to get down there right away! ---Let's see, It's the 39 precinct---who do we know there? Henderson, right? That's good, he's OK. I heard he just made Captain; that'll help a lot. Come on, Connor, move!"

"OK, I'll move---if you'll tell me what this is all about!"

"In the car. Come on!"

Once on the way, Johner took time to explain. "It's Annalee Call, from my old crew. Connor, she's a robot. An Auton, a second-generation robot, designed by robots. They were recalled shortly after they were created, they were all supposed to be destroyed." He smiled. "It seems they didn't like to take orders. That's Call!

"I don't know how she escaped, but she's in big trouble if she's put in jail. If they find out what she is they'll kill her! We've got to get her out before someone X-rays her, or tries to draw blood!"

"What's she in jail for? And how on earth do you expect to get her out? Are we on the way to a jailbreak?" Sarah was smiling, but there was anxiety in her voice. She knew Johner.

"I don't think that'll be necessary." His face creased in a grin. "But you'd do it if I thought it was, wouldn't you."

"Yup."

"You're the most." He reached over to touch her hair.

"You'd do the same for me."

"Yup." Their eyes met for a moment, and they exchanged a smile.

"So what's she in for?"

"The newspaper's right there on the seat. I think some kind of demonstration. God knows what about; Call's the original protester! If any kind of authority is for it, she's against it." He shook his head, remembering Call's intensity and unbending moral judgments.

Sarah scanned the paper. "Oh, for God's sake! The demonstration was about that prison planet the right wing fringe is talking about. It's never going to get done anyway; why would anyone waste their time protesting that?"

Johner chuckled. "That's Call. Perfect! Go to jail and risk death for a moral principle on something that's never going to see the light of day anyhow." He sobered. "She *is* risking death. I just hope we get there in time."

When they entered the precinct station, Captain Jack Henderson was standing in front of the desk; when he saw Johner and Sarah he broke into the sunny smile which Sarah remembered as characteristic of him.

"Johner! How the hell are you, haven't seen you for months! Sarah, you still staying with this big bum? When are you going to get some sense, woman?" He put his arm around her and grinned down at her.

"Hands off, man! You bet she's still with me; she knows a good deal when she's got one." Johner laughed and shook hands. "It has been a while. I understand you've had a promotion recently, congratulations! You deserve it. Last time we saw you, you were handcuffing that no good little pip-squeak that stole the payroll. Heard he got put away for a long time. Good riddance!"

"That's right, you were in on the end of that one, weren't you? Yeah, we won one, for a change. Come on into my office---want a cup of coffee?" He settled them in chairs with cups in hand. "Well, now, what can the 39 Precinct do for you today?"

"We're here to spring someone. Name of Annalee Call."

"Call? God, what do you want with that little wildcat? She's here all right, been raising holy

hell ever since she was dragged kicking and screaming in the door.”

“That’s Call!” Johner laughed. “She’s an old, old friend. I saw the picture in the paper, and knew it was her when I saw she’d been arrested. If there’s trouble, there’s Call. What’re the charges, Jack? Is there going to be a problem springing her?”

“As long as it’s you, no. We got some scratches and bruises off her; there are guys around the precinct who’d like to charge her with assault on a police officer. But there’s no harm done, except to tempers; we were actually going to let the whole bunch go today, her included, as soon as we process them. We’ve kept them as long as we legally can. Hope it puts the fear of God into some of them. Not her, though.” He shook his head, laughing. “She’s a holy terror. Beautiful, though, and guts to spare. Too bad she’s such a wild woman.”

“Yeah, she is that; but I’ll be responsible for her behavior if you release her now, in my custody.”

“She should be fingerprinted and blood typed, but to tell you the truth I’ll be glad to get her out of here. Some of my guys are pretty mad at her. I’d hate to have any nasty incident in my first month as captain, and if she could pin anything on us, she would.”

“I’ll take her off your hands. OK, Connor?”

Sarah laughed. “She sounds like my kind of woman. I’ll be delighted to meet her.”

“Now that I think about it, you’ll probably get along very well. Both stubborn as hell, and not afraid of man nor beast.” Johner stood up and pulled Sarah to her feet. “Come on, babe, let’s get our little wildcat home.”

Captain Henderson personally oversaw Call’s release; when she entered the lobby ten minutes later she was looking over her shoulder and laughing back at Henderson.

When she turned, her face lit with a huge grin. “Johner? Is that you? I don’t believe it! Are you springing me? Well, will wonders never cease! Since when do you enter a cop house voluntarily?”

“Hey, I’m an honored guest, right, Jack?” Henderson nodded, smiling widely. “See? There are sides to my character you never had the slightest idea of. Call, this is Sarah Connor, my woman. Connor, this is the wildcat.”

“Annalee Call, howdy.” Call put her hand out, and Connor took it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Annalee Call. I’ve heard about you. And now we’re going to take you home with us, where you can get a shower and a decent meal. I’ve been in the pokey, I know what the first requirements are when you get out.”

Call laughed. “You are so right! That’s exactly what I want. But I’ve got a room, you don’t need to take me in.”

“Yes we do. Johner will want to catch up, and you need a little TLC after twenty-four hours in jail. Come, please. We’d really like to have you.”

Call’s pleasure in the invitation was obvious. “Well, thanks; I will. I’d like to hear what Johner’s been up to. He appears to have changed just a smidgen since last I saw him.”

“Uh-huh.” Sarah grinned up at Johner. “Due entirely to my benign influence.”

Johner smiled back. “That’s true. There, surprised you didn’t I? Come on, you two, let’s go home. ‘Bye, Jack, thanks. Talk to you later.” He put an arm around each of the women, and they headed for the door.

A couple of hours later Call was showered and fed, and the three of them sat around the kitchen table, drinking coffee.

Johner looked up from his cup. "Call, where's Ripley? I thought you two would surely be together."

Pain transformed Call's face; she looked down for a moment, then raised her head resolutely. "Ripley's dead. She was killed, murdered, three months ago. In a barroom brawl," She looked down at her hands turning her coffee cup. "By a lowlife scum that wasn't worth the least hair of her head. He came up behind her and put a bullet in her head from about three feet away." Tears overflowed her eyes and made shiny tracks on her cheeks as she looked at Johner. "Ripley deserved better than that. I miss her a lot."

"I'm real sorry to hear that. Ripley was like no one else. You're right, she deserved better." Johner reached to put his hand over hers. "I'm sorry. Were you there, Call?"

"Yeah. I was there. She died instantly." Call's face was strained. "The scum won't get out of it, though. He's awaiting trial right now, and he'll go away for a long long time. About ten people saw it happen, and at least three of them are willing to testify.

"He'll be convicted, but Johner, she's still dead, isn't she? It doesn't make any difference to Ripley whether he goes to jail or not." She began to cry again.

Sarah reached to take Call's hands and spoke softly, "I lost someone I loved very much once, to violence. It takes a long time to come to terms with a violent death. I think it's the hardest way to lose someone. I hope it will get easier for you before too long."

"Thanks, Sarah. I hope so too." Call smiled shakily, and then straightened and brushed her short hair back from her forehead. "Now let's talk about you and Johner. How long have the two of you been together? I can't believe yet that you'd put up with this bum! You're such a nice woman, Sarah."

"That's what I keep telling him; that he's unbelievably lucky to have me." She grinned at Johner. "Right?"

"Ah, but she's not telling you about all the disadvantages of our association for me. Her insufferable sense of superiority, for one thing." He ducked as Sarah took a swing at him. "And an unfortunate tendency to become physical when annoyed."

Call chuckled and looked from one to the other. "How long has this been going on?"

"Four years, isn't it?" Sarah looked at Johner, "Nearly five, I guess." She grinned slyly. "The worst part is it's a life sentence. No time off for good behavior."

Johner looked astonished. "What do you know about good behavior? I didn't think you even knew the words!"

"I used to, before I met you. I've been dragged down into a lower realm, made to behave in a manner that was not my natural state." She turned to Call. "Before I met him I was practically a saint."

Johner choked. "And if you believe that, Call, you're not as smart as I thought you were."

"I don't believe it, and I'm smarter than you thought I was." Call laughed and put a hand out to each of them. "I can see from what you say that it's true love. Good, maybe this can turn Johner into a human being. In fact, I'm beginning to think maybe it has." Her face sobered suddenly, and a little smile tinged with bitterness crossed it. "Now if we could just find some way to turn me into a human being---"

Sarah shook her head. "Don't, Call! I know what you mean, Johner told me; but I've been with

you for a few hours now, and there's no doubt in my mind. You are a human being."
"No, Sarah, I'm a robot. I don't fool myself."

Chapter 29

TRANSFORMED

A few days later, Sarah and Johner were reviewing the past day in the privacy of their bedroom.

Johner frowned, disturbed. "Something happened today that I've been waiting for. Jack Henderson called me; he wanted to know if Call was still with us. When I said yes, he asked to be invited to dinner."

"What did you say?"

"I said I'd get back to him, that you were the keeper of our social calendar. He said OK, but don't forget him. He really wants to see her, Connor. What are we going to do about that?"

"We're going to consult Call, of course. She must have faced this problem before."

Johner smiled, then laughed out loud. "She sure has---with me! I breathed down her neck pretty good on the old Betty---she had to make it perfectly clear that she'd die sooner than touch me. Even then I kept after her in my own sensitive, caring way, until Ripley came along and put Call right out of my mind."

"Ripley too? God, Johner, you were a hard case!"

"Right on. But in my own defense, when you're on a small ship with only a couple of women, the Wicked Witch of the West would look good. And Annalee isn't a wicked witch." A small smile began on his face. "Too bad I'm taken, think what an opportunity this would be for me to make time! ---Hey! ---Connor, stop it! Ow! Now stop it! One of us is going to get hurt---uh! Ouch!---and since I've turned into---uh!---a wimp, it'll probably be me!---Connor! No fair! Stop now!"

Johner was laughing helplessly and struggling to subdue her without hurting her. It was no easy task; Connor was very skillful. But after much laughter and mock combat, she was pinned to the bed, with Johner's weight holding her down.

He looked down at her, still laughing. But as he looked his face changed, becoming softer, and his head came down to touch his forehead to hers. "You are so beautiful, and I love you so much." He rolled over to lie beside her, looking up at the ceiling.

After a moment's silence, he said, "On the Betty, Call hated me, and she should have; I was the next thing to an animal. Nothing she said or did made the least difference to me. I remember---I never thought about how she felt at all. I only thought about what I wanted."

He put his arms up, hands behind his head, and settled himself to talk, his eyes focused on nothing, his attention inward.

"You know, I learned very young not to let anyone see what went on inside of me. The street is a very convincing teacher, if you don't protect yourself you're flayed alive. You push your feelings way down inside, and if you do that long enough, you forget they're there. You're without any feelings at all."

I guess I thought that's what everyone did; anyway, it's what I did. If you don't feel anything, you can't be hurt. But there are other feelings; sympathy, compassion, sensitivity to others. They all went; I felt nothing in myself, I felt nothing for others.

"What changed that, Connor? How did it happen that when you walked into my life I was suddenly different?" He thought about that for a minute. "No, I guess it wasn't so sudden. It was the Auriga; after what happened there, things began to change for me. I think the last remnants of my youth died with the Auriga, and I finally grew up while I watched my shipmates die. For the first time I got a glimmer of how senseless violence and killing are. Those---beings, those alien things---they had no conception of what they were destroying when they killed a man. But I began to see it; how individual each life is, and how important.

"When those---things killed the Captain, his woman, Hilliard, just quit living. She kept walking around with us for a while after that, but she quit living right there when he died. She loved him; she didn't want to live without him. It was a revelation to me, Connor. I'd never recognized love before that. For the first time I realized, 'These are people just like me, and they love; and because they love they're never alone!' It took a while to admit it to myself, but I wanted that, not to be alone.

"That realization started a huge revolution inside of me, Connor. So many things changed for me. The first night we met, when I ran to join you under that streetlight, I had finally rejected action without thought; motives had become important to me for the first time in my life. I saw a motive for action that night---a real simple motive; three against one.

I felt things that night too, Conner. I felt admiration for you, that's something I don't think I'd ever felt before. Envy, yes, of other people's skill or courage; but not admiration. And I felt a powerful attraction to you that wasn't just sexual. I was mystified by that---I didn't understand what was happening to me at all.

"The first few weeks that I knew you, I was confused all the time. I didn't know from one day to the next what I thought about anything; but finally out of that confusion one thing emerged. Whatever else I didn't know in this world, I knew that I loved you. By the time I moved in with you, the revolution was pretty much over. I had become a person who could love. And I did love; and lo and behold, against all expectations, I was loved in return."

He was still staring at the ceiling, but one hand came out to reach for hers. "That was a miracle, Connor. I could feel the difference in myself when I opened my mind up to caring; I knew it was right for me, but I realized that I'd probably never be loved back. I thought I had pretty much resigned myself to loving without any return." He chuckled. "I guess that shows how ridiculously naïve I was on that subject!

"I had not the very least idea how powerfully my love for you would work on me. By the time I moved into your house I was starving, dying, for you to return my love. God! How I wanted you to love me! Resignation was not in it. I would have done anything, been anything, tried anything, if I thought it would bring me one moment of your love."

He turned toward her, and she moved quickly into his arms.

"And then you came to me, and put your arms around me, and raised your face up to mine to be kissed. I haven't forgotten that moment; I never will. The joy I felt when I realized that you wanted me was the thing that wiped out all the first part of my life. It's as if it happened to someone else." His arms tightened around her, and he buried his face in his special place, that warm hollow between her neck and her shoulder.

Sarah closed him in her arms, her hand cradling the back of his head, and began a soft murmured monologue of love words. "You are loved, Johner---I love you beyond all reason, beyond understanding---I am yours forever and ever, until the world's end---there is no one

else, there could be no one; you are mine—mine---“ Her words trailed off into a low whisper, broken by kisses.

Chapter 30

DATING

“I’m taking orders for breakfast. What’s everyone’s pleasure?” Frying pan in hand, Johner turned from the stove to Sarah and Annalee.

Call smiled wryly, and said a bit hesitantly, “---Johner, uh---I don’t eat, you know. Or at least not what you’re fixing for breakfast. I can, but I’d prefer not to, unless it’s a matter of camouflage.”

Johner chuckled. “Well, for God’s sake why didn’t you tell me that before? Have you been stuffing food down when you didn’t want it?”

Call looked sheepish. “Well, yes, I have. It seems so impolite to refuse. And it tastes great, so I’m tempted.”

“Well, Christ, don’t do it, unless you want to just taste it. I won’t be offended, although I’ve got to tell you feeding people is one of my best things. It satisfies my patriarchal instincts; taking care of the family. I’m sorry you don’t eat; now you’re in danger of my figuring out some other way to take care of you.” Johner grinned at her and turned back to the stove.

When breakfast was done, and coffee was being drunk, Johner raised the subject that he and Connor had discussed the night before. “Call, we need your input on something. I got a phone call from Captain Henderson yesterday. He wants to see you---socially, I mean. He asked me to invite him to dinner. What do you want me to do about that?” Johner’s brows raised questioningly.

Call put her hands up to her face. “Oh, God! I was afraid that would happen!”

“Exactly what I said to Connor last night. It was pretty obvious from the way he acted at the station.” He laughed and continued, “Well, what do you want to do about it?”

Sarah put her hand on Johner’s arm. “Give her a chance to think, Johner.”

Call looked up ruefully. “I don’t need to think about it. I can’t do it. There’s no way.”

Sarah looked down at her coffee cup. “Don’t answer this if you don’t want to, Call; but ‘can’t’? Does that mean that you can’t, physically? Or that you don’t want to? Or both?”

Call burst out laughing. “Of course I can! I’m made in every way like a human being, on the surface. Inside there are some few differences. Like steel bones. Like no blood. I can, all right; but Sarah, how can I deceive someone who thinks I’m real? And telling anyone about

myself is just something I never do, much less tell a policeman! My life is in some jeopardy here, and I assure you I have been programmed with a full measure of self-preservation.” She shook her head. “It’s just too difficult. I can’t do it.”

“What on earth do you mean, ‘someone who thinks I’m real.’ You are real!” Sarah was indignant. “For Pete’s sake, Call, you’re not a hologram! And you haven’t answered the second part of my question yet. Do you want to do it?”

That question was obviously a little more difficult to answer; Call’s face showed her hesitation. “---I don’t know. You know, Sarah, I’m getting more like a human being every day. My central processor is very, very sophisticated, and it’s learning from the world around me all the time. Once I could have said without hesitation that emotional attachment was not for me. Now---I’m not so sure. But I guess until I am sure I can’t do anything about it. And it certainly shouldn’t be a policeman, of all people!” She stopped, and then continued, more uncertainly. “He was awfully nice, though. For a cop, unbelievable!”

“He is nice. I’ve always liked him, and I think Johner does too.” Sarah glanced at him, and he nodded agreement. “---Well, Annalee, I guess that’s a no, huh?”

“I guess so. What will you tell him?”

Johner’s brows drew together, “That could be a bit of a problem. I don’t want to lie to him in any way that he could discover, like telling him you’re gone. We don’t want to raise any suspicion at all that you have anything to hide. Don’t want that cop’s nose of his to smell anything funny. ---You know, Call, if you would do it, I think the best thing is for us to have him here, and for you just to discourage him from pursuing it any further.”

“Gee thanks! Just what I’m crazy about doing! No, I think the best thing is for me to make your lie a reality. I’ll take off, and you can say with truth that you don’t know where I am.”

Johner’s hand slapped down on the table. “That is not an option! We’re not going to dump you for Henderson’s convenience!”

“You’ve got that right!” Sarah put her hand out to Call. “Not an option! You’ve got friends, Call, and you’re not going to get rid of us that easily!”

Call looked up at them with emotion on her face. “If I could blush, which is one of the few things they left out, I would. Thanks, folks.”

When the evening of the projected dinner party arrived Call showed some signs of nervousness. “What do I say to him? Damn, Connor, I’ve never turned a man down politely. It was always someone like Johner, and in a case like that, you couldn’t put it plain enough!”

Johner looked offended. “I was very sensitive underneath, and you could have hurt me deeply. When you said you’d die first, if I hadn’t known you didn’t mean it, I would have been crushed. But of course I knew that you were just playing hard to get, so I didn’t let it get to me; I just kept on as if you hadn’t said a thing.”

Call caved in with laughter, then replied, “That’s true, all right, you never stopped for a minute. God, you were an animal! Sarah, it does you great credit that you could turn him into some semblance of a human being. A few more years in your company, and he might turn out to be quite presentable.”

“Well, we’ll see; I won’t count on it.” Sarah smiled up at him, and reached up to pat his face.

The doorbell rang. Call’s eyes rolled and she clutched her stomach. “What am I going to say?”

Oh, God, don't answer the door!"

"I'm not going to answer the door. You are. Go on, face the dragon." Sarah gave her a little push.

Call returned to the kitchen in a couple of minutes with Jack Henderson in tow. "Well, here he is!" She said brightly. "No handcuffs are in evidence, I think we're safe for the moment."

"I have never once handcuffed my host, or my hostess. Fellow guests, however---" Jack smiled down at Call warmly. His interest in her was plain; he was making no effort to dissemble it.

"No handcuffs are necessary, she's not going anywhere. Sit down, everyone. Jack, I always tell new dinner guests: if you want to eat my dinner, you have to amuse me while I cook. The kitchen table is where we entertain." Johner pulled out a chair with a flourish.

"I'm a cop, and my father was a cop. The kitchen table is where I've spent three quarters of my life; formal entertaining doesn't go with the lifestyle." Jack pulled out a chair for Call, and sat down. Connor was already in her accustomed place at the table.

"Tonight I cook French. Coq au vin, French bread (from the bakery), Caesar salad. A meal fit for a king, ---or a cop." Johner poured wine all around, and turned with the bottle to the stove, where he dumped a dollop into the big pot simmering there. "Just that extra added touch!"

Connor shook her head, laughing. "Showoff! But it smells great. When is this production ready to serve? I'm hungry!"

Chapter 31

BEING HUMAN

"He's just so---so perfect! Oh, Sarah, I never should have let this start; I'm totally nuts about him. I don't know what to do now!"

Sarah put her arms around Call and hugged her sympathetically. "Sounds like we do have a bit of a problem."

"Sarah, this can't happen! Damn it, robots don't fall in love! My real name, my designation, is ANLE-CL. That's the way I started out. But I'm Annalee Call now; I'm not a machine any more! I'm in love with him, and machines don't fall in love! Oh Sarah, I'm scared to death to tell him; I'm so scared he'll hate me!" She bent over, her arms clasped across her stomach.

Johner smiled, but his face was sympathetic. "Painful, huh? Listen to one who knows, Call; the more human you get, the more it hurts. I found that out when I ceased being an animal. The lows are a whole new level of pain---but Call, the highs make any amount of pain worthwhile." His arm went around Sarah, and he looked fondly down at her. "I wouldn't go back to the way it was for---well, I'd die first."

"Yeah, I hear you, and I believe you, I just don't know what's right in this situation. I've got to take some action. To let Jack go on this way is morally indefensible, but I just can't walk away from him now. I don't know what I was thinking of to let this thing happen in the first place!"

"You weren't thinking; you were feeling." Johner was amused. "I'm not laughing at your pain, Call. I'm laughing because it's so human. That's what people do; they don't think in these situations, they just go for it." He laughed again, and put his hand on her shoulder. "Call, you're not a robot any more. Face it. You're as human as I am."

"Well, except for a few little things in my insides. Come on, Johner, I'm never going to be as human as you are." She stopped, looked away, and took a breath. "For one thing, I'm not ever going to have a child. There are some things beyond the scope of modern science."

Connor answered that one. "Lots of women can't have children. Big deal! But---have you got to the point with Jack where you're talking about having kids?"

Call shook her head. "Not really, it's just that he loves kids; he slows the car down when we go by a playground. I wouldn't want to deprive him of---. Oh, for Christ sake, what are we talking about this for? There are more serious problems, Connor! I'm a robot!" Call's face crumpled, and the tears began to flow.

After a couple of minutes she sniffled, and reached for a tissue. "Why the hell did they give me tears? They make my nose run!"

Connor smiled. "They make everyone's nose run, Call. It's human."

Johner had been thinking; now he interposed. "All this is secondary. The first question is how will he react when you tell him? He's a cop, and a dedicated one, I think. Will he feel that it's his duty to turn you in? If he doesn't, will he feel guilty about it forever? Just as a man, cop aside, will he be able to accept what you are? Will it repel him? You've wondered about all of this, haven't you, Call."

"When I'm lying in bed at night not sleeping you bet I wonder about it. All night long. And the next night, and the next." She looked up, grinning. "It's not something you can sound a person out about. 'Speaking of lawn mowers, how do you feel about making love to one?'"

"Johner, I haven't got the faintest notion how he'd react. Not a clue in the world. But I think I'm going to have to tell him. ---Well! I didn't know I was going to say that until it came out; I guess I've made the decision. I'll tell him tonight." She looked much less strained suddenly; the decision was indeed made.

"I think you're right, Call. You have to tell him." Johner put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed, and Sarah agreed silently, with a nodding head and an embrace.

By common consent, without any discussion, they waited up for her. When she came in they were drinking coffee at the table; she got a cup and sat down with them. She said nothing, just poured coffee and took a slow sip. Her face was unreadable.

"Well? What happened?" Connor couldn't wait any longer.

"I'm not exactly sure, it's so----." She stopped.

"What? Call, did you tell him? "

"Yes. I told him."

Sarah frowned, puzzled. "Well? What did he say?"

Silence. Call looked at her coffee cup.

Johner put his hand on Sarah's arm. " Call, maybe you don't want to talk about this?"

Call shook her head, looking down at her cup. "Yes, yes, I want to tell you. I just---it's just so---. Well, ---I told him, flat out. I said: 'I'm a robot; an Auton, the series that was recalled; they're all dead, except they missed me. But if they catch me, I'm dead too; it's illegal for me to be alive.'

“You know what he did? I can’t believe this yet---it’s just---. He leaned back and looked up at the ceiling for a couple of minutes; then he took hold of both my hands, and just looked at them, the front and the back; just looked. And then he reached up and touched my face, and my hair. And then he looked right into my eyes, and he said. ‘Will you marry me?’”

Sarah leaned slowly back in her chair, her hands flat on the table. “Holy Cow.”

Johner relaxed also, grinning from ear to ear. “Go, Jack!”

Call’s face blossomed into a beatific smile. “Sooo---I’m getting married. Will you guys stand up with us?”

But they didn’t get married after all. With a solemn face, Call announced at dinner that the wedding was called off; Sarah was horrified.

“For God’s sake! What happened, Call?”

Call grinned. “Blood tests.”

“Oh!”

“Yeah, we didn’t think of it either. But who needs marriage anyhow, Sarah? You two are doing fine without it, and the important thing is, he asked. I’ll be leaving you at the end of the week. We found a great apartment, and it’s vacant.”

“Well, we’re on our own again, babe.” Johner turned from the door, having shut it behind Jack and Call.

Sarah looked up at him from under her brows. “Yes. We are. Johner, get in the bedroom. I want to talk to you!”

Johner laughed. “How about in the kitchen? Or the living room? We did it in the bedroom while we had company. Why don’t we spread out a little, now that we’ve got the house to ourselves?”

“I’m too old for the kitchen table, and the couch is too short. Into the bedroom!”

He chuckled, then his smile softened and his arms went around her. He kissed her eyes and cheeks and began to nuzzle her neck. His voice was velvety soft as he murmured, “OK babe, anything you say, any way you want it. Any time, any place; I live to make love with you, any way at all.”

Chapter 32

THE LEGACY

Johner closed the door of the hospital room behind them and turned to Sarah; tears were running down her face. “Oh, Johner, it’s so awful to see him so helpless!”

He put his arms around her and pulled her head down on his shoulder. "We won't let him go on like this, babe. They say he won't live very long; but like I told him, we won't leave him like this."

George was paralyzed. A stroke had hit him while he worked late; the cleaning crew found him unconscious, and now he lay in a hospital bed, unable to speak or move.

But although he couldn't talk, he had made his wishes clear to Johner and Sarah when they got to the hospital. His eyes were eloquent; they moved back and forth from the medical apparatus to Johner's face, clearly begging for release.

Johner reached down and took his hand "I hear you, man. I know what you want, and you can depend on me; I won't leave you like this. George, I'm going to shoot straight with you; the doctor says you're not going to live very long. So, and only if it's all right with you, I'd rather not be the instrument here if waiting a little while will let you go without my help. Is that all right with you? I promise it won't be very many days. OK, George? Blink at me if it's OK."

George blinked, while tears traced shiny tracks from the corners of his eyes. Johner smiled down at him. "OK. It's a deal. We're going to leave you now, they told us not to stay very long. But I'm here, George, and you can count on me."

As it turned out, Johner's intervention wasn't necessary. George died that night.

"My God, Connor, he's left us the business!" Johner looked up from the will, stunned.

"What?" Sarah got up to look over his shoulder at the document, which he had received as executor. "I don't believe it! Why on earth---what about Marie and Heather? Read it to me, Johner."

It was true; George had left the business jointly to Johner, Sarah and Marie. He had no other close relatives; some cousins received bequests from his personal estate, but the business was completely in Johner and Sarah's hands. Marie had no hand in running it; she was only to receive a third of the profits. He had left the bulk of his personal estate to her; however, that money was in trust and Johner was named as administrator.

"He wanted to make sure that no-good bum Cliff didn't get hold of his money." Johner smiled. "He sure didn't like that man. Well, I don't like him either. He won't get any of Marie's money out of me!"

Sarah grinned. "I believe that! It was really smart of George to make you responsible, Johner. He knew you'd see to it that Marie and Heather are taken care of, and he trusted you completely.

"Now that I think about it, I guess I can see why he left the business to us," she continued. "He knew there was no way Marie could run it. This way Marie will be comfortable all her life with the income from it, plus what he left her. It's safer for her than to receive a chunk of money all at once from the sale of the business. And I think he didn't want it to be sold to someone who might not care about it like he did."

Johner was silent for a minute, thinking. "I think you're right. The business was his life; he'd spent forty years building it, and he wanted it to be in safe hands. Well, it is. We'll see to it that it goes on just the way he would have wanted it; that'll be easy, because it's the way we want it too."

Then he looked up at Sarah, still standing behind him and leaning over his shoulder; his face

was full of wonder. "Look at me. I'm the owner of a business, I have a beautiful woman whom I adore and who'll be mine forever, a home full of love, a son to be proud of. Connor, if anyone had told me---! I'm the luckiest man on the face of the earth!"

Sarah smiled at him, and put her hand over his. "You always say that you're the luckiest man. How about the luckiest woman? How do you think I feel? I started life slinging hash in a crummy restaurant. Then I spent years in the nuthouse, not to speak of jail. Now look at me! I've got all the things you mentioned, plus all the women I know are jealous of me because of the man that's mine forever, and that I adore. Johner, you and I have a lot to be thankful for."

The news that the business now belonged to Johner and Sarah was a nine days' wonder at the office. There were a few disgruntled faces, every office has its malcontents; however, most of the employees were quick with sincere congratulations. Johner took the entire staff out to dinner to celebrate the new era, and when the time came for speeches, Lou Peabody was the spokesman for his fellows. He stood up, champagne glass in hand, to salute the new owners. "George always knew what he was doing, and he didn't let us down in the end. You two are the best choice, and we're all happy with it! Here's to the new owners of the old business!" He raised his glass, and everyone drank to the health of Johner, Connor, and Marie, who was present for the occasion, and to the business.

Johner stood next. "Thanks, Lou, and thank you all. I guess I don't have to tell you that we were stunned when we read the will. George never gave us the slightest reason to think we'd be in it at all. I think he's probably chuckling right now over the shock it gave me." He grinned and shook his head. "We'll miss him personally, and probably more than I realize at this moment, we'll miss him in the business. Neither of us has ever run a business before; it's going to be a learning experience. I hope we can count on your help."

Johner wasn't sleeping very well. Sarah woke up to find him gone, not for the first time in the last few weeks.

He was, predictably, in the kitchen drinking coffee. "Well, I see that you felt that worrying was more important than sleeping again." She put her hands on his shoulders, standing close behind him where he sat at the table, letting him feel the comforting warmth of her body.

He reached up to cover her hands with his. "Well, dammit, it's a hell of a burden to be responsible for the paychecks of thirty five people. What if the money isn't there to cover the payroll one day? Jesus, Connor, I feel like the whole world is depending on me, and waiting for me to fuck up!"

"They don't think you're going to fuck up, and neither do I. Do you wish I'd take more part in running things, Johner? I'm sure more comfortable not, but if you want me to---?"

"No. No, I don't. I know you're not crazy about the idea of administering anything." He turned his head and smiled up at her. "You're more of an action girl; just love having a gun in your hand, don't you?" He grinned evilly. "A shrink might have something interesting to say about that!"

"Do you want me to stop handling---a gun?" Her grin was as evil as his.

He laughed. "No, Connor, I want you to keep on doing just what you've been doing, it's very

satisfactory. I've got no complaints. Now, can we get back to my worrying? I'm not nearly done for the night." He stopped and thought for a minute. "You know what, Connor? In spite of my worries, I think I'm going to like running the business, if I ever get over being scared shitless."

"Everything is going OK, isn't it? I mean you're not really short of cash or anything?"

"Everything's fine. It's just as good as it ever was; George had a fine reputation, a good clientele, and a lot of good word of mouth. And people seem to trust me; in this business that's of prime importance. I had a guy tell me the other day that if I was good enough for George, that was good enough for him. That really made me feel good, Connor."

"I would think so. It's true, too. I'm sure a lot of clients are willing to accept George's choice. They had forty years of his word being good. That's hard to beat!"

"You're right about that. ---Come around here and sit down where I can see your face, Connor. I've got something else to say."

She did as he asked. "OK---but I don't like the sound of this. I'm not going to like it, am I."

He smiled and took her hands across the table. "I'm not sure. Connor, a long time ago we made a deal. The deal was, you wouldn't go out on any chancy job without me. You remember that, don't you?"

"I'm getting old, but I'm not senile yet. So?" She was looking very defensive.

"Well, unless I want to be working fifteen hours a day, I'm going to have to cut down on the field work. What are we going to do about that?"

She frowned down at their joined hands. "I saw this coming. I don't know what we're going to do." She paused. "To tell you the truth, Johner, I don't trust anyone else. I don't think I'd be happy with anyone but you."

"Good! I've finally convinced you that you need me! That's music to my ears, Connor." He eyed her slyly.

"Don't get uppity! I can still get along without you!" She looked up at him from under her brows, smiling. "I just don't want to. To tell you the absolute truth---God, I can't believe I'm going to say this---I'm getting a little tired of all this action. Maybe---maybe I'll go on part-time." She brightened, and sat up straight. "Maybe I'll learn to cook!"

"Oh my God! Don't get carried away! Think of the health of your family!" He tried to look alarmed, but couldn't keep from laughing. "Please, Connor, let's keep this discussion on a realistic basis. Let's only talk about things that are within the realm of the possible!"

"Johner, you're still a smartass. After all these years, I haven't really taught you a thing."

"Well, talk about a smartass---, did you really think I'd believe that you want to go on part-time? But maybe there's another way. I've got an idea I've been playing with.

"How do you feel about teaching, Connor? Teaching what you've been doing all these years; what you're so damn good at. We've been hearing for years about the shortage of security people, and how they're always inadequately trained; maybe there's an opportunity there."

Sarah looked up at him, her attention caught. "Maybe. Maybe there is."

In ten minutes they were deep in planning.

EMPIRE

"Look, I can't do it all! There just are not enough hours in the day, Connor! I never planned on being this busy, and I don't like it! Our home life has gone to hell; we never see each other any more, and when we do we're too tired to do anything about it. This is not the way I want to spend the rest of my life, Goddammit!"

Sarah couldn't help it; she smiled, then chuckled, then finally laughed out loud. "Listen to the empire builder! I thought you *wanted* to run two businesses."

"No, you got that wrong. I wanted to start two businesses. I wanted to own two businesses. I never said I wanted to run two businesses!" He looked down at her, his face softening.

"Connor, I never see you any more. I can't do this! It's necessary to my life that I see you, and talk to you, and touch you. Please, Connor, get with me on this. I can see why it's funny to you---I know I just bulled ahead and did it, but now I'm sorry---help me, babe. I need your help."

Sarah's face softened also. "You know I can't resist you when you talk like that. I'll help all I can, but Johner, the school has got me hopping ten hours a day even with you doing the administration. What do you want me to do?"

"Figure out a way for me to get out from under this disaster I've built for myself. What can I do?" He looked at her helplessly.

"Surely someone with the brains to run two highly successful businesses can figure that out? It looks fairly simple to me. Find someone to help you."

Johner's face changed from helplessness to uncertainty. "Great idea. But who, Connor, who?"

"I've got that covered too. Carlie."

He was surprised. "Our Carlie? Would she be able to do the job?"

"You have been busy! Too busy to look around you, I guess." Connor shook her head. "Carlie is a marvel of organization. She's got the house totally under control, not to speak of John and me, and you too, if you weren't too busy to notice. How do you suppose it is that the house is running smoothly when you're working fourteen hours a day, I'm working ten, and John's going through exams? Carlie is responsible for the whole thing, and she does it without the slightest effort. Johner, you'd be crazy not to hire her."

"Oh. Well OK. I guess it wasn't too dumb when I got John to transfer up here so they could live with us, huh?" Johner grinned at her. "Remember, I said I thought they might be a help."

"So you were right! And I said we wouldn't have the house to ourselves any more. Well, I don't know what good it would do us anyway, we're never there." She put her hand up to his face to caress it lightly. "We need time for ourselves, babe, you're sure right about that. We do need to make a major reorganization, and I think the best thing for us to do is to put it straight into Carlie's lap. If anybody can figure it out, she can, and we're too busy to do it, even if we knew how!"

They put it to Carlie at the dinner table that night. By making some major schedule changes they both arranged to be there; and Johner had even managed to make enough time to cook dinner.

"What a pleasure! My family sits down to eat my food; now this is what makes it all worthwhile!" Johner was smiling from ear to ear as he served them.

"God, you're a frustrated housewife!" Sarah laughed and shook her head.

"No, no! I'm a frustrated chef! Now eat, everyone. After dinner comes the serious talk; you know there had to be something to get us all together at one table. Now eat!"

When dessert had been served and consumed, Johner called the meeting to order.

"Carlie, Connor and I have a proposition for you."

Carlie looked up, surprised. "Me? What?"

"How would you like to make an enormous salary for doing what you're good at?"

"Now wait just a minute! She may be good at it, but it's not for sale! It's just for me!" John grinned at Carlie, who blushed.

Johner grinned too. "Carlie, get used to it. There is no privacy in this family; sexual matters have been common currency ever since I first came here. It never gets any better, and it's mostly John's fault, so blame him.

"Now, if I may be allowed to have the floor for a moment. It has been brought to my attention that Carlita, our own little Carlie, is a wonder at organization. And boy, do we need it! Connor and I are foundering under a load of work that would kill two horses; and Carlie, we are hoping that you will find it in your heart to give us back our lives.

"What I am offering here is a post as---I don't know what to call it; Connor, we didn't figure that out---anyway, what we want is for you to get in there and organize. We figure that what's too much for two people might be just right for three, if one of them is a genius at organization.

"We need help. Our lives are going to hell because there's no time left for living; work takes up all the available hours. We need to split up the workload three ways, with each of us doing what we do best, and none of us working more than eight hours. Do you want to try your hand at doing this for us? First the organizing, and then taking on a full time job as one third of this triumvirate. The salary would be the same as what each of us is making. How about it?"

Carlie looked around at the other three faces at the table. "I don't know what to say. I certainly need to work, and to tell you the truth, this kind of management stuff is what I think I'm good at. John, what do you think?"

"This one is for you to decide, but I think you'd be extremely good at it, and I think you'd like it. Of course if you don't it'll be a little hard to get out of it. Mother-in-law and all that, you know." John grinned at his mother, who batted at his shoulder.

"Can I have a couple of days to think about it?" Carlie was looking a little overcome.

"Well, of course. As long as you need. Just keep in mind that I'm dying of Connor deprivation, and it may soon be too late." Johner laughed and put his arm around Connor.

Carlie thought about it all right; in three days she had a tentative chart of organization drawn up.

"Where in hell did you get the information?" Johner was stunned; she had included practically everything necessary to the operation of both businesses.

"Well, a lot of it is usual with any business; and then I sat at the dinner table with you two for

a lot of nights, listening to the problems. I heard which ones were giving the trouble, and which ones you did and didn't like to deal with. I paid attention because it's the kind of stuff that interests me." Carlie was focused and serious, intent on the work at hand.

"Carlie, if you want the job, it's yours. Please!" Johner's head went down to look at the chart again. He studied it for a minute, then looked up grinning with elation. "Christ, Connor, look! I don't have to do any financial stuff! Woh! That would be a deliverance all by itself! Carlie, do you like to do that stuff?" He looked unbelieving.

"Yes. I took two semesters of accounting, just because I thought it might come in handy, and it was interesting. It satisfied a requirement, and I liked it besides."

Connor was scanning the chart also. "God, Johner, she's going to do my paperwork! Carlie, you've got all the awful jobs! Are you sure you want to do this? It may not look so bad right now, but after you've been slogging through this stuff for months it might grind."

Carlie laughed. "I guess there's no accounting for tastes. I like to do detail work. I like the feeling of accomplishment when everything balances and comes out neatly at the end. I don't even mind working for six hours to get my checkbook to come out to the penny."

Johner laughed with the rest of them, but his face sobered with his next words. "I don't know how important this is to you two, and I guess it's not the most critical thing for Connor and me either, but these businesses are making a lot of money. You'll share in that, both now and after we're gone. Like I said, it's not the important thing---living is more fun than making money, and we want to live.

But it's nice to have the money when you want to expand your lifestyle a little. Like this: when you've got this down so we've got some time available, I'm going to take Connor to Paris. Don't you think we deserve Paris in the spring, Connor?"

Sarah's jaw dropped. "Jesus, Johner, let me in on these things!"

"You don't want to go?" He pretended disappointment.

"That's a silly question! Of course I want to, ninny!" She smiled at him, her look belying her words.

And so they went to Paris in the spring.

Johner stretched and looked down at her, leaning lazily on his elbow. "As long as we're here, don't you think we should get out of bed long enough to do a little sightseeing? We've only got three days more,--- 'Carlie said!'" Sarah smiled; he was quoting the new catch phrase around the office.

"Yes, we should. In a minute. Come here, Johner, I want to talk to you."

"Connor! Again?"

"Yes, again. And again. Until we get caught up."

"Caught up from what?"

"From six months of being too busy to do anything but work."

Johner laughed. "OK! Just a minute, though. I've got to call the desk."

"What? What for?"

"I want to find out if they've got a weekly rate!"

Chapter 34

DISAPPEARANCE

“Damn! I don’t believe this!” Sarah turned off the fire under the butter she was melting, and started for the front door. It was the second time she’d tried cooking in the last five years, and the doorbell rings this time too! She opened the door in no very good temper, and when she didn’t recognize man standing in front of her she nearly shut the door in his face.

But she didn’t---and the last thing she remembered after that was his hand coming up with a gun in it.

Johner came home late but elated. “Hey---where is everybody! I’ve got news!” He hurried through the kitchen, looked briefly around the living room, then banged on John and Carlie’s bedroom door in passing on his way to Sarah’s door. “Come on, people, where are you?”

Carlie came out of her bedroom alarmed. “What’s the matter, Johner? What happened?”

“We made top of the A list on the Security Agencies Listing, that’s what happened! And you had a lot to do with that, darlin’!” He picked her up and swung her around, endangering both Carlie and nearby furniture. “Hooe-e-e! I’m thinking of a new slogan, ‘Not the biggest, but the very best!’ Where’s Connor?”

Carlie regained her feet, laughing up at him. “I don’t know. She wasn’t here when I got home.”

“Damn! I want to tell her the news!” His brows drew together. “Her car’s in the garage. Where the hell is she?” His face cleared as he heard the back door slam. “There she is!”

But it was John who came through the kitchen door. “Damn! It’s John.”

“Thanks! Thanks a lot! I suppose you were expecting Mom; I guess we all have to accept being a distant second, but you could at least *pretend* to be glad to see me!” John grinned and turned to kiss Carlie.

When dinner was ready to eat and the news had been thoroughly discussed, Connor still had not returned. Johner began to get mad.

“Jesus Christ! She could at least call!” He glared at the phone as if it were responsible for Sarah’s delinquency.

“You got that right; she’s forever bitching at us to call before mealtime if we’re not coming home.” John grinned at Johner, amused at his rare irritation with Sarah.

“Her car’s here. Where the hell did she go without her car? Something’s not right here, John. You know, there was a pan on the stove, with melted butter in it. Carlie didn’t do it; I didn’t do it. Something is funny---.” He stopped, and his face cleared as the phone rang. “There she is. I’ve got a few things to say to her!”

He reached for the phone. "Yeah?" It wasn't Sarah, they could tell from his face. "Yeah, it's me." He said nothing further, just listened; and then, while John and Carlie watched, the color drained from his face, leaving it absolutely white. After just a few seconds, he put the phone slowly back in its cradle.

"Johner, what? God, what is it?"

"It was---someone. He's got her. He said---he said he might kill her. He said it depended on me. He said he'd get back to me." Johner lowered himself slowly into a chair at the table, staring ahead with blind eyes.

"Oh my God. Who? Why? Johner, did he say anything else?"

Johner shook his head still staring straight in front of him, his hands flat on the table. "He said he'd get back to me."

Shock silenced them all as they digested this unbelievable event. Then Johner's head raised and he sat up straighter, his eyes coming back into focus. His mind began to function again, recovering from the first paralysis of shock, and shifted into emergency mode, peak performance, instantly.

"OK---OK! John, check to see if the front door lock is turned on. ---He either waited for her in the garage, or---no, he didn't do that, he knows us; he'd know she'd kill him if he jumped her. The windows all have Safelock, they're not beatable. If the doors were both locked, then she let him in. He rang, at either the front or back door. Probably the back, it's in the garage; less noticeable. It was locked; I used my key to get in. Someone she knew? Not necessarily, she'd open the door if the bell rang." He got up, opened the door into the garage, and began to examine the floor and the door.

"Johner? Come in here, I've found something." John's face was white also as he returned from the front door.

On the light tile floor just inside the front door, and scattered outside onto the step, were a few drops of blood, dried now; a dark brownish red, but recognizable.

Johner squatted to examine them; then he subsided limply onto the floor, leaning against the opened door, his head back, his face agonized. "Oh God---Connor, Connor---."

When the next call came Johner was ready. The recorder came on undetectably when he picked up the phone, and the trace started at the same moment. There were advantages to knowing people in law enforcement. Jack Henderson sat with him at the kitchen table; Annalee Call, John and Carlie were all gathered there also, waiting.

"Yeah?"

"She's hurting, Johner; she's hurting a lot. She's a good-looking woman, isn't she, Johner. She looks even better without her clothes, though. A lot better. It'd be a shame to mess that up, wouldn't it?"

Johner's face crumpled, and his body curled down in the chair over his arm held tight around his abdomen; but no sound came from him.

"Johner, you there?"

"I'm here. What do you want?" His voice was perfectly calm, but the effort to make it so was evident to those watching him.

"I want you to hurt. I want you to suffer, the way I have. Doesn't feel too good to have someone mess with your woman, does it? I'm going to mess with her, Johner. I'm going to mess with her a lot. I'll let you know how it's going, all the details, Johner."

The connection broke, and Johner put the phone carefully down in its cradle. "I know who it is."

Every head came up. "Who?"

"Clifford Dexter, Marie's husband. ---I'm going to kill him." This came quietly, conversationally. John looked up quickly, and saw cold intent to kill in Johner's face. "But first we've got to get Mom home safe, right Johner?" Maybe after she was safe he'd cool down, and they could keep him from doing murder.

Johner looked up. "Yes. Of course."

"How do you know it's him? His voice?"

"Not his voice. I don't think I've ever heard it. I dunno exactly. A combination of how he sounded and what he said." Johner shuddered, remembering what had been said; then turned to Captain Henderson.

Jack, did we get a trace?" Jack nodded, his CP at his ear. "We did."

"Where?"

"Booth, corner of Hempsted and Logan. Not a good neighborhood; warehouses, crummy businesses."

Johner nodded. "He works near there. I know where it is. God, he's a stupid man. Did he think he could get away with this? He knows what we do for a living!" He got up from the table and went to the locked cupboard beside the back door where weapons were stored, for emergencies, when they couldn't spare time to get to the office. "John, let's go. We'll decide what we're going to do on the way."

Jack put his hand on Johner's arm. "Hey, this's what the cops are for, Johner. Can't you let us handle it for you?" He too had seen the deadly intent to kill in Johner's face.

"Jack, I can't let anyone else do this. I can't trust anyone else, not even you. Not for this." His face twisted for a moment, his terror and his torment showing through the blank facade he was maintaining. The others hadn't heard the last phone call, and he meant to keep it that way. No one else needed to hear that.

Jack put his hand on Johner's shoulder. "I know; I understand. If it was anyone else, I'd argue; but to tell you the truth I think you'll do it better than we could. God knows you've got reason! But Johner---don't let this guy screw up your future, yours and Connor's. If you kill him, it'll be very bad for you, and that's what he wants."

"Yeah. Let's go, John."

John didn't get up from the table. "Johner, let's give this some thought. I know, I know, you want to go now! So do I, Johner, I love her too. But we've got to have some kind of plan, and Jack might be able to help us. Please, Johner, cool down and think. It'll be better for Mom."

That got through. Johner subsided slowly to a chair at the table, and they began to make a plan.

A PLAN

“He’s the night watchman at a warehouse called Superior Freight. The patrolman got Marie out of bed to tell him where Dexter is working. We’ll need the general layout of the outside; I’m sending the nearest squad right now to check it out.”

“God, no!” Johner raised his head in alarm.

“It’s OK, Johner!” Jack put out a calming hand. “A squad goes by the place about once every hour and a half to two hours, and it’s about time for the usual check. He won’t think anything of it. Give us a little credit here, OK?” Johner nodded and slumped back over the table.

Jack was still listening on the CP hunched between his shoulder and his ear. “Put me through to the squad. For Chrissake, I don’t care about that, do it now! NOW! ----OK, who am I talking to? Red? Good, I’ll get some brains at work. What does the place look like, Red? You know, windows, doors---. Uh-huh. Good---that’s good.” He looked up at John across the table. “Small show window directly to the left of the entrance. No window in the door; door not recessed. No cage over the show window, but there’s what he thinks is a burglar alarm warning on the window. Loading dock in front also, to the right of the door. Pretty narrow front, no other features. ---Uh-huh? OK, thanks.” He looked up again. “Loading dock recessed in about four feet. That’s it for the front of the building.”

Taking the phone from his ear, he added, “Pretty normal amount of security for the area. The break-in rate is relatively low. The warehouses in that district mostly deal in staples: flour, salt, pasta, dog food; low cost, high bulk items not worth stealing.”

John thought a minute. “We can’t take a chance on blowing the door in. He might have her hidden where it will take us too long to find her; or he could be with her, and kill her when he hears the explosion. ---No, we’ve got to have a way to get him to come to the door and open it; then we’ll know that she’s safe from him. Once we get our hands on him, Johner will get her location out of him.” John looked up at the others. “Suggestions?”

Johner was silent. John thought he seemed to be holding himself together by sheer will until action was called for. He sat looking down at his hands, but in a moment he raised his head. “It doesn’t have to be complicated. He’s so stupid he seems nearly half-witted. He’s far gone in booze, probably has brain damage.”

There was a silence while everyone thought about the problem; it was Carlie who offered a suggestion. “I could go to the door. If I bang on the door and ask to use the phone, he might let me in, ---if I sounded frightened and if I was being so noisy that he thought I could draw some attention.”

“The area is deserted at night. He wouldn’t worry about a little noise.” Jack shook his head.

It was Call, not Carlie, who answered him. “How about this? I do the helpless woman routine, holler and bang on the door; then I break the window. That will trip the alarm, if the patrolman saw the sign right. I think that’ll bring him if anything will. I keep crying and hollering; he’ll open the door to shut me up because he knows the police are on the way. When he gets close enough, I grab him. You guys can wait in the loading dock bay.” She turned to Carlie. “It was your idea, Carlie, but I’m better equipped to handle this, believe me.”

“That’s OK, Call! Whatever it takes to get Sarah out of there!”

John put his hand out to Carlie. “I’m afraid he’d recognize you anyway. He may have seen you at the office.”

Jack stood up. “It’s decided, then. Call makes the first move. She goes to the door; when he

opens it, she grabs him. I'll tell you, once he opens that door, it's all over. No one gets away from Call." Jack smiled at her quickly, then turned back to business. "Then we close in, and he tells us where Sarah is.

"Johner, I'm going to call in two squads to stay close but out of sight. I don't think we need backup, but kidnapping is a federal offense, and I need to cover my ass. Don't worry; I'll get men I can trust to follow orders exactly. Now, Is everyone agreed? Then let's go."

Johner was on his feet before anyone else, but he started for the living room, telling John, "I'll be there. Get in the van, I gotta get something."

When he returned he was carrying a blanket, and before he got into the van, he leaned down and slid a knife into his boot.

Chapter 36

RESCUE

The van pulled silently into the street, and rolled to a stop just out of sight of Superior Freight. Call, Jack and Johner got out. John stayed in the driver's seat, prepared to move fast if Sarah needed medical attention, Carlie beside him. Jack and Johner took up positions in the loading dock bay, hidden from the door.

The operation went exactly as planned. Call cried hysterically and banged on the door, then banged on the window with a rock. As the window shattered emergency lights flashed on, illuminating the building front; and the sound of the burglar alarm echoed eerily up and down the empty street. Before many seconds had passed, the men heard the door squeak loudly as it opened, and Clifford Dexter's voice. "For Christ's sake, lady, cut the---Hey!"

"OK, guys, come and get him!" Call held Dexter's wrist effortlessly with one hand, forcing him to his knees without any visible exertion as the two men came up to her.

Johner picked up Dexter by his shirtfront, holding him off the ground while he roared into his face. "Where is she? WHERE IS SHE? You'll live one more minute if you talk NOW!"

Dexter was frightened; he had experience of what Johner was capable of. With no further encouragement he pointed down the hall. "There, there! Last door!" Johner looked down the hall, then dropped him without looking at him again and started for the door, scooping up the blanket he'd dropped when he grabbed Dexter.

Jack and Call hustled the handcuffed Dexter outside as John and Carlie pulled up in the van. Dexter was dumped into the rear lockup of the police vehicle, and all four started back into the building. John stopped them just inside. "We'll wait here. He'll call if he needs us."

Jack started to object, then stopped. Yeah---OK, yeah. I guess you're right."

Johner entered the room at a run, and slowed not at all until he was kneeling beside her where she lay on a cot. She was conscious; her eyes looked up at him over her gagged mouth. "Oh God---Connor! Hang on, babe this will hurt." He ripped off the duct tape that bound her mouth in one quick move, then bent down to touch her bruised mouth softly with

his while he reached for the knife in his boot.

"I knew you'd be here tonight," she whispered through sore lips. I *knew* it, Johner." Tears began to run out of the corners of her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Connor, are you shot? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"No, no, just scared, Johner---just scared." Her faced twisted, and she sobbed.

"It's OK now, I'm here, babe---it's all right now---nothing's going to happen to you, I'm here now---it's all right, babe---I've got you now--" He murmured reassurance to her steadily while he cut the duct tape that bound her.

She was bound four times: around her upper arms and torso just below her breasts, around her forearms, binding them tightly to her body just below her navel, and twice around her legs at mid-thigh and ankles. Her clothes had been cut off between the tapes.

As soon as her arms were freed they went up around him and she held him to her as tightly as her muscles, numb from their imprisonment, would let her. Johner enfolded her in his large embrace, and rocked her in his arms, his face pressed to the top of her head while his tears dampened her hair. "You're safe---I've got you, babe---you're OK now---."

He held her for a few moments more, then reached up and gently loosened her arms. "Come on now, we've got to get you home. I want you home, babe! It's OK, come on, let me get you out of here." Her arms clung with feeble strength, but in a moment she let go and smiled up at him shakily while he laid her gently back on the cot and finished freeing her body.

The tape was still attached to her body in several places where her clothing hadn't covered her, but Johner was thankful that she had been bound while she was still dressed. If not removed carefully the tape could take skin with it, so he made no attempt to remove it now, just cut her arms and legs free, then deftly lifted and turned her body until he had her securely wrapped in the blanket he had brought for that purpose.

He lifted her into his arms and moved to the door, then stopped, looking down at her. "God---you're so little, and I was so scared, and I love you so much!" New tears flowed, and his feelings threatened to overcome him now that he knew she was safe and in his arms again; but Sarah's courage asserted itself to save him. Tears streaked her face also; but her head lifted and she smiled.

"Come on, Johner, let's go home!"

By the time they got back to the front door, Sarah was recovering. She smiled brilliantly at John. "It's OK, hon, I'm OK."

Tears filled John's eyes as he looked at her. "Well, we were just a little scared!" He laughed rather shakily.

"So was I." She turned to look up at Johner. "But I kept saying to myself: 'They're working on it, they'll be here!'" She turned back, still smiling. "And here you are! Hi Carlie. Hi, Jack. Hi, Call. Looks like we've got the whole family in on this!"

They rode to the nearest hospital with a police escort; sirens, lights, the whole treatment. Jack had been insistent that Sarah go to the hospital, but Johner objected violently. He held her in his lap, and his arms tightened around her. "She's going home, with me!"

"Johner, we've got to have medical testimony at his trial. Please, be sensible!" Jack hesitated

to bring up Dexter; still not sure that Johner wouldn't try to kill him. But Johner had Sarah to take care of now; Dexter had faded to unimportance next to the woman in his arms. That woman looked up at him, and put her hand up out of her nest of blankets to caress his cheek. "He's right, Johner. I'm OK, we won't let them keep me."

So Johner consented, grudgingly. In the emergency room he stayed by her side over objections by the medical staff, holding her hand while they examined her.

"I can find nothing wrong except a couple of bruises, I believe she's OK." The resident on duty was sympathetic to Johner's protectiveness of Sarah, unlike the nurse, who had been impatient of his presence. "That tape is going to be difficult, though. If you won't let us remove it, I'll get you something that will help." In a minute he came back with a bottle in his hand. "Use this. It's what we use to remove tape. Works slick." He smiled, then his voice softened and he put his hand on Johner's arm. "---Don't worry. She's strong. She'll be OK."

Johner smiled back. "Thanks. For the tape remover too."

Johner held her in his lap again on the way home, whispering in her ear, kissing her, showing her how glad he was to have her in his arms again. When the van pulled into the driveway, he turned to Jack. "I know how important you, and Call, were to this whole thing. If you ever need anything, anything at all, let me know; it's yours." He stopped, his voice choked with emotion. Then, as he got out of the van, still holding his precious burden, he said, "Jack, I know there's police business to be done, but can you give us until morning?"

"Sure. But not any longer, Johner, please. The Feds are going to be breathing down my neck; I may have to call in that favor you promised to break me out of jail. They're not going to be happy that I didn't call them in until it was all over."

"Another reason to be grateful. I won't forget, Jack." They shook hands, and Johner turned away. The back door stood open, light burning in the kitchen where John had already started the coffee pot. Johner stopped for a minute, looking at the welcoming light streaming out. Then he stepped up to the door and took his woman home, into the brightly lit kitchen.

John was standing at the stove, cooking something. Carlie sat at the kitchen table, sipping coffee.

"I'm going to take Connor to the bedroom and get the tape off her. Could someone come along with a couple of cups of that coffee?"

Carlie got up. "Sure, Johner. Right with you."

"Do either of you want anything to eat?" John held up the spatula in his hand. "I'm cooking bacon and eggs."

Johner looked down questioningly at Sarah, who shook her head. "Just coffee, thanks John." He moved away, anxious to get Sarah comfortable---and comforted.

"There, that's every last sticky bit." Johner grinned down at Sarah. "Thank the gods for the tape remover; I don't know how I'd have done it otherwise." His face sobered as he looked at her. "My poor babe, you're just about out, aren't you. Wait 'til I strip, we'll be asleep in no time."

He skinned out of his clothes quickly, and slid in beside her. His arms went around her and he pulled her tightly against him, spooned against his much bigger body, her slight form lost against his massive strength. "Closer, Johner!" He tightened his arms again and snuggled his

body into full contact with hers. "There. That's right." Her voice was drowsy, and half asleep she lifted his big hands that were pressed against her midriff, moving them to cover her breasts. "There. There---" She was asleep.

But Johner didn't sleep, not right away. His mind replayed the events of the past twelve hours over more than once before he finally relaxed in the sure knowledge that Sarah slept peacefully, right here in his arms.

Chapter 37

FINISHING UP

The next morning belonged to the Feds. By eight o'clock the kitchen was full of strangers, sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee and asking innumerable questions. Sarah sat with them and answered their questions, while Johner, hostile and bad tempered, hovered over her protectively and obstructed their progress.

After a while Donald Heming, the agent-in-charge, pushed his chair back from the table. "Mr. Reilly, we're not here to hurt her. Do you think you could relax just a little, and give us credit for being human beings as well as cops? We're aware that she just went through a very, very bad twelve hours. Now our job is to see that her kidnapper has some bad hours of his own! Ms. Connor, can you help us with this guy? You're both professionals, but you seem to be able to remember that fact easier than he can."

"Well, the first thing you can do is call him Johner, not "Mr. Reilly". He doesn't respond very well to that. He's been called Johner all his life."

"Is that OK with you, Mr. R---, uh, Johner?"

"Yeah, better."

Sarah grinned up at Johner, reaching for his hand. He stood behind her like a very large growling dog, ready to bite at any provocation. "Come on, Johner, sit down. We've got to get through this, and we want to, really. Come on, babe. OK?"

Johner sat down, looking up from under his brows at Heming with residual hostility, but apologetic. "I'm sorry. I guess I still remember finding her there. I'm just a little touchy this morning."

"We understand that, Mr.---uh, Johner. Now, if we can get back to some questions."

Johner spoke while Hemming was looking down at his papers. "I've got a couple for you. Did you find some kind of dart gun? Connor's got a wound in her right shoulder that looks like it's from a needle. I think she was shot with some kind of knockout stuff. She doesn't remember anything after she saw the gun."

"It was 'some kind of knockout stuff', all right. It was an animal tranquilizer, one that's used to subdue vicious dogs. It seems that Dexter befriended an animal control officer who used to come to the warehouse to pick up dog food. The guy says that his dart gun is missing from the back of his truck; we don't know yet if he's implicated or if Dexter stole it, but you can bet we'll find out."

Johner's head went down and he stared at his hands, which were doubled into fists. "An animal tranquilizer. ---I didn't think I'd ever hear myself say this, but I'm sorry we don't still have the death penalty!"

"I wouldn't be sorry if I were you; the death penalty is too good for him. This guy's going to spend the rest of his life in a hospital for the criminally insane. We interviewed him at some length last night; he's a third stage alcoholic, his brain is mostly gone. The rest of his life isn't going to be very rewarding. Let him die on his own."

There was no trial; Dexter was committed to the state hospital for the criminally insane by order of a federal judge after a psychiatric examination showed him unfit to stand trial. There was no objection from the public defender retained to defend him, the district attorney, or his family, and the case was closed.

Sarah recovered very quickly from her ordeal. Johner was the one who found it hard to put it behind him. He remained vigilantly protective of her, and it drove her crazy.

"Jesus Christ, Johner, I went to the grocery store to get a bug bomb! There are ants in the kitchen again. When are you going to lighten up? You're driving me to drink!" Sarah set the spray can on the table in front of him with a bang.

"I didn't know where you were. I came home, and you were gone, and I didn't know where you were!" Johner's jaw was set; he stared straight ahead, not looking at her.

She stalked away for a couple of paces, then whirled back to face him. "I'm supposed to leave a note when I go to the store for ten minutes? Maybe I should just get a bunch printed up. Then I can drop them like bread crumbs behind me wherever I go!"

"You weren't here. I didn't know where you were." He looked stubbornly straight ahead of him. His body was tense, his fists on the table were white-knuckled.

As she turned again from pacing the floor and looked down at those big hands clenched so tightly in fear for her, her heart hurt her suddenly. Her voice came from her throat soft and husky when she spoke. "Oh, Johner, babe, I know you're scared, I know you love me, I know, babe." Her arms went around him from behind his chair, and her mouth pressed the top of his head.

His tense pose relaxed as he felt her loving attention. He turned and pulled her around his chair and into his lap. "God, I love you, I want you---." He buried his face in the warm hollow of her neck. From that beloved place he spoke without raising his head. "Connor----could you tell me---you've never said exactly what happened while---I wonder a lot what happened---. If you don't want to talk about it, that's OK, I understand. I just---you know, sometimes when we're making love I---I'm afraid, Connor. I'm afraid I'll do something that will remind you of---something bad."

Gently she lifted his face with a hand under his chin. He looked up at her apprehensively. "I thought---maybe I could let it go more if I knew. I imagine stuff that gets me crazy, Connor. Would it be OK with you?"

"Sweetheart, why didn't you say something before? I didn't tell you because you never asked; I thought you might not want to know. I don't mind talking about it at all, but Johner, there really isn't much to say. When I woke up he had cut my clothes off me, but I think he did it mostly so he could tell you about it. You're the one he wanted to hurt."

She thought about it for a minute, remembering what had happened. "I was really scared when I woke up and my clothes were gone. That made it not just a kidnapping for money; someone crazy had me tied down naked. You can bet I was scared! But when he came in and I watched him for a little while, I began to be a little less scared, really. I didn't think any longer about---terrible things. He was just so---blurred---about everything. Including my body; he looked at it like it was a bale of hay! I remember thinking once that the worst thing he'd do was forget about me, and I'd starve to death.

The only time he showed any animation at all was when he talked about what he was going to say to you. He touched my breasts a couple of times, talking all the time about what you would say if you knew it. He---put his hand---in that place that's only your place, once. But to tell the truth it wasn't very scary. He had no interest in it for itself, only for how you would feel about it. He just gloated about how you'd feel when he told you what he'd done. I don't think it even occurred to him that he could tell you he'd done it without actually doing it.

"I sure didn't at the time, but talking about it now, and I suppose because now I know that nothing bad is going to happen, I feel a little sorry for him, Johnner."

Johner's face twisted. "No! Never! God, Connor, don't say that! If you knew how scared I was---."

"I know. I know, sweetheart." Her arms were around his neck, and she began to kiss him softly, all around his ear, and down the side of his neck. His eyes closed, and his head bent to the side, giving her more access to his skin. Without opening his eyes, and speaking slowly, through his growing arousal, he said, "I'm glad I asked, I had thought much worse things---. Oh, Connor, do that again---again!"

She whispered into his ear, her breath making him shiver. "It's only you, Johnner. Nothing else matters, no one else is real---."

Groaning at the sensations engendered by her hot breath, he got up, still holding her in his arms, and started for the bedroom.

Chapter 38

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

John graduated from law school in the spring, and passed the bar easily. His entry into the business as attorney-in-residence had been long awaited and was much appreciated. He'd wondered aloud before joining them if there would be enough for him to do, but after three months his desk was piled with work like everyone else's. After six months, requests for John's expertise in the security area from other security firms and from alumni of the security school seemed likely to burgeon into a third business.

"Over my dead body!" was Johnner's response to this suggestion. "I learn slow, but I learn! John, if you want to start another business, go ahead. I'll watch, thanks!"

But as John laid plans to start a third business Johnner was deep into the planning, all the while denying any interest in the whole matter. "It's fucking nuts! Jesus, John, you want to be the owner of something that gives you a constant headache and makes you old before your time, go ahead!" But he understood John's desire to make something of his own, and he helped in every way he could.

On the evening of the day John incorporated his own business, *J. Connor & Associates*,

Johner let out the worries he'd kept to himself. He and Connor lay in bed talking over the day's events, as was their usual practice.

"God, Connor, I'm so scared for him. I hope it goes well, I just...well, I hope it goes well."

Sarah looked at him for a moment, assessing his words. "I think you mean you're scared it won't. Why, Johner? What makes you think it won't go well?"

"I don't know. I just..." He was looking down at his hands.

Sarah shook her head. "Johner, the reason you don't think it will be successful is because you won't be running it."

His head came around to her quickly. "What the hell does that mean?"

She chuckled, then began to laugh. "You son of a gun, you think no one in the whole world can do anything right unless you're supervising! Relax, Johner. You'd be surprised at how many competent people there are in the world, people who don't even know you, and get along quite well anyhow."

Johner was indignant. "Now that's unfair! I never..."

Sarah was laughing hard now. She nodded to indicate her agreement through her laughter and as she sobered, she put her hand out to touch the side of his face. "Yes, yes, of course it is unfair. But Johner, since you became an empire builder, everyone has to be protected by you, 'cause they don't know what's best for them."

Johner searched her face; as he realized that she meant what she said, he looked stricken. "Is this true? God, Connor, that's what I've never stood still for in my whole life; and you think I'm doing it to other people?" He had turned his face away from her and resumed the study of his hands, but he was shaken, she could see it in the set of his shoulders.

Sarah hesitated to answer him, unsure if this was the time. Saying anything that would hurt him was the hardest thing she could think of to do. As the seconds passed and she didn't answer, he reached over and put his hand on her shoulder. "I asked, babe. Tell me what you think. I need to hear it."

"Yes, I think you're tending to think you know what's best for others." His head had gone down again as she spoke. She put her hand under his chin, and turned his face to hers. "Babe, I love you. You know that. I could be wrong here, but I'm trying to tell you the truth as I see it. Is that...are you OK with it?"

"Yes. Of course. I'm just...I don't see... Oh. You mean like when I told Tim Waxman that his car wasn't suitable for his job? Well Connor, a beach buggy! He can't take clients to lunch in a beach buggy!"

"Sure he can. Maybe they'll like it. But that's not a good example. You're his boss, if you have concerns for the good of the business, that's a legitimate reason to tell him he needs to change cars. I was thinking more of...well, you put a damper on Marie when she advanced the notion that she'd like to get a job. I felt sorry for her, Johner. She's such a timid soul, and this idea might well have been her first effort to be independent in a lifetime, but she wasn't strong enough to persist after her idol said he didn't think it was a good idea."

He grinned a little. "She does think I'm perfect, doesn't she? But Connor, she sure doesn't need the money, and she's totally unsuited to the workplace. What could she possibly do? I just saw nothing but disappointment for her. It was better for her not to try." He stopped suddenly. "I did it, didn't I? I decided for her what was best for her."

"Yes, you did. People have to take their own lumps and learn their own lessons, Johner. You're not saving anyone anything by steering them away from experience."

He thought about that for a minute. "I could have helped her to find something to do that would have let her feel useful. I could have done something good for her, instead of turning her back on herself. There were better ways to handle that situation."

"Yup. There were." She smiled at him, and her hand came up to caress his face. "I love you. You have a graceful soul, Johner."

"Now I don't know what in hell that means, but if you think so it must be true." He kissed her lightly. "Thanks. I think. Now, I'll start tomorrow to find something for Marie to do. Something that's within her capabilities..."

"Whoa! You're doing it again. How in hell do you know what her capabilities are?"

"Well, Jesus Christ, Connor, can't I help anybody do *anything*?"

"Not really. People do what people do, and there's not a lot you can do to change them. You can send opportunities their way, and they have the option to take them or no. That's about it."

"This is very discouraging, Connor. I was hoping to rearrange the whole world to suit my ideas, and you're telling me I can't. Very disappointing." He grinned at her.

Connor grinned back, then sobered as she questioned him. "Why would you worry about John? He's got more work to do than he can manage, he's generated that business himself, and he'll have Carlie there to take care of the business side for him. Why would you think he wouldn't be successful?"

"Well, he's just a kid, he doesn't have the experience..." Sarah turned to stare at him, and he immediately looked defensive. "What...what? Oh. You're thinking I didn't have the experience a couple of years ago. Well, that's true but I had... No, Connor, I think I won't say anything more. It could be too good an opportunity for you to embarrass me." He gave her a quick grin before his face stilled in thought. "Maybe there's something in what you're saying. I just worry about..." He looked up at her and his expression warmed in a smile. "Everything. Everyone. Don't I."

"You got it."

"Where do I get off to worry about other people? The world got along without me for ten thousand years, maybe I should give up trying to fix it. Is that pretty much what you're trying to tell me?"

"In a nutshell."

He smiled at her, a little wryly. "OK, I got it. I think you've got something---maybe! I'll keep thinking about it, anyway. OK?"

"OK."

He looked down at his hands for a minute, then his arms snaked out suddenly and enclosed her. "I've got enough to worry about, right here in bed with me!" He pulled her into his lap. "Now that you've corrected my thinking on ruling the world, do you think you could give me a little help in another area? I've been wondering about women...I don't know very much about them at all, maybe you could help me...would they like it if I did this? Or would they rather I'd do...this? Or...how about this?"

"Johner, what other women like is no concern of yours, and even if I knew I wouldn't tell you! Hear me? All you need to know on that subject is if I like it. And I do...especially that one... oh, again..."

Chapter 39

BAG OF TRICKS

Carlie looked out of the car window at Sarah's house as they pulled into the driveway. "I'm nervous, John. What d'you think he'll say?"

"They'll both be glad for us, but what you're thinking is right. This is going to be hard for Johner, he's such a patriarch." John smiled as he thought about Johner's tendency to bring the whole world into his embrace. "But he won't show it if he can help it. He'll know that it's the right thing for us to have a place of our own."

"He's a dear man, and he's been a father to me." Carlie smiled also as she thought about Johner, and then her face sobered. "I hate the thought of doing anything at all that would upset either one of them. They've been so good to us...to me, I guess I mean. I must have just about the best in-laws of anyone on the planet."

"Honey, just keep thinking about having a house of your own." John leaned over to kiss her lightly, and stroked her hair back from her face with tenderness. "Carlie, I know how important this is to you. I can see it in your face every time we talk about it. Don't let your pleasure in it be dimmed at all by how Johner's going to feel about it. That's the last thing in the world he'd want to happen." He grinned. "In a month he'll be driving us crazy, thinking of ways he can make the new place better for us. You'll see. I'm not saying he won't grieve a little over this, I think he will, but he'll get over it. And it'll be better for all of us in the long run."

"Well, come on, let's beard the lion." John reached over her to open her door.

Johner was indeed upset, but John had been right, he greeted the news with an outward show of pleasure. "Hey, that's great! Tell us all about it. Where is it? Have you closed on it yet? When do you take possession? Come on, guys, give!"

Carlie laughed delightedly. "I thought you might be mad that we're leaving you! I'm so glad that you're not upset."

Johner's face immediately became tragic. "Whaddaya mean, not upset? I'm broken hearted, but I'm keeping a stiff upper lip so you won't feel bad, because I'm such a saint!" Then he grinned. "...Come on, Carlie, you're both grown up, it makes perfect sense that you'd want a place of your own. And the captain of industry here is making so much money that there's no doubt you can afford it." Johner gestured at John, his pride in him evident. "Not doing too bad, are you, kid?"

"No problem paying the bills so far." John was proud also of his accomplishment.

They looked at each other with easy affection, and Johner's arm went around John. "My kid!" he said, striking a proud parent pose.

"Oh, please!" Sarah shook her head. "It's getting too deep, I can't stand much more of this. Carlie, why don't you sit down here and tell us about it, and let Johner get back to the stove." She turned to Johner. "I'm hungry, dolt! Cook!"

“Steak and American fries and coleslaw, coming up.” Johner leaned over and kissed Sarah where she was sitting at the table. He straightened, then leaned back and kissed her again. “You do that pretty good, woman. Wanna go on a date?” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

Sarah snorted. “Will you *cook*? We’ll talk about dating later.”

He leered at her. “I’ll hold you to that!” Then he turned to the stove.

“Well, Carlie? Tell!” Sarah leaned forward expectantly.

Carlie looked at John. “You tell them. I don’t know where to start.”

“I think we should start with location. That’s the most important part of any property, right?”

Johner turned around. “I suppose it’s at the other end of the world.”

John grinned. “Not exactly. In fact, if you stand at your back fence and spit over it, you’ll be spitting in our back yard.”

“What? You bought the Jamison’s’ house? I didn’t even know it was for sale!” Sarah was dumbfounded.

“It isn’t. Not any more. We closed last night.”

“Well, now, that makes a whole lot of difference.” Johner’s grin was huge. “I’m glad to hear that you had sense enough to stay close. It’s possible that you could need us yet, you know.”

Sarah waited until they were settled in bed before she asked him to talk about what she knew was painful to him. She pulled herself over to sit in his lap, kissed him lightly, and said, “Ok, tell me how you feel.”

“Babe, you always know. I just...it’s going to be mighty different around here without them.”

He thought a minute. “Having a family is such a wonderful thing for me; I never get used to the fact that these people love me. You’re a miracle that never ceases to amaze me, but...” he grinned from under his brows, “that can be explained by the fact that I’m so unbelievably good in bed. The kids...well, they just love me. No reason, they just do. That’s something I’ll never get used to.”

“Damn, that’s annoying! I wish I could deny that you’re unbelievably good in bed. It would be very satisfactory...but...I cannot tell a lie.” She grinned at him. “You know, Johner, that’s not the only reason I love you. I love you for all the same reasons that the kids do, also. I’m not going to tell you what they are; we’ve got to do *something* to keep your ego under control. Just trust me, there are reasons. And then there’s the fact that we love you for no reason except you’re so damn lovable that we just do. *I just do.*” She reached to kiss him, and he took the opportunity to make the kiss a lot more than she had intended. His arms went around her closely and his mouth opened to let his tongue search out the soft surfaces of her mouth’s interior. Sarah made a little sound and melted against him, aroused instantly by his lovemaking.

“Can we talk about dating now?” He spoke against her mouth. “I’d really like to...date you.”

She chuckled without moving from his mouth. “Yeah, what you’d *like* to do is obvious to anyone sitting in your lap.”

“How about it? Do you do it on the first date?” His hands were moving over her now, sliding under the covers to move slowly up her inner thigh.

“No, I don’t!” Then she jumped as his fingers made a practiced motion. “Oh...do that again...”

I'll make an exception for you, if you'll just do...that...again."

But he didn't. "Huh-uh. I'm the one that feels bad, you have to do stuff to me." He smiled smugly at her.

She smiled back. "I take that as a challenge. Lie down"

"Oh-oh. That's an evil grin. I may have started something." Johner laid himself back against the pillows, "Here I am, helpless."

Sarah looked down at him speculatively. Then: "Not as helpless as you're going to be." She got up and crossed the room to her dresser. When she came back, she had her hands full of pantyhose.

Johner looked nonplused. "What the hell do you intend to do with those? I will *not* wear them!"

Sarah chuckled. "Put your arms up and grab the bedposts." She proceeded to tie his hands to the posts with the pantyhose.

"Connor? What are your plans? ...Connor? Am I going to be sorry I started this?"

"I don't know. We'll have to wait and see, won't we?" And she tied his feet to the posts at the foot, leaving him spread-eagled on the bed.

Then she knelt between his legs, just looking at his body. After a minute or so, Johner began to squirm. "Connor, I'm getting goose bumps. What are you going to do?"

"If I told you, it would spoil the fun." She got up again, and when she came back she had a feather in her hand, a long thin pheasant feather.

"Where the hell did you get that? Have you been planning this?"

The evil grin was back. "I laid in a few supplies, just in case. In case I ever got you helpless in my power. Which would appear to be the case at the moment, wouldn't it? I've often wondered what the application of a feather to your...shall we say...more sensitive parts, would do. I think we're about to find out."

She climbed back on the bed, and settled between his legs. The feather ran along his side to tickle his underarm, then across his chest to touch his nipple, passing around it, circling the nub in the center, making the erectile tissue come to attention. The feather was applied very lightly, trailing back and forth across his abdomen, dipping into his navel, which made him jump, and then progressing to the area around his penis, which was in semi-erection. In thirty seconds it had blossomed into a full steel hard erection, and he was squirming again.

"Jesus, Connor! Have a heart; that tickles! "

"Looks to me like that's not all it's doing." She kept steadily at her task, being careful not to touch his penis. Now the feather was moving up and down the inside of his thighs.

He began to move his pelvis as much as he could, trying to move so that the feather would touch his penis. "Oh no you don't!" Sarah looked up at him, grinning. "Whassamatta? Want a little touch right...there?" She moved the feather to six inches above his reaching erection. "I thought it tickled, and you didn't like it. I'll stop if you want."

"No...don't stop, just put it on my dick. I'm...interested to see how it would feel there."

Sarah laughed softly. "Johner, you're such a liar! You want me to bring you off. I can see that you're pretty much ready. Well, you might as well relax. You're not going to come for a long, long time." She laid the feather down, and got up. When she came back from her dresser this time she had a black slip in her hand.

By this time Johner was very suspicious. "What're you gonna do with that?"

She didn't answer him. Instead, she laid the slip across his eyes, and tied the ends behind his head.

"Connor! You can't *do* this! If I can't see what you're gonna do, I'll go nuts!"

"I certainly hope so." She stood beside the bed, very quietly, not moving at all, for maybe thirty seconds.

"Connor? Where are you? What are you planning? Connor, this is torture!"

She said nothing, not moving, letting the suspense build.

"Connor!"

No answer.

His penis, which had subsided somewhat while the blindfold was applied, began to stand up stiffly again. "God almighty! What have I gotten myself into? Come on, babe, what are you planning? I can't just lie here not knowing!"

Sarah bent over silently, and without any preliminary touch, laid her tongue over a nipple.

"Ah-h! Oh, God!" He jumped as if he'd been burned.

The nipple received full attention, then her tongue moved on. Not her lips or her mouth, just the end of her tongue. Johner began to tremble, and his penis jerked with every soft touch on his body. She didn't miss any place that would be at all sensitive. His underarm seemed particularly to drive him up the wall, so she covered it thoroughly, still just with the end of her tongue, while he moaned and writhed. "Connor, have a little mercy; you're making me crazy. What the hell is that, your tongue? God, I think it's a nipple! Connor, is that your nipple? Connor?"

Sarah chuckled, but said nothing, and kept on. She covered his body except for his penis, which she was still careful not to touch. He moaned and jumped when she began on a new spot, and his erection surged and throbbed. Then she climbed onto the bed again, and starting with tonguing and sucking his ears, she worked her way down his body again, this time with her mouth, lips, tongue and teeth. His nipples and his underarms were thoroughly covered again, and he began to lift his body closer to her mouth, eagerly reaching for closer contact, loving the sensations at the same time they were driving him crazy. When she reached his groin, she circled all around his penis, while he groaned and tried to get closer to her searching mouth.

By this time Johner's hips were convulsively lifting, and Sarah thought it was time to let him cool off a little. She didn't want to chance a premature explosion, so she reached up and pulled off the blindfold. "Hi. Are you having a good time? I think it's time for a break."

"God, Connor, don't stop, don't leave me like this!"

He was really pleading now, but Sarah was adamant. "You wanted me to do stuff to you. Well, I'm doing it."

She sat beside him on the bed, casually looking at her nails. She was wearing nothing at all, and Johner's eyes devoured her as she sat there, looking longingly at her breasts. "Just let me touch you. Come on Connor, just untie one hand, OK?"

She smiled, still looking down at her nails. "Not a chance."

"Connor, I need to touch you. You're so beautiful, I need to just feel your skin against my hands."

"OK, Johner, I'll let you touch me." She got up and leaned over him, her breast directly over his mouth. Johner reached up as far as he could, but she stayed just out of his reach.

“Connor! Please....?”

She relented then, and when his lips closed over her breast he made a moan of satisfaction. Sarah’s eyes closed; his mouth on her breast was what she had been wanting for many minutes. Johner was very skilled at what he was doing, and in a little while she began to breathe harder. He heard that, and redoubled his efforts. Sarah sighed and moaned as his mouth nipped and sucked at her breast. “Oh babe, you’re so good at that.” She moved to give him the other breast, and he cooperated with gusto.

But Sarah had one more thing in her bag of tricks. Reluctantly, she moved away from his clinging mouth, and the blindfold went back on.

“A-a-ah, God, now what? Jesus Christ, Connor, turn me loose! I need you! I want you right now!”

She smiled. “Not yet.” She reached down beside her, and brought her hand up with something in it. Something that started to buzz.

Johner stiffened. “Oh my God, Connor, no! I’ll die!” He was tugging at the ties holding him now, his pelvis arched up as far as he could take it, bringing his distended phallus as close to her as he could. She began to run the vibrator it up and down the inside of his thighs. When he felt the vibrations, he pushed himself down as far as he could, trying to get his penis nearer to it. “Come on, Connor, put it on me, just touch me with it, please...please.” The vibrator moved up over his hip, circling around the area where he wanted it so badly, across his belly, and down the other side. Then she brought it back down between his legs, and slowly she brought it up the inside of his thigh, and applied it to his testicles.

He cried out wordlessly, his whole body stiffened and trembling, his penis jumping with every touch of the vibrator to his testicles. She ran it around them, and then under them, which made him groan and tremble in excitement.

Sarah could see he wasn’t going to last much longer. If she kept it up, he’d come without her ever touching his penis at all. She too was very close to spontaneous climax, the sight of his beautiful body writhing in excitement was making her crazy with desire. She turned the vibrator off, and reached up to pull the blindfold off him. Then, without a word, she moved to straddle his thighs. She smiled tenderly at him, and stroked his cheek with one hand. “Now, babe, now...” And she raised herself up and brought her body down over his penis, gasping as she felt it slide into her.

Johner groaned as he felt the heat and wetness of her body. “Oh Jesus, that’s wonderful, I love you...” He was very close to climax, and she stayed still for a moment. Then she began to move on him, and he moaned and moved with her. In just a few seconds his body arched up as far as his bonds would let him, and he cried out, a wordless animal sound as he came with violence.

Sarah’s head went back as she felt his seed spurt into her, and his climax brought hers. She moaned as her body exploded with ecstatic pleasure, and then she collapsed over him, feeling the lessening contractions of his penis, and her own body’s aftershocks.

In a few minutes, as she came back to reality, she raised her head. Johner was looking at her and grinning. “Hi, stranger. Who are you, anyhow?”

She chuckled. “I’m the same woman you’ve been going to bed with for years.”

“Oh, no. I’d remember this woman if I’d ever slept with her before!” He laughed, shaking his head. “Will I ever learn all there is to know about you? Four years! Four years I’ve been sleeping with you, and now you spring this on me. What the hell got into you, anyhow?”

“To tell you the truth, I have no idea. I bought the vibrator one day at the dollar store, just for a

joke really, and forgot all about it. The feather I've had for years, I saved it because I thought it was pretty; it was up in the closet. But somehow, when I looked down at you all tied up like that, these things came into my mind automatically. It was fun, though, wasn't it?"

"I'm not sure 'fun' is how I'd describe it. It was one of the best climaxes I ever had though." He grinned again. "Now that you've had your way with me, maybe you'd untie me?"

She complied. When she had freed his feet, and begun on his hands, she stopped. "There wouldn't be retribution, would there?"

"For what? For a spectacular climax? I guess not. I don't know though, you really deserve some kind of payback for the feather. *That* was uncalled for! I'll have to think about that one, but rest assured I'll think of something, sooner or later."

When they were lying in the dark, ready for sleep in each other's arms, she felt the vibrations of a chuckle through her cheek lying on his shoulder.

"What?"

He chuckled again. "You, wielding that feather. The big bad dominatrix...with a pheasant feather!"

CHAPTER 40

THE KID

"Now what? Jesus, I didn't need this! Not tonight!" Johner slumped over the steering wheel, shaking his head.

He was very tired. As he drove home, he'd been thinking about his day. *Another first as a business owner!* he thought. He'd fired a man today, someone who simply couldn't do the job. He'd done what he could to make the blow easier, but his careful courtesy hadn't helped. The man had stormed out, banging into furniture and cursing Johner loudly.

Johner's heart was sore, and his temper was short as a result. And now this! He looked out through the windshield with impatience that was turning quickly into anger.

The headlights showed him a human blockade. In the dark deserted street before him a line of people had appeared from nowhere, obliging him to brake hard to avoid hitting them. The consequent adrenaline rush hadn't helped his temper at all, and now he sat staring out through the glare of the headlights at this new problem.

They were *kids!* As he stared, he saw that there were five or six boys, none over about twelve or thirteen. Understanding flashed through his mind immediately. He knew what was happening, he'd done it himself, when he was a kid growing up on the street.

It was a heist. They were counting on their numbers to make up for their size while they intimidated a driver into giving them whatever they could scare out of him. Money, of course. Anything salable that he had in the car. His clothes, if they could get them. And the ideal situation was that he'd run, and leave the car to their mercy. In that case, they'd strip it. By morning there'd be nothing removable left.

But this time they'd picked the wrong car. He sat quietly, awaiting their next move---he knew what it would be. They'd move up to the car, one of them staying in front of it to hold him

where he was. They'd expect him to lock his doors, so they'd be prepared to break a window. Well, he had a little surprise for them. He smiled as he removed the handgun from its holster beside the seat. He was, after all, a registered level 10 security operative, duly licensed to carry or conceal a weapon, wherever and whenever he wanted to.

As the biggest of them, the leader, approached the car, Johner opened the door and stepped out. The leader didn't hesitate. He motioned for the others to back him, and kept coming.

Good move! Johner thought. This kid wasn't intimidated by the unusual action on the part of the mark. *Now we'll see how he feels about this.* He brought up the gun. As the boy stopped in front of him, the gun was leveled at his chest. *All right! Well done, kid!* was Johner's thought, when the boy looked down the barrel of the gun without turning a hair.

"Go ahead. Shoot me, fucker. I'm twelve years old. You'll have a great time explaining why you shot a twelve year old kid!"

"You're closer to fourteen, big mouth. And you're coming with me!" With practiced speed Johner reached out with his free hand and in two seconds had an immobilizing hold on the boy, while keeping the gun leveled at his associates. The boy fought him with all he had, in spite of the agony of a twisted shoulder, while Johner muscled him into the car.

The door slammed shut and the locks went on while Johner still fought to hold him. In a couple of seconds, cuffs had the boy chained to the opposite door. He stopped fighting then. He became perfectly still, his eyes on Johner with a killing glare, waiting to see what came next.

Johner sat still for a moment, panting a little from the battle just past. The boy looked up at him from under a mop of unkempt light brown hair, wary as a chained wolf, and as ready to kill. He was a big strong kid, just beginning to come into the final shape of his manhood. He was going to be tall, broad-shouldered, heavily built. *Like me...* Johner thought, with a rush of emotion he couldn't identify, as he stared back, holding the boy's blue eyes with his own. *He's going to be like me...*

"OK, kid, relax. I'm not gonna turn you in." That would be the boy's first fear, he knew; that he'd call the cops. "We're gonna go for a ride. Nothing terrible is gonna happen to you, just cool it."

He turned to the wheel. When he looked out he saw that the rest of the boys had disappeared. That figured. *It's what I would have done.* He put the car into gear and drove away, going he knew not where, to do he knew not what. *How did I get into this? Ten minutes ago I was on my way home. I can't take this...this wild animal...home with me. What in hell am I going to do with him?*

He only knew he couldn't dump him out in the street. Not back to the street. He couldn't do that.

"You did good back there. I can't think of anything I'd tell you to change." Johner kept his eyes on the road.

Silence from the passenger seat.

"What got you was bad luck. I'm not the best mark you coulda picked. I've been where you are; I knew what was gonna happen."

Silence.

“OK---we won’t talk about it.”

After a while Johner stopped to get fuel. As he pumped it, he thought about what he’d have done in a like situation, and decided that he’d have been just as silent and unresponsive as the kid was. What would have got to him? He knew the answer immediately. Food. He’d been hungry all the time when he was fourteen.

When he paid for his fuel he bought food. Sandwiches, potato chips, Coke. He smiled to himself. He still liked those things; it must be because he’d never got enough of them. *God knows they’re not the world’s best food, he thought, but I wanted potato chips more than life itself when I was his age.*

On his way out he called home. Connor answered. “I’m *waiting* for you, dopey. Where the hell are you? I’m hungry!”

Johner chuckled. “Can’t even open a can! Better go out to eat, I’m gonna be awhile.”

“Have you got some bimbo with you? I’ll kill you!”

“Well, as a matter of fact, yes, I have. She’s beautiful, and she wants me. But I couldn’t get it up when I tried to fuck her. I was too scared of you! She *laughed* at me. Practically destroyed my manhood on the spot!”

“Ha! I’m here to testify that nothing, absolutely nothing, could do that.”

“Right. I need to keep it for you.” His voice softened. “Only for you, babe.”

“Come home quick. I want you.” Sarah’s voice had softened also, to a deliberately throaty whisper.

“Jesus! Don’t *do* that, babe!” he protested, laughing. “I can’t come home right now. But I’ll be there sometime soon. I’ll call again. No problems, I’ve just got myself into something here that’s gonna take a little time.”

“OK, see ya. I love you.”

“Love you. Bye.”

“I’m going to put a longer chain on you so you can eat.” Johner grinned at him. “Please don’t bother to tell me you’re not hungry; I remember.” He quickly changed the cuffs, putting the longer chain on before he removed the shorter one. “Now, kid. You may be able to reach me with this longer chain. Just remember before you try it that I’m capable of making you hurt a lot, and I will if I have to. What’s your name?”

“...Des.” Even the one word came out reluctantly.

“Des. OK. Eat.” Johner started the car and drove away, glancing at the boy as he drove. Des reached for a sandwich, took a huge bite, opened the soda, tore the top off the potato chip bag. All of it was gone in five minutes. “Want more?” Johner grinned; he’d been right about a fourteen-year-old’s appetite.

“Later.” Des settled back in the seat, satisfied for the moment. When Johner glanced at him again, he was staring steadily at his captor, a long assessing stare. Johner understood that stare. Des was figuring out his motives. He was expert at that sort of appraisal; he had to be to have lived this long. His life could depend on the accuracy of his judgment of what others’ intentions were; and no less important, what profit he could make from them. His brain was busily weighing every look, every gesture, everything about Johner that his quick perception had picked up in the last half hour.

After a few more seconds of that cool appraisal he turned his back on Johner, curled up, and was asleep immediately. Johner smiled to himself. Apparently Des had decided that he was in no present danger.

He reached over and operated the control that put the back of the passenger seat down to the horizontal position. The boy moaned a little and stretched himself out into the increased space without waking. Like an animal, Johner thought. He’s lived like an animal all his life. I know this kid. He’s me. Always hungry, always exhausted. Never enough food, enough sleep, enough of anything. And...God, never any love at all. None. No one, not ever, to care if you live or die. He doesn’t know what love is. I didn’t. Not until Connor. Not until my miracle happened.

He looked at the sleeping youngster, and his heart was torn as he perceived the lost innocence in the half-grown boy lying there. The childhood forfeited, subverted into a frantic battle for survival, the youth twisted into premature cynicism, the love never lost, because never possessed; he knew it all. All of it was so much a part of who he was, who he had been in the past. The pain of his own wasted years was ever with him, but in this moment it was indivisible from the compassion he felt for this sleeping boy; this damaged boy who was verging upon a misshapen manhood.

He bent over the boy and spoke softly, almost soundlessly. “Maybe I can change it for you. Maybe I can make it come out right...at last. Maybe I can be your miracle, Des.”

Chapter 42

DAYBREAK

The car was sitting in the driveway in front of Sarah’s house. It had been there for more than two hours, with Johner slumped over the wheel half asleep while he waited for the boy to wake up. God, the kid couldn’t sleep forever! Gray light was breaking in the east as he roused himself to look over at Des once more. The boy hadn’t moved, but his eyes were open, staring at Johner.

“Morning, kid. Thought you were going to sleep right on through the day.” Johner stretched as much of himself as he could in the confines of the car. “Ready for breakfast?”

Silence.

“OK, we’ll wait for breakfast, we’ll talk first. I guess we need to have things cleared up a little. I’m gonna tell you exactly what’s up, Des. I thought it over while you slept, and I’m just gonna lay it out for you the way I see it.

“This is my home, what you see there in front of you. If you agree, my plan is to take you into my house, take you to live with my family. You probably think I’m nuts.” He shook his head.

"Maybe I am.

"Well, I'll try to explain. I was a..." He stopped, thought, then shook his head. "No, I'll just give you the short version for now. It'll be easier.

"I grew up on the street. Just like you. Very much like you. Been on the street all your life?" Johner waited for an answer.

Des watched him warily for a minute, then nodded slowly.

"Me too. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but...I've got the god-damnedest notion that I can save you, or something. Probably I'm nuts." He stopped, not knowing how to continue, then bulled ahead, in typical Johner fashion.

"Well, whatever. Let's look at the part that's important to you, OK? It'll be a good deal for you in some ways. I'll provide everything you need to live while you're here with us. You don't have to scramble for anything. You don't have to go to school, you don't have to work, you can lay around all day and do nothing. I'll provide it all." He grinned; Des was looking more suspicious with every word.

"Wondering what's in it for me, aren't you? So am I, believe me! Don't know how to make you understand, I don't understand it myself. I...can't explain it...yet...but I'll keep thinking about it, I'll get it straight enough someday so I can explain it to you." There was a touch of shyness in his grin.

"Anyhow! It's not all gravy. I've got conditions...rules. Three of 'em. No stealing. No drugs. No violence. Those three rules are all there are. No drugs, no stealing, no violence. Only three, but firm. No exceptions. Got it?"

"Those are the rules, but there's a whole list of things I'd *like* for you to do. Things like be polite, be clean, be friendly. And another one...don't lie to me; I don't like being lied to much. But these are *not* rules. Got it?"

"Connor---she's my woman, she lives here, probably isn't gonna be very happy about this at first, but she's the world's greatest person, and she'll go along with it. The important thing for you to know about her is, she won't take it out on you, no matter how mad she is at me.

"Well, whaddaya think? Oh---one more thing. No strings. You can leave now, or whenever you want. No cops, no manhunt. I'll probably look for you, depending on how mad I am when you leave, but I won't turn the cops onto you, ever."

Des just stared at him. After a minute he lifted his wrists, still chained to the door. Johner quickly unfastened the cuffs, then just sat, waiting for Des to decide what to do next.

Des opened the door on his side and got out. Johner got out on his side. Des turned and started to walk away. Johner watched him go, leaning on the top of the car, his face not showing anything. After a few steps, Des stopped and looked back. Johner said nothing, his face still impassive.

Des stood, still wary and unbelieving, but Johner thought he was tempted. He watched the boy with panic in his heart that he'd keep on walking, but he let nothing show on the outside. He didn't move, almost didn't breathe. He felt as if he were trying to coax a wild animal to eat from his hand.

When Des made up his mind it was without words, silence being what he appeared to prefer. He walked to the front door of the house and turned to look at Johner, waiting to be let in.

Sarah, as usual, astonished Johner with her generosity. When he walked into the kitchen with Des, her first words after she learned his name were:

“Hi, Des. Want a Coke? I’m having one.” When he nodded, she went to the fridge and got him one. She opened it on the way back and presented it to him with a little bow. “There. Ready to drink. The service is pretty good around here, huh?” She grinned at him and sat down at the kitchen table.

“How about some breakfast with your Coke?” Johner began to rattle pans in his usual fashion. “How many eggs, Des? Bacon or sausage?”

Des looked at Johner, then at Sarah. “Isn’t she cooking?” His first words since entering the house.

“Nope. I do the cooking.”

“What’re you, some kinda wimp? Women cook.”

“Not here. I cook here.”

“Are you a woman?” With derision in his voice.

Johner grinned. “Ask her.” He jerked his head at Sarah.

“Trust me, Des, he’s not a woman.” Sarah smiled at Johner, letting her affection show in her face.

“I bet he is. I bet he pees sitting down.” Des looked back and forth between them.

Johner’s grin widened. “If you wanna get my goat try another subject, Des. I’m not worried about being a man. I like to cook, and we’d all die of hunger if Connor was doing the cooking!” Johner glanced at Sarah, smiling, as he broke eggs into the frying pan. “How many eggs, Des? Speak up!”

“Six.” Des obviously thought he was being outrageous.

“OK. Bacon or sausage?”

“Both.”

“OK. How many toast?”

“Six.”

Johner turned from the frying pan to grin at him. “Hungry, huh? Well, that’s what it’s for. I like someone who’ll *eat* when I cook!”

Des ate it all, and drank five cups of coffee to boot.

Sarah surveyed Johner with a raised eyebrow. “OK, you want to explain to me just what’s going on here? Where in hell did you pick him up? Are you expecting him to be permanent?” When he didn’t answer immediately, she continued, “Let me in on your plans, huh? Slightly after the fact, but better late than never, I guess.” She leaned back against her pillow, staying on her own side of the bed, her arms crossed, her body language telling Johner plainly that she was annoyed.

He looked down at his hands. “I snatched him into the car in the middle of an attempted robbery. And...yes, I hope he’s permanent; and yes, I know it’s been sprung on you...but Connor...” He reached over to lift Sarah into his arms, holding her against his chest. He looked at her with pleading eyes, his voice husky. “Don’t be mad, Connor. Please, please...I know you think I’m nuts...when I look at it from your point of view, I am. But babe, this is...I

just...I don't know what to say..."

He took a deep breath in an attempt to release the tension he felt. "Connor, this kid is me. He's *me*! I see myself so plainly...Christ!" He stopped and one hand went to the back of his neck, massaging the tight muscles there. "I just...I couldn't *do* it, babe. I couldn't leave him there...in the street. Not this one. Not this time. I just...Connor...*please*..."

He turned his head down and away from her, unable to let even Sarah see his face. The words to express the fundamental significance of this matter to him came slowly and with difficulty. "I thought...Connor, I...well, maybe I can...save him, ...save him from fifty years of..." His throat closed; he couldn't finish. He shook his head and gathered her closer into his arms, completely inarticulate now.

He didn't need to finish. Sarah knew the never-ending pain that was the result of his first fifty years on earth. As he buried his head in her shoulder she murmured words of comfort and support, her hands stroking his back.

"It's OK, babe, it's OK with me... don't you think I saw it too, the minute he walked in? He's *you*, babe...he's you. It's OK...we'll make it all right...it'll be OK...this time it'll come out right..." Her voice trailed away into soft murmurs, her love for him in every sound.

Chapter 42

Suffering the Inevitable

But it didn't come out right. Des just couldn't do it. Sarah watched his struggle with sympathy for him, but with sorrow in her heart for Johner.

Des tried. He could see that it was the best deal ever likely to be offered to him, and he wanted to take advantage of a life without the need to struggle for every mouthful, every snatched nap. After a few days he even came to understand that Johner wasn't going to appear beside his bed in the night, wanting favors he wasn't prepared to give. He began to see that Johner's sexual energy was entirely centered on Sarah, although he hadn't believed it at first. He'd had experience with men who wanted to 'help' him.

Des understood that by accepting Johner's invitation, he had given tacit agreement to the three rules. He had no problem with that. He didn't do drugs, they made people careless of their safety. The one older man who had befriended him without ulterior motives had died because he couldn't come out of the drug haze quickly enough. Des was present and saw it happen. The man had done him a great favor by dying in that way; he didn't touch drugs.

There were many things around the house that would be very profitable to steal. He could live for a long time just on the firearms that were in the locked kitchen cupboard, but if he stole them he couldn't come back. He wasn't ready yet to do that.

There was no need for violence, everything he wanted was his for the taking.

The other things, things Johner had said he'd like him to do?

Lying wasn't a problem; he spoke very little, and when he did it was necessary. "Pass the salt." That sort of thing. Johner tried to draw him out a couple of times, but Des's reticence convinced him to let it be.

Politeness was pretty much beyond him. His experience just didn't include it, he had no idea

how to do it.

Cleanliness was OK with him. He thought he looked better clean, and knew he felt better. There was a hot shower available whenever he wanted it, and he used it at least once a day. He thought that if he left that was the thing he'd miss most, next to eating regularly.

The problem was boredom. His friends, such as they were, weren't exactly the kind he could entertain in Johner's house. *They* hadn't agreed not to steal. He didn't miss them much anyhow. They were a convenience when he needed a group, as when he'd held up Johner, but he'd been alone most of the time most of his life, he was used to it, and it was really easier.

After he'd showered and eaten, what was there to do? He couldn't read, and although Johner had offered to teach him he had no interest in learning. After he'd caught up on sleep he couldn't stay in bed all day. He watched the TV obsessively for a few days, but one day he just turned it off, and that was that.

He walked around the neighborhood. There were kids his age around, but the little contact he had with them was enough. They understood almost nothing of what he said, nor did he understand them. 'Nothing in common' was a mild way to put it. As the days passed he began to rove farther afield. Soon he was spending part of his days back in the old haunts, where he could at least talk to people who understood what he was saying.

Johner was unaware that he was gone during the day.

Sarah could see that he was eaten up with boredom, and she talked to Johner about it during their usual bedtime recap of the day's events.

"We've got to find him something to do. He's too bright to sit in front of the TV all day, and he's used to an active life. He's been here three weeks, and you can see he's getting restless."

Johner nodded. "I know you're right, but what the hell am I going to give him to do? He doesn't want to go to school, he doesn't want a job. Hell, Connor, what else is there? Hobbies? Oh sure, let's try to get him interested in collecting butterflies!"

"I know it's tough, but we've got to think of something." She reached over to touch his cheek. "You're the one who should know. He's so much like you..."

Johner lifted her over to sit in his lap, his powerful arms making the job easy. Leaning back against the pillows he looked at her, a long admiring look. "Yeah. In that case, I do know. What he needs is a girl." He grinned. "It sure did the job for me."

She grinned back. "Very astute. And just where are you going to find a girl for him?"

A brilliant idea struck him. "What about the girls in the neighborhood?"

"Jesus, Johner, you can't turn this kid loose on the little suburban twits in this neighborhood! You'll get us run out of town on a rail!"

His face fell. "Yeah, I guess you're right. He'd chew'em up and spit'em out, wouldn't he." He thought about it for a moment more. "I can't think of anything we can do about this. He'll have to find something to do on his own."

There was a pause as Sarah thought about what she was going to say. She wasn't entirely sure she should say it at all, but...well, maybe it could work. "Have you thought about taking

him to the office? He'd probably be pretty good at some of the things we do."

Johner's face lit up. "Hoo! What an idea. You bet he'd be good at it! He'd make a hell of an undercover operative. There's not much about street life he doesn't know. This could work, Connor, this could..." He stopped suddenly, and his face closed in thought. When he looked up, the light had gone out. "No. Can't do that to the clients. Too much confidential information that he could use if he left us." He thought again. "There's no way to keep him separate from information he shouldn't see...nope, can't do it."

"Damn! You're right.' She was as disappointed as he.

"Have to think of something, though." He looked down at her and was suddenly struck by her beauty. "But I'll think about that tomorrow. Tonight....tonight...I want to think about you, and how beautiful you are, and how much I want to kiss you." His head dropped to hers, and he found her mouth.

It was inevitable that Des would go. The first time Johner was aware that he was gone it was just overnight, then it became two or three days at a time. Johner worried and waited, and breathed a great sigh of relief when he reappeared. He tried to talk to the boy, tried to find out what he could do to help, but Des just couldn't communicate. He was unable to say what help he needed because he didn't know. All he knew was that he had to get out.

As much as Johner wanted to believe that Des was a carbon copy of Johner himself, he wasn't. He was physically very close, and that was a great part of what led both Johner and Sarah to be deceived in him. He was reasonably bright and he was street-smart, but he had neither Johner's intelligence nor his emotional depth. His life experience and his intellect didn't lead him to introspection; he only knew he felt stifled at Johner's house. The comforts of the way of life were just not worth the constriction, and inevitably he went back to the streets.

After about two months, when he finally left not intending to come back, he took everything he could carry with him. The gun cupboard didn't withstand his determined onslaught, although Johner had thought it was pretty well protected. He'd worked at it for a long time, from the number of tools strewn around the kitchen, and at last he had been successful with the aid of an axe from the garage.

"God damn it! God damn it!" Johner strode around the kitchen, kicking pieces of the gun cupboard out of his way. "The ungrateful, miserable, lazy, lying, two-faced, double-dealing little son of a bitch! God damn it! I'll climb down his throat and pull out his kidneys! The treacherous little rat couldn't even think of a better scam than lifting a few guns? Jesus, at his age and with the opportunities he had, I'd have cleaned this place out to the bare walls. Stupid little bastard wasn't worth the time I spent trying to straighten him up. God damn it! Didn't have the brains to pour pee out of his boot, and if I get my hands on him I'll shove his head..." He paced for a long time, swearing steadily

Sarah watched silently. She knew he was hurting, and he had to get it out.

He finally wound down, sat himself at the kitchen table, shook his head hard as if to clear it, and began to talk sense. "Now we'll have to change all the locks, doors and windows. It's a miserable job, I'll get Ken Perkins from the office to do it for us. It'll take him half the time it would me. I wonder if Des duped my car keys? Better change 'em, and yours too. Is there any material from the office here that he could have got his hands on?" He answered his own

question. “No. We don’t bring much home, and nothing crucial that belongs to the clients. But the office keys? Oh God, they’re on the ring with my car keys. We’ll have to change all the office locks too. God, what a headache!”

His eyes left hers, his head dropped down and a hand came up to shield his eyes. Suddenly his whole body slumped and he buried his head in his crossed arms. For a long minute he said nothing, then his voice came out softly, muffled and hoarse. “I wanted to help, Connor. I just wanted to help.”

Sarah put down the coffee cups she was carrying to the table and sat down across from him. She reached to put a caressing hand on his bent head.

“I’m sorry, Johner. I’m so sorry.” What else could she say? She knew how much this attempt to change a life had meant to him.

After a minute he looked up at her. “You knew this was going to happen, didn’t you?”

“Well, I thought it was pretty probable.” She couldn’t lie to him, she had thought exactly that. “As much as we both thought he was like you, Johner, he is not you. He’s a separate person, and he has to work out his own destiny, I guess.”

His head bent again as he pulled his coffee cup to him. “I wanted to help. I wanted to help so much, Connor. If I... if I had just...” He stopped, staring down into the cup.

She reached her other hand to his. “I don’t think anything you did would have made a difference, Johner. I watched the way you handled the whole thing, and I was amazed at the understanding you showed. I think it was *him*, Johner. I think he just didn’t know how to *be* helped.”

He turned his hand up to clasp hers. “Maybe. Maybe.”

When Johner was in trouble he didn’t sleep. and Sarah began to wake in the night and find him gone. When she joined him at the kitchen table, he was willing to talk, and the talk always came around to the same thing; what he could do to fix what Sarah believed to be an unfixable situation.

“Do you think I should go and look for him? Do you think he’d come back?” Johner looked up from his cup hopefully.

Sarah had to tell him what she thought. “No, I don’t think so. He stole from you, big time. Neither of you could forget that.”

“Hell, Connor, it’s only money. What difference do a few guns make?”

“It’s not the guns. It was a betrayal. That’s the difference, to both of you.”

“Yeah. But maybe...”

“Johner, quit it! You’re driving yourself nuts. Go look for him.” She got up from the table and reached for his car keys on the counter. “Here. Go. You want to, you have from the beginning. I’ll cover for you at work tomorrow. Go!”

He took the keys and got up. “You’re all right with this?”

“Yes, of course I am. I love you, and I can’t bear to see you tearing yourself to pieces like this. You need to find a solution, one way or another. I’ll go along with whatever happens.”

He put his arms around her. “I love you. You always know.” He kissed her softly and was out the door.

Chapter 43

CLOSURE

It took awhile, but Johner found him.

It was on the eighth night of cruising the streets in the neighborhood of the original hijack that he caught sight of Des on a street corner with several other boys. He pulled up to the corner, stopped, rolled down the window on the passenger side.

“Des?”

Des stiffened as he recognized. Johner, but he stood his ground.

“Come on, get in. I’m not going to keep you.” Johner leaned over so Des could see his face in the light from the neon in the store window.

Des stood for a moment, then walked slowly to the side of the car, hesitated, then opened the door and got in, his expression wary. He closed the door and sat unmoving, not looking at Johner.

Johner grinned at him. “I won’t chain you to the door handle this time.” He put the car in gear, and they moved away. “I was pretty mad at the time, but I’m over it. You want to tell me what’s been going on?”

Des looked straight ahead at the road. Finally he said, “Whadda you care?”

Johner smiled wryly and shook his head. “Damned if I know! But I do, so let’s get on with it. What’ve you been doing? Had any good car-jackings lately?”

Des smiled, a small smile, the most he seemed to be capable of. “Not lately.”

“Wanta come back?”

He looked at Johner for the first time, surprised. “Jeez, you want me back?”

“Didn’t say I’d take you, asked if you wanted to.”

A pause. “No.”

Johner chuckled. “You know, this thing would probably have gone a lot better if I could ever get you to talk to me.” He shook his head when Des didn’t answer. “There, that’s exactly what I mean. Cripe, kid, *talk* to me!”

Long pause. “Nothing to say.”

Johner shook his head, discouraged. “I hear you. I guess that’s the truth. Nothing to say.”

He cruised on for a couple of minutes, then found what he’d been looking for. He pulled the car into a fast food restaurant, and pulled up to the order board. “Hungry?”

Des looked at him, a fast side glance. “Sure.”

“Whaddaya want?”

Des told him, and he ordered. They waited in silence for the food.

Des dug in with his usual enthusiasm for food. Johner watched him eat for a minute, then said “Does it make sense to you, what I said about talking to me?”

Des looked up at him, mouth full, and nodded.

“Can’t do it, huh?”

No response.

“Wish you could?”

Pause. Another glance. Des held Johner’s gaze as he slowly shook his head.

Johner looked back, searching Des’s face, then shrugged. The message was clear; Des wasn’t interested in furthering this association. Arguments and persuasions passed through Johner’s mind, but he kept them inside. It was no use, the kid didn’t want it.

“OK, kid. I guess that’s it, then. I wish it was different, but you are who you are.” He started the car.

The ride back to Des’s corner was silent. Johner pulled the car up to the corner and stopped. Des opened the door, but stopped before he got out. He sat silently for a moment, still facing the door, then turned. His voice was very low, and he didn’t look at Johner.

“Thanks.”

He got out of the car and walked swiftly away.

Sarah was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee and waiting for him, as she had on every night he searched for Des. She looked up as he came in, and knew immediately that this time the search had been successful.

“What happened?” She stood up and got a cup, poured his coffee.

He sat down at the table, drew the coffee cup toward him and looked down into it, head bent so she couldn’t see his face.

“Johner? What happened.?” Her hand reached across the table to cover his. “Tell me about it.”

“He doesn’t want to come back, doesn’t even want to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry. Sorry for your disappointment...but babe, he wasn’t happy here.”

“I know.” He looked up at her and his other hand covered hers, holding it between his. “I know, but...well, it’s hard to let go of it, somehow. Damn it, it was a *chance* for him! A chance...to get out of it, out of what will kill his soul in the end!” His face was charged with pain.

Sarah nodded. “Yes. But it’s not what he wants. It would be best for him, sure... but since when did any of us do what’s best?” She smiled a little. “It would be best for you to forget it. And it would be best for me not to care so much that it hurts you. But...we don’t do what’s best, we do what we have to do, or need to do, or want to do.” She turned her hand up to grasp his. “Come on, babe, let’s go to bed. You look exhausted.”

He nodded, and got up wearily. She put her arm around his waist, he put his around her shoulder, and they walked slowly out of the kitchen.

Tomatoes

Sarah put her keys and her grocery sack down on the kitchen counter and looked around for Johner. Yes, there was coffee made, and his car was in the garage, he must be here.

"Johner? Johner! Where are you?"

No answer. Sarah crossed the living room, checked their bedroom, then the bath and the other bedrooms. "Where the devil..." She crossed the living room and looked out the front door. Not in the front yard. There was only one place left, but what he would be doing in the back yard was beyond her. Outside of mowing it when necessary, neither of them ever went out there. But she crossed the garage and opened the yard door.

"Johner! What in the hell are you doing?" She stood in the doorway, chuckling. Johner was digging up the back yard.

He stood up, leaning on the spade, and grinned at her. "I thought I needed to get back to the soil."

She grinned back. "You were never at the soil! It's useless to try to pretend that you ever in your life dug in the dirt before. Now, what the hell are you up to? Where's the body? I knew you'd kill Anderson eventually."

He straightened, his face a parody of wounded feelings. "I have only the highest motives. I'm trying to provide the very best for my family."

"The best dirt?"

"No. The best tomatoes."

She grinned more widely. "You're going to plant tomatoes? Johner, you've never grown anything in your life, so now you're a gardener?"

"That is correct. I got a book." He was still doing the wounded act.

She leaned against the door frame, still chuckling. "Are you serious? Is that what you're doing?"

He relaxed from the haughty pose. "Yup. I'm sick of the pale pink hothouse tomatoes at the market. I want *tomatoes*! Real dark red juicy homegrown tomatoes. And the only way to get them is to grow them myself, so I am. I went to the library and the garden center and the hardware store, and I think I know what I'm doing." He gestured to the wall by the door, where there was a pile of equipment and supplies.

"You need all this stuff just to put a plant in the ground?"

The haughty pose was back. "Anything worth doing is worth doing well. I read that."

She shrugged, still grinning, amused by the whole thing. "OK by me. But if you're going to spend time out here, we should at least have a chair." Another chuckle. "I'd like to sit down while I watch you work."

"I've got plans. We'll have chairs."

"Oh, really. What kind of plans?"

"You'll see. Now go fix food, woman, I'm ploughing."

She laughed out loud. "That'll be the day. You wouldn't let me do it if I could. Someone else in *your kitchen*? No way. I'll plough; you fix dinner."

He stuck the spade in the ground and moved to join her at the door. "I guess I'll have to do it all, I don't trust you to plough, either." He grinned and put his arm around her, smearing her

liberally with dirt in the process, and they headed for the kitchen.

“Now tell me again, what was the reason for your sudden interest in agronomy?” Sarah looked up as she put the last bite of apple pie in her mouth.

“Well, I found this recipe for homemade tomato soup. It called for large fully ripe tomatoes.” He shook his head. “What the market had was small, greenish, hard balls of something they called tomatoes. Now, good meals come from good---“

“---ingredients! Yes, I’ve got that firmly in my mind. You might even say it’s been pushed in and pounded down. About four hundred times.” She shook her head, laughing, as she raised her coffee cup for a final swallow.

Johner looked a little sheepish. “Well, it’s true. And I knew that if I used those tomatoes I’d be doing violence to what looked like a very good recipe. So-o-o, I decided to grow my own.”

She pondered for a moment. Then: “I guess you might call it sort of a long-range strategy for tomato soup.”

His face lit up. “Exactly! There, you’ve got it now. I knew you could figure it out if I gave you enough clues.” He kept his face almost straight.

Sarah looked severe. “If you get smart with me I’ll tell your son that you’re digging for buried treasure. He’s never been entirely sure you were sane anyway.”

“Completely untrue. He knows that I am a pillar of wisdom and a fount of knowledge.” Johner’s face was unbearably smug.

Sarah choked. “Yeah, right. Yeah, I’ll tell him you said that.” She got up from the table and began to pick up the dishes. “Well, Johner, I think it’s a good idea. It’ll keep you out of trouble doing something relatively harmless.”

He looked up at her. “Do you? Do you think it’s a good idea?” His face was serious.

She reached over and touched his cheek. “Of course. If you want to grow tomatoes, you’ll grow tomatoes. I’ll bet they’ll be damn good ones, too.”

“Thanks. I don’t want to do anything without you behind me.” He paused, and then went into his act again. Heavy sigh. “I’m turning into such a wimp.”

“Yeah. Right. You were such a wimp last night. I think we’re going to have to get a new bed, you’ve worn this one out.”

He shrugged. “Things wear out. I’m not responsible for the inadequate foresight of the bed manufacturer.” A look of satisfied complacency crossed his face. “Maybe they can’t be blamed at that. Who would expect a performer like me? It’s almost beyond belief!”

“There is something about you that’s beyond belief, that’s for sure. Your ego.”

He grinned, put his dishes down by the sink, and turned to the door. “When you’re done, you could join me on the terrace.”

“Oh my God, now it’s a terrace. Just exactly what kind of plans do you have?”

“When it’s dark, and I have to wait for the sun to come up again to finish my work, I’ll come in and tell you.”

She did her best to look concerned. “You’re planning to get up with the sun? Johner, this is beginning to smell of obsession!”

He grinned. "Just a plan, that's all." And was out the door.

Chapter 45

The Terrace

"---and then over here, there'll be a table and chairs, and here's where the barbeque will sit." Johner beamed as he finished the sentence.

Sarah sat silently for a moment. "I know you're expecting me to make fun of this idea, but you know, Johner, I think it's a good plan." She looked around the yard speculatively. "How do you feel about taking down the fence between our yard and John's?"

"I don't think...they need to feel like they've got a place of their own. But how about a gate?"

"Yeah, that's perfect. They'll like that, I'm sure. Now that I think about it, why didn't we put in a gate long ago? It'd only be step to their house that way. Not that any of us spend much time at home, but when we are---yes, a gate is the way to go."

Johner's plan was extensive. A large, paved, trellis covered lounging area. ("Since when do we have time to lounge?") A barbeque setup with equipment enough for Johner's most ambitious meals. A table that would seat eight, or ten at a pinch. ("You planning a lot of entertaining, Johner?") A vegetable garden that Sarah thought could feed a family of six comfortably. And a flower garden.

"Flowers? *Flowers?*"

Johner seemed a little uncomfortable. "Well," he said, "I found this picture in a magazine..."

Sara looked at his face for a moment, and one eyebrow rose. "And which magazine would that be, Johner?"

"...Just a magazine. This picture..."

"Johner. Which magazine?"

"That's not the point."

"Jo-o-hner..."

"Well... *Woman's Day*. But that's not the point... Connor! Connor, stop it! Pay attention now... Damn it! Connor! Oh...*fuck!*" He started to laugh too. "It was on the cover! Damn it, I just walked up to the checkout counter and there it was!"

By this time Connor had tears running down her face. When she had calmed enough to talk she asked: "Did you buy it?"

Now he really looked sheepish. "Well, it had some more pictures inside. Now what's so damn funny about that? Oh, for Chrissakes Connor, get a hold of yourself!"

She shook her head wordlessly, but in a moment she was able to talk again. "Where did you hide it?"

He grinned. "Under my socks."

She held her stomach and howled.

John and Carlie were all for it. "Great idea, Johner." John was full of enthusiasm. "What can I do? Where shall we start? You know, we could put in a walk through to our place..."

"A gate."

"Yeah! Perfect! A gate!"

Johner had little woodworking experience, but he had built a lot of ship's hardware out of metal, and as he said, "It's the same idea, just not as strong." John had no experience at all, but he made up for it with enthusiasm.

The latticework pergola went up quickly, thanks in large part to directions in Woman's Day, a fact which Johner was not allowed to forget. The floor was laid with big ceramic tiles, done also by the book, this time a library book to which Sarah could not take exception.

Bougainvillea was planted on trellises in the sun, but Johner reserved the latticed pergola for a grape vine. Sarah knew immediately what that portended. *Oh-oh. I see wine-making in the not too distant future.* When she mentioned this possibility to Johner, she got a large satisfied grin in return.

All of this construction necessitated the use of many power tools, which of course made a total reorganization of the garage imperative. "A place for everything, and everything in its place." And Johner had everything; new power tools appeared daily. "How did we ever get along without a router?" he asked, looking down at it fondly.

"I can't imagine." Sarah looked fondly, not at the router, but at her domestic partner. "You really eat this stuff up, don't you?"

He looked up. "Yeah. I do."

While the planning and building was going on, Johner was also working at getting his garden started. "Soil preparation, that's the key!" was heard until Sarah was ready to tattoo it on his forehead.

In three weekends the garden was planted, complete with stretched string and row markers. "Back-breaking" was the word Johner used when he begged for a back rub. "It was all back-breaking stoop labor. I suffered."

"Right." said Connor. "Maybe on the first weekend, but after you discovered that there was such a thing as a tiller, I didn't see much sweat."

Johner was hurt. "All that bending over, planting seeds? Doesn't that count at all?"

"OK, babe, lay down. You'll get your back rub, but I'll expect a little something in return." Her smile suggested that "something" might be sexual favors.

"Babe, it'll be my pleasure."

But he really was tired, and when she was through rubbing his back he was sound asleep.

Sarah climbed gently off the bed, not to wake him. "Sweet dreams, sweetheart," she said softly, as she kissed the side of his face and pulled the blanket over him. "Sweet dreams."

Vice Presidents

On the Sunday night when the bulk of the hard manual work was finished, they collapsed into

bed exhausted. As she lay preparing to go to sleep, Sarah began to wonder about Johner's long-range plans. She raised herself up on her elbow, and turned on her light.

"What?" Johner turned over grumpily to face her. "What's up?"

"Don't be bad tempered, I need to talk about something, or I'll never go to sleep."

He yawned and stretched. "Ok, I'm awake now, shoot."

"Johner, when do you expect to enjoy this Roman bath of a back yard that we're building? We have to break our necks just to get a weekend free to work on it." She sat up on an elbow to look down at him. "What's your plan? I know that you haven't told me everything. Come clean!"

Johner looked sheepish. "Well, I'm just planning for the future, Connor." His demeanor slid from sheepish to sly. "You know I'm not getting any younger, and I thought..."

"Stop! Stop right there. If you're going to try to tell me that you're thinking about retiring, I not only won't believe it, I'll be mad that you suggested it! You're not old enough to retire, so don't try to feed me any guff like that!"

There was a silence. Then Johner said, "I'm thinking about retiring." He looked up at her. "Are you really gonna be mad?"

"I'm too stunned to be mad. What the hell is...? OK, start from the beginning. Fill me in on what's going through that thick skull of yours."

Johner sat up. "I thought you might not like this. I've been trying to figure out some was to say it without...well, saying it." He grinned at her.

"Hah! Good luck"

When he was silent for a moment, Sarah said, "Well?" She was impatient.

"Jeez! Give me a minute, willya? I'm still trying to figure out how to slip it by you."

"Too late. Just say it, Johner!" She smiled while she said it; she couldn't stay mad at him.

He looked down at his hands. "...Well...I think we work too hard."

"This'll surprise you. So do I."

His head came up. "Yeah, it does surprise me! You never complain anymore, since we've got Carly working alongside us."

"Well, it's not unbearable any more, but...I'd like to have more time...well, time with you." She was a little bit hesitant.

He looked up at her from under his brows. "So...I'm still irresistible, huh? I knew it."

"Damn it, Johner, I knew you'd say that! I knew I shouldn't admit it!" She poked his middle, hard.

"Oof!! God, Connor, remember that I'm getting old! I'm easily damaged!" His grin belied his words. Then he sobered. "But I know what you mean, about time together. It's exactly what I'm thinking. We don't seem to spend much time together any more, and I miss it, Connor. Weekends are good, but during the week we fall into bed right after supper, and it's lights out by ten or ten thirty." He grinned again. "I'm getting old, but not old enough yet that I only want sex on weekends!"

"Well, we're tired. We work hard."

"Exactly what I'm talking about. We work *too* hard." He paused for a moment. "It's not as though there was any need for money. The businesses are a whole herd of cash cows. I'm feeling guilty about it, but if I give one more raise all around, the staff's going to be sure I'm

nuts. They already make thirty percent more than anyone else in the field.

“Connor, how do you feel about taking in some of the senior people as partners? We could call ’em vice presidents, or something, I dunno, but we could give them a share of the profits that way. And they’ll feel more responsible for the business. There are a couple of people that I wouldn’t mind handing the business over to right now, if we had to. If we take ’em into the management now, we can be getting them ready to take over. We could remain in control somehow, John will know how to set it up, but the day to day running of the business could be in Larry Martin’s, and/or Johnny Fredericks’ hands. Whatddaya think?”

Connor didn’t answer for a minute; she just sat staring at nothing. Then she said. “Not John Fredericks. Sandy Howe.”

“What’s wrong with Johnny?”

“He cares too much about what other people think of him. He’s a good guy, honest as the day is long, but I don’t think he could stand up to the staff. They’re a pretty powerful bunch.”

“Hm...I think you’re right. And Sandy was my next up.”

“Good. That’s decided.” She looked up at him. “I’m for it. It’s a good idea.”

Announcements

Johner sat back and looked around the table. “Now this is what I call a barbeque!” Eight people sat at the table, busily consuming steak, roasted potatoes, and spinach salad; they responded with various nods, grunts, and fork waving.

Sarah looked up from her plate and grinned. “Johner, this is not the time to make speeches; let people eat!”

He grinned back. “You’re right as usual.” He sighed, eyes turned to heaven. “I’m hen pecked, there’s not a doubt of it.”

Call hooted. “You’re not civilized enough to be henpecked!”

John looked up from his steak, a sly grin forming. “I like having Call around. She calls a spade a spade.”

“Look at this! I provide this marvelous meal by the sweat of my brow, and you’re all in league against me!” Johner waved a piece of garlic bread. “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth is an ungrateful bunch.”

“Well, you got one thing right, Johner, this is a marvelous meal.” Carlie smiled sunnily at him. “And I call it pretty civilized when you quote Shakespeare...even if you didn’t quote it right.” Her smile widened into a saucy grin.

“You too, Carlie. Ah, you’re all against me.”

“Uh-uh. We’re not against you. We just like to watch you squirm.” Jack spoke around a mouthful of steak. “Now are you going to shut up and let us enjoy what is undoubtedly a marvelous meal, much as it pains me to admit it. Pass the bread, please, Heather.”

Heather complied with the request, then ventured a comment of her own. “I think you’re civilized, Johner. Well...most of the time.”

This raised a general laugh. “You might as well give up, Johner. If Heather can see something wrong, there’s no hope at all.” Sarah reached over and patted his cheek. “Eat your dinner.”

END