

Innocent 0: Geri

Prequel to the League of Worldly Wise Innocents Series

L. A. Zoe

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Chapter 1

At the Ice Cream Shoppe

Anxious to return to her dorm room to get in a solid block of studying before dinner, Simone Beverly was rushing across Cromwell's College of Fine Arts Quad when the excited solemn opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony rang out:

De de de dum.

She groaned. What now?

Morning's rainwater still dripped from the leaves of the oak and maple trees around her, glowing green thanks to spring and the deluge that just ended while she sat in class listening to Professor Williams lecture on Modern Art in his creaky voice.

Picasso would have eaten Professor Williams for lunch.

Simone pulled out her cellphone and read the text:

Mt i scrm shppe 3

V

Simone thumbed back, "k," and sighed. So much for studying before dinner.

But she couldn't refuse. Her friend Veronica Orlando hadn't seemed herself lately. Hadn't been the same off and on for a month or so.

But Veronica was the kind of person who liked to smile all the time, making things look fine even when they weren't.

Ever since she noticed her friend's problem, Simone offered to help, if only to provide a comfortable shoulder to cry upon. But Veronica shrugged off her overtures.

If Veronica was finally ready to talk, Simone would be there for her. The books could wait. Simone was caught up in all her classes, and looked to end her senior year with a GPA just a notch below 4.0.

She also didn't need an excuse to eat a few scoops of Yummy Butterscotch ice cream.

Always punctual, Veronica arrived right on time, Simone just behind her.

The Ice Cream Shoppe's bright, loud pinks and oranges felt cheerfully childish despite the gloomy gray clouds hanging over their heads threatening yet another tropical downpour before nightfall.

Veronica was the woman Barbie Doll wanted to be when she finished growing up. Beautiful and sexy. Lustrous long silver-blond hair. An ideally proportioned movie star body just enough bigger than Simone's smaller figure to make her jealous. Eyes blue as the water lapping a Pacific Ocean beach cove.

With her cultured voice, precise diction, and impeccable manners, she gave the impression of coming from a background of Old Money. Perhaps the Rockefellers. Or, even better, from a family going back to France's l'ancien regime.

Even though her family lived in a tiny clapboard house in an obscure white working class ghetto in South Cromwell.

Veronica looked as elegant as a Land's End catalog in khaki slacks, an orange top, and a wool jacket.

She wore just enough makeup to look nice on a day more suited to building an ark.

She leaned back in her seat, and sighed. "Don't ever take Modern French Lit. Jean Paul Sartre is just as tedious in his original language as he is in English."

Simone, knowing her friend didn't call her there to discuss existentialism, didn't reply.

They ordered, Veronica getting her usual scoops of Chocolate Cookie and Mint.

Simone wore comfortable clothes for the dreary day. Old blue jeans, a gray U.S. Navy sweatshirt, and a light blue windbreaker. With just a touch of makeup, next to Veronica she always felt like an amateur landscape beside a painting by Maxfield Parrish.

She enjoyed the cold, sweet taste of the treat despite the inappropriate weather. The many canisters of ice cream in the freezer display case, the gallons of chocolate and soda syrups, and the sugar confections and toppings threatened to force their calories into her body's supply of stored fat around her thighs and hips just from osmosis.

Just like Veronica to insist on a spring activity whether or not the world cooperated.

"Well," Veronica said at least, putting down her spoon in the bowl. "I guess I should get started. I know you're busy."

"Only the French Impressionists," Simone said. "It's lucky for me paintings look the same in every language. Are you all right? You've seemed worried lately."

"I'm concerned about my sister," Veronica said. "She's trapped herself. Like a wild canary in a cage."

Chapter 2

A TV Night

The stop light turned green.

As Rend accelerated, Geri Orlando fell back against the seat back, but tried to relax. She double checked her shoulder harness. It was all right.

Everything was all right. Really.

"2005 Ford Mustang," Rend said with pride in his voice. "Got her for cheap over a year ago because she'd been in two accidents. Put a lot of work into her, and now she's sweet as silky honey. Though she still shimmies at ninety."

"That sounds awful fast," Geri said. Don't go that high. Please.

"Aw, don't you worry about anything," Rend said, patting her knee with one hand while not keeping his eyes off the street. Thank goodness.

Rend wore old blue jeans. Clean except for the grease spots on one leg. And the rear left pocket had been half-ripped away, so it just hung loose. A blue chambray workshirt. Generic, dirty tennies.

Rend looked dressed to work on cars, though his actual job was crew member at McDonald's, where Geri met him a few weeks ago.

A cheap men's cologne emanated from his face, telling Geri he tried hard to impress her.

They'd had a few quickie meetings for coffee and burgers, and then he asked her out for that night.

Saturday night chilling at his crib.

Just kicking.

Geri wore her nicest pair of green apple slacks and a lightweight cotton white blouse under the heavy wool sweater she counted on to keep her warm.

Before Rend picked her up, she spent lots of time putting her makeup on, long enough to make certain her face looked attractive.

But, as always, she felt conspicuously big. Not fat or obese. Not Rubenesque. Not full-figured. Just weight proportional to height, she called it.

Tall for a woman, with a bone structure to match. And lean layers of taut, strong, and muscular flesh over those bones. Flesh which curved in the right places without sagging.

She had a big ass, though, as near as she could tell from trying to see herself from the rear in mirrors, it was nicely rounded and firm.

Her breasts, though nothing to make a swimsuit model jealous, had been targets for the wandering hands of boys for as long as Geri could remember.

Her younger sister Veronica assured she looked fine, but what did Veronica know? She hung out with her snooty college friends at that school for country club bitches. Women born with it all. Everything Geri didn't have, but wanted.

Polished good looks, a runway model's figure, a wealthy daddy to spoil them.

"See?" Rend said as he pulled into the driveway of a small brown wooden house not much different from the one where Geri lived with her mother. "No other cars around. Pop's left already. Probably drinking with his buddies. He'll spend the night with his girlfriend. Unless he starts a fight and winds up in jail."

Maybe Geri ought to be nervous about going into the house alone with Rend, but she trusted him. He just didn't give off a dangerous, bad news vibe.

And from what he told her about his father, the older man wouldn't be any protection against his son even if he were present. Maybe more of a threat.

Loud, out-of-control drunks made Geri nervous, especially if they also took meth and smoked hash.

Geri once met a woman at a party who claimed she went with a guy her age to his house, all they did was watch TV, and she fell asleep during a movie. She woke up to some guy screwing her, and the rapist turned out to be the young dude's father.

How messed up was that?

She wasn't certain how fiercely she intended to defend her virginity, but she certainly didn't want an old man pulling her pants down while she was sleeping.

Thinking about her virginity just made Geri's mind swirl with confusion.

Her mother and Father Perot at Mary Magdalene wanted her to remain a good woman, not going All the Way until she got married.

Boys blamed her for their "blue balls" -- although she jerked or sucked off the ones who liked -- and called her a cocktease.

Her friends laughed at her, acted as though sexual intercourse was some secret sexual superpleasure she was too chickenshit to learn about. Although none of them seemed to have things so great they could afford to look down their nose at Geri.

Just her opinion.

Veronica remained a virgin, too. Why? Not because she didn't lack for offers, that was for sure.

Geri left the car, and stretched. Daylight savings time wasn't over until next week, so the sun still shone a thick yellow light over the world.

The house would look nicer with flowers in the yard, but what could you expect from two guys living together? Flowers? How about crotchet, doilies, and potpourri?

Geri just hoped the inside wouldn't smell worse than a garbage dump.

Having a boyfriend was most important. That's what all her girlfriends obviously decided. Half of them lived with him. Others didn't. But they all had sex with the dudes.

According to them, that's what made the guys their boyfriends. Otherwise, the girl'd be like a whore, jumping into the sack just because. Like the women Geri heard about who hung around inside bars wanting guys to take them home.

Not a boyfriend, though Geri heard of cases of them turning into boyfriends, but a cock with a life-support system to ease the burning hunger driving them crazy.

Geri sighed. She was so slow about things. Almost backward. It just didn't matter that much to her, yet she also didn't want to let just any old dude have her first time.

Shouldn't it mean something? Not angels singing in Heaven, not eternal death till us part marriage, but something more than a sweaty boy panting and drooling.

Of course, protecting that thin slice of flesh between her legs wasn't as important as making sure she didn't get pregnant. She didn't need or want a baby. She was still one herself, living with her mother, unsure how she was going to make a living when none of the jobs she'd tried had worked out.

She was almost ready to enroll in the dog grooming school. That looked like a solid career. Lots of people had dogs and cats, and many took better care of them than they did their children.

Geri always loved cats and dogs, and had gift for getting along with them. Growing up, wherever her family lived, she met the neighborhood pets and animals before she made friends with the new little boys and girls.

She could hardly imagine a profession more fun and rewarding than grooming people's pets, making them sharp and sleek, at their best despite the way some people neglected them.

Except to be an actual veterinarian. Not just finding sores and making suggestions to the owners how to improve their pets' health, which dog groomers did, but to heal the sick and comfort the wounded.

But that was beyond her dreams. Four years of college, followed by four years of veterinary school, followed by a year-long internship, maybe followed by two to five more years to qualify for a specialist residency.

Geri sighed. She just couldn't imagine taking so many classes even if she could afford them, which she couldn't. And hard classes, too -- biology and organic chemistry. Real science. Real math.

Not the sissy "fine arts" classes Veronica took at that wimpy college of hers.

And Veronica struggled hard to complete her homework while working as a waitress.

The inside of Rend's house smelled like a dumpster in the alley. Blue-green scum grew on the surface of pans filled with water to soak before washing, and placed the kitchen counter. Stacks of dirty plates and bowls filled the sink.

A large plastic bag sat on the floor in the corner, overflowing with wrappings from loaves of bread and ham sandwich meat. An emptied can of peaches sat on the floor beside it, upside down. A pool of syrup congealed beside it.

Geri's stomach jumped, flopped over. "Come on," she said when Rend hesitated. "I don't want a tour of the refrigerator."

She could guess what might be in there, but didn't want to see -- or smell -- it.

Rend smiled. "That bad, hey? I guess it is. I just get used to it."

Geri fought the urge to wrap an apron around her waist, and begin cleaning.

Did Rend really expect that? On her first trip to his house?

If so, forget it. She wasn't anybody's free maid. She cleaned up behind Mom, but that was Mom -- and Geri's house where she lived too, so that was different.

It'd take her all night to bring that kitchen up to her standards of cleanliness.

How long would it remain that way?

Maybe until breakfast. Rend and his father would leave dirty dishes in the sink, and Geri would have to kill them both. A jury of housewives would rule it justifiable homicide.

The living room consisted of several dumpy old chairs and a long, brownish sofa all clustered around a large screen TV.

She hated to think what sins of excess the mottled brown and black carpeting might be hiding. No matter what happened later that evening, she would wear her sandals when walking on the floor.

A small brown wooden table held several remote controls. Rend picked one up, and the TV screen flashed into life with a pop of roaring sound.

Football players, some in red and gold uniforms, others wearing orange and white, stood around the field while officials argued, fans waved banners, and cheerleaders bounced around.

"Saturday night football," Rend said. "Iowa State against Oklahoma State. Ought to be killer."

"Sure," Geri said.

"Have a seat," Rend said.

Smiling, Geri sat against the armrest of the sofa.

"We can watch a movie later," Rend said. "I know you might want something besides sports."

"Girls can like sports too," Geri said. She didn't care who won or lost, and understood only the basics of baseball and football, but after watching a game for a while, she enjoyed the drama, except when one team beat another so badly it was boring.

Rend sat beside her, and she shivered with the electricity he gave off. He wasn't trying to force himself into her space. He just sat close enough, in a relaxed way, for their forearms to brush against each other. He had a thick mat of black arm hair.

"Thing is, after this game's over, it's all late-night ESPN," Rend said. "Soccer games in Spain or college swimming, unimportant stuff like that."

"A movie's fine," Geri said.

She felt surprisingly comfortable there with Rend -- comfort, and more.

A kind of discomfort that was . . . exciting.

Rend gave off a kind of energy that made Geri's blood boil and swirl, generating warm waves of pulsations between her thighs. Making her welcome the idea of giving herself to Rend, whether that night or later.

He had sheer physical presence. Just there -- all there -- as bones and sinews and vital organs and muscles.

"Do you lift weights?" Geri asked him.

"How'd you know?" he asked, eyes still on the football games, which had resumed on the TV screen.

"It's the way you move."

Pleased, he raised an arm and flexed a bicep. Joking, but still showing off power. "Yeah, I got barbells and weights in the basement. Don't use them as much as when I was in high school, and I was never one of those big hotshots, and I never took steroids so I didn't balloon up, but, yeah."

"I thought so. You just seem bigger than your size."

"I'm a hard-gainer," Rend said. "That means it's hard for me to put on more muscle, now I'm full-grown. That's all right, I never thought I could compete with Arnold, you know? It just helps me feel good. I could show off my six-pack abs," he said, still joking, rubbing his tummy over his t-shirt.

Geri kept her facial expression nearly blank, with just a good-humored smile. She knew better than to give away too much, too soon. This early in the evening.

But she wanted to see those rippling muscles of his running from the bottom of his rib cage down to . . . wherever they led.

Blue-green veins popped out of his forearms, so for sure he couldn't have much flab covering his abdomen.

What would strong, powerful ridges feel like? Geri longed to run her hand down his abs, savoring their strength, their power. His fingers on her smooth, ample but smooth flesh could claim every ounce of her for his pleasure.

Twisting and rippling all the way, a low-pitched, tingly hum snaked from her inner thighs up to the pit of her stomach.

Geri pursed her lips, struggling to keep a broad smile off her face.

It was going to be a long, but good, night.

She'd already stopped smelling the dirt. The messiness just proved Rend's masculinity.

And what Geri wanted -- needed -- most that night was a real man.

Chapter 3

On the Sofa

The red and gold uniforms and the white and orange uniforms pushed each other back and forth along the football field, brightly lit by overhead lights.

The announcer voices intoned a lot of facts and stories as they described the action.

Players ran around. Sometimes the ball flew through the air where Geri could see it. Sometimes she had no idea who had it, and just watched the patterns of the uniforms surging against each other. Eventually the camera focused on the pigskin's final resting place.

The score remained low, both sides even.

Sometimes cute cheerleaders filled the screen, sometimes fans in the stadium dressed in weird costumes.

"The bookies put Oklahoma State ahead by seven," Rend said. "Looks like Iowa State bettors are going to win."

"What do you mean?" Geri asked.

"Seven's the line," Rend said. "Which is pretty close."

Geri's confusion must have shown on her face.

"The line. You know, what bookies use to keep betting even."

"You know how bookies work?" Geri said, not disguising her amazement and admiration. She realized people used bookies to bet on sports events, but she understood the process even less than she did the sports and games themselves. It was all a totally different world to her.

Rend turned to her, proud of his new role as her teacher. "Look, two teams play, one has to win, right?"

Geri nodded. She understood winning and losing.

"The other loses. Usually the worse one, but nothing's for sure, or it wouldn't be any fun. There's always surprises. So, the bookies, they figure out the line. They think Oklahoma State's going to win by only seven points. So, if Oklahoma State can't do that, it's the same as Iowa State winning, for bets."

"You lost me," Geri said.

"Say Oklahoma State wins by four points. That's less than seven, so they did worse than they should have. But if they win by more than seven points, they do better, and so for bettors, they're the winners of the game."

Geri understood a little bit. "They can lose even if they win?"

"Just for bookies paying off the sports bettors. Look, say a team that's stomped ten teams this seasons goes against a team hasn't won even one game yet. Everybody in their right mind wants to bet on the first team, including the bookies. Without a line, there'd be no action, because the bookies wouldn't take it. They're not in business to lose money. So, they say, the first team is so good they ought to win by thirty points. They don't, it's like they slacked off or the second team rose up to the challenge, so the bookies'll pay off the second team bettors instead."

"That's amazing, you know all that," Geri said, honestly respecting that. She didn't care who won or lose, so she certainly wouldn't risk betting any of her hard-earned money, no matter what the line was.

"You can make a lot of money betting on sports," Rend said. "If you know what you're doing. But it's tough to keep track of everything going on. Not just the games, that's the easy part, but with the teams. The players. And having enough money to put down. That's the really tough part when you're working for Mickey D's for trash cash."

He stood up. "I'm getting hungry. I've got pizza in the freezer and beer in the fridge."

Only a frozen pizza with plastic coins of pepperoni in bland cheese over unspiced tomato sauce on a crisp, blackened crust -- and Geri enjoyed eating several slices, washing it down with cold Coors.

Veronica told Geri some of the guys she went out with at the Cromwell College of Fine Arts drank wine on their dates.

Wine.

What kind of man drank wine? A Frenchman, all right. French people drank lots of wine. But an American dude? Not hardly.

Real men drank beer when relaxing. Harder stuff if they seriously wanted to get drunk fast.

Rend ate half the large pizza, politely leaving her the other half, although Geri could finish only two slices of it. So the remaining two slices got cold on the aluminum foil on the wood table.

The football game ended.

Rend flipped through the channels until he found one where the movie Sin City had just begun.

Geri had never watched it, but he assured her it was a terrific crime flick. It sounded interesting, though she preferred love stories.

Geri let her last can of Coors just sit on the table beside the pizza slices getting cold, but Rend kept drinking.

Sipping steadily. Not getting drunk, just slowly stewed.

To his credit, he always stood up and got his own new beers. When he noticed her falling behind, shaking her nearly-full can of warm beer, he rolled his eyes, and told her to go get a new one for herself whenever she liked.

When she just kept watching the movie, he brought her a new can of cold brew when he got another for himself.

She didn't get drunk either, but enough alcohol built up in her veins and arteries to relax her, making her feel silly and giggly, though not uncontrolled enough to actually act like a little kid while watching TV with Rend.

Eventually she realized the balance between light and darkness had shifted, so she and Rend huddled together on the sofa in front of the TV as though around an ancient campfire keeping away the terrors of the night just beyond the ring of light it cast.

Ridiculous, of course. But it meant Rend must have turned off all the ground floor lights on his last trip to the fridge.

And all right, because, Geri realized with the clarity of having downed over four beers in the past few hours, she wanted a boyfriend.

And was auditioning Rend for the part. Even as he probably thought he was just trying to get into her pants.

She wanted to grow up. She wanted to get away from her mother. She wanted her own money. That's why she needed to go to dog grooming school, so she would have her own career, not just another minimum wage job she could lose when the economy went downhill again or a boss didn't like her.

And having a boyfriend, even if she remained living with her mother -- and she couldn't see herself moving to that crummy shack to live with Rend and his father -- meant independence.

Something close to freedom. Maybe, if everything worked out, she and Rend could rent their own little place. A tiny studio apartment in a decent neighborhood not terrorized by crack gangs.

Why not? Other couples managed.

It didn't mean she had to love Rend or he had to love her.

Love could die. Mom taught her that when she divorced Dad so many years ago.

Dad still hadn't recovered. Geri hated to visit him, because he looked at her as though she were Mom, ready to love him as she did when they were Geri's age.

Pitiful.

If he ever saw Mom as she looked now, he might be glad for the divorce. He didn't let himself realize how much she had changed -- and not for the better.

And not just because she was older. That was inevitable. Some people grew older and looked better, more distinguished, more comfortable with themselves. Full of depth and the wisdom they learned through the years.

Mom just looked more and more like a classical witch. Ugly and evil.

She wasn't, not really.

But neither of Geri's parents convinced her she needed or wanted true love.

Feeling hidden by the darkness as though watching a movie in a theater, even though the only other person present sat right beside her, Geri enjoyed that squishy-warm cushioned feeling of being hidden -- secret and safe -- from the world.

As though anything she and Rend did wouldn't count. It'd be separate and complete. Not a part of the rest of her life.

Mom wouldn't know or care.

Veronica always cared, but wouldn't know. Ever.

Just sitting beside her with one arm draped over shoulders, the others holding a can of Coors, Rend gave off supermasculine, stud-like vibes that had Geri quivering below the waist.

Cheap cologne or not, his scent made Geri think of the essence of bull testicles.

Only her old fashioned upbringing to be a good girl kept Geri from kneeling across his lap, and unbuckling the belt holding those jeans.

What seemed strange -- and yet not -- was Rend had this extraordinary effect on Geri despite not doing anything except holding her as he watched TV.

He just did so with so much power and self-confidence. No doubt in his manhood. No doubt he just assumed Geri would fall on her back for him when he was ready to get down to it.

Until then, he relaxed and enjoyed the movie -- by then, an interminable action epic with periodic gunfights and karate punch-outs that made no sense to Geri. It seemed to have no real plot. She knew the good guys from the bad guys only from the

traditional cues. The good guys looked determined. The bad guys sneered a lot, when they didn't laugh sadistically at the prospect of torturing a helpless victim.

Something about drugs and a scientist's beautiful young daughter.

Nothing Rend could have done to show off his male beauty could have aroused Geri so much as his simple assumption of his desirability. If he'd flexed his arms then, showed off the full stallion tattoo on his back -- she could see a little bit creeping up the back of his neck -- or even crunched his abs, she might have laughed at him.

Like he was a little boy trying to attract her eye by swinging from a jungle gym or throwing snowballs at her.

By the time Rend's arm around her shoulder pulled her closer so his hot hand could feel her side, Geri's slacks felt unbearably small and tight.

Gently, she pushed herself up and away. "Where's your bathroom?" she asked.

He pointed. "Down that hall to your left."

The darkness vibrated liquidly. Maybe she drank more beer than she realized. Warmth burned her face.

Once in the john, the combination of dirt and old bathroom smells made her gag. It reminded her of the rest room in an old gas station, the kind you found in the back, surrounded by discarded oil filters, greasy bolts, and broken glass. And once inside, you discovered it didn't have a latch to hold the door shut and locked.

Well, not that bad. At least half a roll of white toilet tissue sat on the top of the toilet tank -- so coarse you could almost see splinters sticking out of the paper. Geri found a nearly full can of blue-green cleansing powder in a wood cabinet beneath the sink.

She dampened a thick wad of the tissue, sprinkled cleanser on it, dropped the toilet seat, and scrubbed it. Then rinsed and dried it as well as she could.

Only then did she dare unbuckle her belt.

Sitting with her pants around her ankles, Geri let loose with a jet stream that surprised her. So did the deep gurgling sound just below her groin.

Doubts again bothered her.

Did she really want a man whose house threatened her with germs?

Geri didn't think of herself as overly fastidious, but, growing up with only Mom and Veronica, she realized she learned to take for granted a lot more than she realized. A lot of cleanliness Rend and his father didn't bother with.

But so what?

That just showed Rend was a man, and that's what she wanted.

He kept himself personally clean.

That's what counted.

Rend's physical presence made Geri's heart thump on pattering rabbit feet.

Not his personality, though he was a nice guy.

Not his intellect, though he was smart.

Not his jokes, though they made Geri laugh.

Somehow, his skin projected an aura of sensuality that surrounded him like light around an angel.

Though, of course, it was purely a physical energy, not spiritual.

Finished, she pulled her slacks back up, then washed her hands with the sliver of soap. She wished she had a hand sanitizer. Must start carrying a bottle in her purse.

In the living room, no sound came out of the TV's speakers even though fierce-looking men still fired submachine guns at each other on the screen, so light flickered across Rend's face.

In the warmth, Geri removed her sweater.

Back beside Rend, Geri put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm not promising anything, but -- just in case -- I want to make sure you have condoms."

Rend grinned, reached into a front pocket of his jeans, pulled out two purple plastic foil packs, and tossed them onto the coffee table so they landed between her last can of beer and the two uneaten slices of pizza.

They didn't look like much to Geri, but what did she know?

Chapter 4

Geri's First Time

Rend's mouth took Geri's with the same slow, insolent confidence and ease.

Like walking across the street against the light, but still striding loose and cool, too unconcerned to pay attention to the cars, knowing they wouldn't run him over.

Not quite smart ass. The kid in high school who knew how to irritate the teachers just short of getting suspended.

Co-workers Geri met on various jobs who could push and defy bosses without getting written up or fired for insubordination.

Knowing the line, then playing the game up to it.

Ignoring Geri's impatient chest-keening as just pointless noise.

Playing her slow and steady, not letting her loose, not betraying his own need.

Geri had dated guys who wanted their mouth on hers as soon as they were alone. Their hands squeezing her boobs. Their groins pressing against hers. If she allowed them, they'd have torn off her panties and shoved themselves inside within thirty seconds.

When she didn't let them, they creamed in their shorts.

Rend betrayed no such impatience or impulsiveness.

He took her with the slow patience of an old yogi. The skill of a concert violinist playing Carnegie Hall. The deliberate pace of a cross-country skier across flat ground.

Their heads bobbed back and forth like a metronome while their tongues circled and collided.

Sharing warm wetness.

His tongue coated with beer fizz and mindless lust. One arm holding her pressed close and tight to his chest while the other hand teased her.

Gripping her shoulder. Running fingernails down her bare forearms, twirling the light hairs growing there, pushing his fingers in the wet heat between her arms and ribs covered with firm cushy flesh.

In his long, slow buildup, Rend kept the pressure going up. Slowly, ever so slightly, but always changing, ever-expanding.

Gradually, the caresses of his fingertips up and down her back, up and down her side, sliding to her hip, became faster, stronger, more rhythmic.

Geri's breathing came faster, more ragged. Her heart felt like an open hole in the middle of her chest.

Her brain went spacey, so she stopped thinking, just let herself flow with the feelings and sensations. Everything magnified by the beer still inside her blood.

Spinning like a ballerina going off-balance like a top.

Her body's inner core pulled at Geri's heart, pulling her down like Earth's gravity, deep into herself, her bottom, her plain, thick self.

Away from the lightweight, thin prissy feelings of the house where she lived with Mom and Veronica. Three women. Mom still spoke of her monthly curse. Yet menopause would make her feel even worse. Veronica cared only for her ambition, nothing for the needs of her physical body.

As Rend used the raw needs of Geri's physical body to pull her to him like a fisher reeling in a giant deep-sea tuna.

Slowly, giving her slack as she swam away from him, but gradually tightening the hook in her mouth, drawing her closer to the boat -- and him.

Rend's mouth on Geri's caressed and massaged her soul in a place deeper she ever imagined she'd go with a boy -- and she still had her clothes on.

Geri held on to Rend's back like a drowning woman clutching the heavy rock dragging her down deeper into the water, desperate for the promised oblivion.

Not the freedom of death, but the overwhelming passion.

No soft flab covered Rend's backbone and ribs, just thick strands of muscle.

Geri couldn't resist.

She moved her one hand down to the side of his waist, slid it under his t-shirt, and allowed herself the luxury of caressing Rend's taut tissues. The powerful sinews molding him into an Adonis. One of the Greek statues of gods in Veronica's fine arts textbook.

Although the original men who modeled for the sculptures had been dead thousands of years, their divine physiques lived on in iron, marble, and bronze.

Mouth still attached to Rend's, Geri gasped with awe and volcanic desire.

Her fingertips explored Rend's chiseled flesh. No statue, he, but bone and blood and living heat as drawn to her heartbeat as she to his.

The small sounds of the late-night house seemed far away. The roar of the refrigerator's motor, the creak of boards as she and Rend shifted their weight on the ancient sofa, and the bass-boom of rap or the ragged thrust of a hotrod engine from the occasional passing cars.

They surrounded her skull, circling, heard but outside her mind.

The blue, yellow, and red lights flickering from the TV screen spattered against her eyes with meaningless but fast-moving shapes.

Annoying in a way, because Geri craved darkness -- visually as well as sexually. But entertaining too.

She pressed her palm to his chest, and rubbed, taking comfort and assurance from the press of her fingers against him.

She found the tiny nub of his nipple, tweaked it.

Taken by surprise, Rend pulled his mouth away a fraction of an inch.

"You're a hot bitch, aren't you?" he said in a hoarse, husky voice.

"Yes." Out of breath.

"You act high and mighty, but I knew it. Get you alone and you want it just as bad as every other slut."

"Yes."

"Oh you shameless whore, I'm going to make you beg for it."

Rend's crude words raised Geri's temperature ten degrees, making everything a fever dream. Intense and withering. She could only nod in reply.

Rend wouldn't stop. "Do you want to see me without my shirt on?"

"Yes," Geri said.

"Yes? That's all? Usually I leave it on to fuck. You want to see my eight-pack abs, you've got to try harder than that."

So obnoxiously arrogant -- and sexy.

Geri could play too. She clutched at his t-shirt. "Show me your muscles," she said in a demanding voice. "Now!"

He grinned. "Jesus, what a bitch you are." Slowly, putting on a show of teasing her like a stripper in a club, he pulled his t-shirt over his head.

Geri groaned, and pressed her face to his chest muscles. Pecs, whatever you called them. Man muscle.

A thick black swatch of hair covered his upper chest, smelling of sweat and musk as she rolled her cheeks and nose against it. Her mouth found his nipple, and she licked and sucked it.

Rend pulled the shirt tail of her blouse completely out of her waistband, and slowly began unbuttoning it, beginning at the bottom.

The last button loose, Geri's modern white blouse fell open. Rend dragged it down her arms, off her shoulders.

Rend pushed forward, mouth to her throat, forcing Geri to fall back onto her back, raising a slight puff of dust from the sofa cushion, making its joints groan.

Oh, his weight on top of her. Lips sucking like a primitive sea-creature.

His teeth biting and chewing. Over and over, throat to shoulder and upper chest.

He growled like a lion, making Geri feel as though she were wetting her pants, though she just returned from the bathroom.

With a deep breath, she allowed herself to relax, despite Rend writhing and wrenching on top of her, tearing at her throat almost as fiercely as though she were an antelope he just pulled down with his claws. And the thick gooey hot wet sensation spread down her groin into her inner thighs.

She let it flow.

Another deep breath, and her back arched, driving her chest up, bra scratching against his pecs, making her breasts swell and ache for release.

His hard, lined abs against the round bulge of her tummy. Belly button to belly button.

With Rend still slobbering at her throat like a vampire, Geri's diaphragm quivered.

She'd never before went to a man's house ready to fall into bed with him. Not to go all the way.

She'd been with guys, even more undressed, but she and Rend were just getting warmed up even though sweat already slicked their skin.

No man before Rend turned her into a shivering mass of melting marshmallow.

Trying to work her blouse all the way off, past her wrists, Geri wriggled her shoulders and arched her backbone.

Though she shook Rend off of one bite, he just re-attacked her soft skin.

Finally, she got the blouse off, freeing her hands. She pulled at Rend's t-shirt, finally getting him to let her slip it over his head and hands.

Leaving them both naked above the waist except for her bra. Which he quickly unsnapped behind her, and tightened his mouth around one of her nipples, sucking out her brains while the bra flopped around her shoulders and he massaged the red marks it pinched around the outside of her breasts.

He seemed bigger, impossibly stronger than when a mere man sitting beside her watching a football game.

Then he'd been of ordinary height a few inches taller than herself. And nearly scrawny, though built compactly, with muscles to the bone.

Now, over and on top of her, he seemed more like a bear or lion without the fur. Smelling of beast in heat. Roaring more than he panted.

His thick black hair short on the sides and longish on top like a mane advertising his manhood. His breath smelling of fresh raw meat like a jungle predator.

Geri reached down to her belt buckle, unhooked it, and unsnapped the button.

Rend brushed her hands away, taking control. The zipper fell loose, and her pants slipped down her hips.

But so slowly she ached with the frustration of thwarted bestial lust.

She could hardly believe she used to treasure the glowing white-hot but empty furnace between her legs, guard against any intrusion, even by finger. Let alone from a penis.

What was she protecting? A reputation nobody cared about anymore.

She couldn't remember. Couldn't think. Barely held on to consciousness as Rend slid the fabric of her slacks down her thighs.

A slow, inch-by-inch teasing calculated to drive her crazy while he demonstrated his control over her. How he could still think and plan. Had not yet lost of rational thought.

After her slacks left her toes behind and slid onto the floor, only the thin white nylon of Geri's panties stood between her and total nakedness.

So soft and wispy.

Yet a stone wall standing between Rend's manhood and her dripping gate.

But he was talking to her again, teasing her by delaying the inevitable in yet another way.

"You're hungry for me, aren't you, slut?" he asked in a leather voice that smelled of ripe lemons sour and exciting.

Was he talking to her? Who else? Could he really expect a reply while her mind drifted in moon orbit?

He pawed her bare thigh like a dog's paw, scraping his fingernails lightly across her sensitive skin. "You want me, don't you, bitch?"

"Yes," Geri said, so soft she could barely hear herself.

"Say it again, like you mean it."

"Yes," Geri said, louder, more insistent.

"Again. What do you want, slut?"

"Sex!" Geri shouted. "I want your cock in my pussy!"

He grinned. "You're such a whore, aren't you? Not for money, but just for dick. You haven't even seen mine yet."

In a few seconds he slid his jeans down to his knees, revealing a gigantic cock that shown in the TV-screen light like a monster torch.

He slipped the jeans down his legs so he kneeled before her proud and huge. His manhood sticking out. Reaching to Geri.

She felt its yearning. How it moaned, smelling her pussy walls saturated with sweet humid juices.

"Oh God!" Geri moaned.

"Do you like it?" he wanted to know.

"Yes!"

"Is it big enough for you?"

Was she big enough to take it inside her? She didn't know. All of a sudden she wanted to practice with something a lot smaller, such as a banana. A cucumber. A zucchini. Even an eggplant. "Oh my fucking God."

Geri couldn't resist. She pushed herself up on her elbows, reached out, and grabbed the knobby member.

"Be careful," he said with a slightly scared voice.

Geri didn't understand then, but later remembered boys could have an orgasm into a woman's hand too, so he might have been afraid she was going to give him a handjob instead of letting him screw her.

She'd done that with plenty of guys she dated before. Squeezed and pulled. Even with her hand on the outside of their pants, they'd usually squirt within a few minutes, if not a few seconds.

If not, she'd reach inside. No guy ever objected to her finding his cock standing stiff in a bush of thick hairs, and to her tightening her hand rhythmically around it like a tennis player using a rubber ball to strengthen her forearm grip.

Rend was different. Her Chosen One. To initiate her into the mysteries of sexual intercourse.

And his manhood stood out, straight and strong, throbbing. A work of art. Reaching toward the ceiling at an angle, like a raised rifle.

Nothing like the puny cylinders of those other guys. Grabbing them reminded her of the Chinese finger traps she and her friends played with as a kid. Grabbing one in the middle when her friend had both index fingers jammed into the open ends.

Small, firm squirmy and round, that described those other dudes -- not Rend's gorilla forearm with clenched fist at the end.

A shaft more like the stick shift of a sixteen-wheeler than the manhood of an ordinary guy.

So thick around she could barely touch her fingertips together.

Her throat gulped as though swallowing a granite boulder.

Could she really take him inside her, especially her first time?

She didn't feel big enough. How far would her vagina stretch?

The hot pole felt like a clump of sticks inside a thin hide. Throbbing with thick, boiling blood.

The rounded knob at the end, like an upside teacup but spongy and without a handle. Just purple with Rend's furious desire. She rubbed her fingertip across it, and the sudden small wet open hole at the very tip startled her.

Everything came out there. Urine, and . . . everything.

Geri moaned.

And, to her surprise, she broke out in tears.

Partly fear of the tearing ripping pain to come. Partly anticipation. Partly gratitude she chose Rend as her first man. Partly the premonition no other man she lay with later would measure up to him, and she had no intention to trying to tie him down to herself.

"You want it?" Rend said, obviously knowing full well she did.

"Yes!" she shouted. She learned.

"Beg me for it! Grovel."

"I want it, Rend. Give it to me."

"You call that begging? You call that groveling?"

"I want it!" Geri shouted.

"Where?"

"Inside me," Geri said, tears pouring from her eyes. "Deep inside me." As her stomach growled.

"You're a slut, aren't you?"

"Yes, oh God -- yes."

"You act so high and mighty, but deep down you're like all the sluts. All women. You just want a big hard dick up your cunt."

"Yes, take me, Rend. Take me, fuck me. Before I pass out and die."

Rend reached out, grabbed the elastic waistband of her panties, and ripped them down, tore them off her hips and legs in one fast motion.

As a certified virgin, Geri had only an idea of what position men and women made love in, though on the sofa she didn't have room to spread her legs as wide as they wanted to go. So she shifted her ass to maintain her balance on the top of the cushions as well as she could, with her knees naturally falling to each side. She couldn't have kept them together if she wanted to.

Rend fell down on top of her, arms wrapping around her upper body. Despite his huge size, she supported her.

He stared at her with chestnut eyes like pools of nighttime sky, infinite in darkness. As though he wanted to swallow her. Absorb her into the ocean of his black soul.

Geri braced herself on her upper back as much as she could, arching her hips, and then the first wave of pain hit her.

A log pressing against her vaginal lips, trying to squeeze past their wet dripping sensitive tissues.

They spread -- too little. The end of the felled tree rolled closer, trying to push inside like a cat constricting itself to go through a rat hole.

"Aiiiiii!" Geri shouted, certain Rend was going to tear her apart, slice her, injure her.

She adjusted the position of her open thighs, and the boulder's tip passed inside Geri's open gate.

Slowly, it crept forward. Fractional inch by fractional inch.

Rend retained admirable control.

In a few minutes Geri realized the tip of his penis was actually inside her, stretching the opening of her vagina.

Until it slammed against a slightly deeper block, making Geri gasp with the pain of the impact.

Rend paused, taking deep breaths.

Geri realized he looked and acted just like an athlete psyching themselves up for a major effort. The one hundred meter dash in the Olympic finals.

She gritted her teeth, preparing for more pain. It got better after the first time, right? It had to. All her girlfriends told her that. The second and subsequent times were worth the first.

When they cared enough about the man.

Geri didn't care about Rend except he was obviously a nice guy who'd treated her well.

Was that enough to let him have her first time?

Too late to back out now.

The leg slid farther forward, stretching Geri like a balloon about to burst, and then something between her legs exploded with pain and a popping sound loud enough to hurt her ears, and she was screaming as though a knife stabbed her guts.

Rend's weight held Geri down so she didn't sit up or fall, just remained bare back pressed against the rough wool of the sofa.

The steel pipe between her legs pushed her legs farther apart, except they had nowhere else to go, so she had to shift her hips, but they couldn't find a comfortable spot.

And Rend's hips kept shoving the steel pipe deeper into Geri's womanhood.

Slowly, but inexorably. Like an avalanche in slow-mo.

Sweat gushed from Geri's forehead as though she just ran a marathon in ninety-five degree heat.

Her stomach gulped as though trying to burp up a rock.

Her lungs slammed up and down with harsh gasping breaths.

She just wanted it over. Done with.

Yet, as the initial pain of the shredding of the tight skin of her hymen receded, a gradually growing, warm liquid pleasure replaced it.

The comfort of Rend's flesh occupying her former emptiness.

The thrill of caressing him deep insider her.

Her own once-sleeping nerves stimulated like twinkling Christmas tree lights.

She enjoyed the eerie sensation of her innermost organ gradually stretching to accommodate his manhood, like pushing her fingers into Isotoner gloves.

She felt almost like Thanksgiving afternoon, stuffed with turkey and dressing, only farther down.

And it came attached to a sweaty, rutting man now grinning at her as though he could read the surrender and avid passion on her face.

And their groins thrashed together, friction setting off pleasure signals inside Geri like a display of fireworks.

The tip of his manhood so deep, when he ejaculated she tasted the metallic salt taste as though it splashed onto her tongue instead of her vaginal walls.

And she thanked God she gave her first time to Rend. Only Rend could have given her such a powerful, all-consuming orgasm in exchange for her virginity. No other man in the entire world.

As Geri's heart slowly stopped pounding a rap bass beat against her inner ears, she lay back on the sofa, Rend still on top of her, his cheek against hers.

The TV screen still played a movie, though now the flickers were more red and yellow than blue.

And, on the coffee table, just above her eye level, the small foil condom wrappers. All unopened.

Chapter 5

First Day of Dog Grooming Class

"Even abused pets give their owners unconditional love," Blake Stanfield, the teacher, said to the small class of ten dog grooming trainees.

"We don't get unconditional love from our friends, our family members, or even from our students." At the last phrase, Blake grinned in a nonchalant way, and Geri almost didn't realize he was making a sly joke.

"Especially not from our children, at least once they start going to school," Blake continued. "Or so I've heard from my married friends."

Along with the other nine students, Geri sat in a small room in the rear of Blake's pet grooming salon in a small desk so battered, with a wood top with so many initials carved into it, she figured a local high school must have junked it.

"In return, some people spend incredible amounts of money on their pets. Basic grooming and health care services are just the beginning. There are day spas for pets. Facials. Holistic massages. Even reiki treatments."

What?

Blake paced in front of the room wearing a white jacket even though he was not a veterinarian, hands cupped together waist-high.

Thinning, longish blonde hair set off his handsome face and intense blue eyes.

As she listened, Geri wondered what it'd be like to have sex with him.

Blake spread his arms wide. "I completed my dog grooming training nearly ten years ago," he said. "After serving an apprenticeship, and saving up some money to open my own shop, I've done quite well. Blake's Pet Grooming Salon is Cromwell's largest."

Ever since the night she spent on Rend's couch, Geri wondered what it'd be like to have sex with every handsome man she saw.

Silly, because she wasn't far removed from wondering what "sex" in general would feel like.

Now she'd experienced one man, she wondered about the rest.

Although in his early thirties, Blake qualified. A hard cut face though with impish eyes that flashed when he made his jokes.

He wore dark green slacks like an Army uniform and a heavy duty red plain button-up work shirt.

She couldn't see his musculature, but he walked with the stalking grace of a black panther, indicating his clothes hid sleek, powerful strength. The way his shirt lay against his chest and how his pants creased when briefly outlining his thigh muscles hinted at bodybuilder-like definition. Though he obviously wasn't ridiculously pumped up.

His thin waist emphasized the broad shoulders and upside down V of his upper back.

"And the best times are just starting," Blake continued. "Baby boomers keep getting older. Their kids are grown-up and busy, so they never see their grandchildren. But Rover and Fee Fee will be there for them every day. I want to expand into offering those high-end services. I plan to make this clinic the biggest pet health and luxury provider between Beverly Hills and Miami Beach."

The classroom contained a lot of cages, from Chihuahua to Great Dane sized, stacked to the ceiling. But no actual dogs. Blake apparently didn't trust the students yet.

But their barks and yips from the rest of the salon carried through the closed wood door. Along with the smells of the dogs and various soaps and fur treatments.

Geri took a tour of the salon before paying her fee for the training, and its cleanliness and professionalism impressed her.

If she had a dog, she'd take it there. Or else she would have looked around for another place to take her training.

"Americans spent over four billion dollars on pet services in 2012, and that's going to go up every year. I want my fair share -- ten percent." He chuckled as he spoke. "And that means I'll have to expand a lot. I need to hire and train more groomers. And not people content to make a bare living grooming dogs, but groomers will to take a lot of additional training, to learn lots of advanced skills. People willing to go to workshops and keep learning, and willing to train others."

A thrill buzzed down Geri's spine at Blake's words, as some of Blake's ambition transmitted itself to the depth of her brain.

The man wasn't satisfied with grooming a few dogs and going home to put his feet up and watch ESPN until bedtime.

He'd taken what was a lowly, unglamorous, little-regarded and barely paid profession, and already founded a successful small business.

And was aiming to make it much bigger.

"Because quality is the key," Blake continued. "That's the foundation: healthy, attractive dogs and cats. Part of your problem is finding issues the owners aren't aware of. Teaching them how to take better care of their beloved animals. Never forget, we are working on the owners' substitute children. If you find a real problem, you must refer the client to a vet. If they don't have their own, we work with the finest in Cromwell. Someday soon, we'll have our own veterinarians in-house, on staff, immediately available."

Blake paced with feline grace, as though he were a leopard, a cat too big, too untamed, and too wild to keep in your house.

Savage enough to take Geri. Maul her and rake her with his nails, and penetrate her over and over again.

Geri shook her head. One episode of sex, and now she was an obsessed maniac. Imagining herself with every hot guy. Getting wet between her legs while watching Jensen Ackles on Supernatural on TV. Waking up every morning with her finger smelling sour.

"I'm just letting you all know right up front," Blake continued. "The opportunity's there for the best of you. I hope to hire some of you by the end of our sixteen weeks together. But it will be the best, most dedicated. If you just want to groom dogs eight hours a day, and you're happy making a few bucks doing that, that's fine, but I still want you to make me proud."

Geri hadn't seen Rend since she yelled at him that night about not wearing a condom.

"I'm clean," he kept repeating.

"But what if I'm pregnant!" Geri shouted.

"It doesn't happen your first time," he said.

She knew that was ignorant, and stormed out.

And she missed him every night. Wanted him again. Sitting beside her watching TV. Lying on top of her. Penetrating and pounding her.

But he didn't call -- not that she could blame him.

And damned if she were going to call him.

To Geri's amazement, Blake stopped pacing right in front of her desk. He leaned down, and asked, "Are you ready for your first pop quiz?"

The other students tittered softly, amused but also embarrassed for her.

Break into tears, or laugh along? Geri wasn't sure. He was criticizing her, but gently. No anger showed on his face, just beneficent smile, as though she were a dog he was clipping.

"I'm sorry," Geri said. She paused. She added, "I think working under you would be a wonderful experience."

Oh, God, he'd for sure think she was a total dork. Or a cock-crazed slut.

"Maybe you'll get a chance to find out," Blake said in a loud but shaken voice, his confidence gone.

None of the other students laughed or said anything, but to Geri's intuition Blake was responding to her sexual invitation, not offering her a dog grooming job at his salon.

Chapter 6

Veronica Visits

Several weeks after dog grooming class began, Veronica made her monthly visit to eat dinner at home.

To check on Mom and Geri.

With her younger sister there to help her cook, Geri got more ambitious than usual. A tuna casserole and a large tossed salad. After making all the family meals together since Father left them ten years ago, she and Veronica easily fell back into their old patterns.

Technically, of course Veronica still lived with them, but she spent almost all her time in her dormitory room at that fancy College of Fine Arts.

Geri couldn't blame her. She had to study. She worked part-time off campus as a waitress. No doubt she also partied with the other girls. Dated guys.

Geri had the sense her younger sister was still a virgin -- just as Geri'd been a mere four weeks ago -- but it wasn't her place to ask.

With the tuna casserole nearly done cooking -- smelling tasty -- and the table set and Veronica using big wood prongs to toss the salad with a sweet Italian dressing in a big bowl, Geri sat at the kitchen table and drank a glass of iced tea.

"She's still the same?" Veronica asked.

"What do you expect after ten years?" Geri asked.

"Sorry. I just . . . I don't know, after a month away, in school with a bunch of normal kids, I start hoping."

"Don't bother," Geri said. She preferred her tea with a spoon of sugar, but she was feeling bloated recently, and she didn't want to get fat. "I'll call you if there's any change."

Meaning if she freaked out. Geri long ago gave up hope Mom would ever get better. Time healed most people's wounds, but after ten years she accepted Mom was an emotional hemophiliac. She'd bleed grief and disappointment until the day she died.

"How's the dog grooming class coming?" Veronica asked, as though asking about the weather. Geri recognized that as one of Veronica's sophisticated lies.

"Nothing as fancy and intellectual as you're used to," Geri said.

"Oh, Geri. You could go to college too, if you really wanted. Save up enough money. You're as smart as me."

Veronica's words slammed into the usual wall in Geri's mind. College equaled smart kids and lots of money, and lots of work for a piece of paper no big company would take seriously. They wanted the smart, golden kids from good families. Not Geri Orlando.

Geri said, "Pet grooming's not as la-ti-da as the fine arts, but the clients really appreciate you."

"I thought they'd all be rich snobs," Veronica said.

"I meant the dogs and cats," Geri said, allowing herself to smile "But most of the owners are nice too, though I've only met a few. I'm still learning the basics."

"Who's the teacher?"

"The salon owner," Geri said.

"Yeah? What's she like? Why doesn't she have one of the staff do it? How can she run the business at the same time?"

"It's a guy," Geri said, hating how a sudden rush of heat from the oven baking the tuna casserole heated and reddened her face. "He says he's teaching because he wants to expand, and so he's looking for the best new groomers."

Something in Geri's voice must have signaled more to her sister than she intended.

Veronica grinned, nudged Geri with an elbow. "A guy? I thought all dog groomers were women. The men become veterinarians."

"It's a big salon," Geri said. "Must make good money."

Veronica kept digging in her elbow. "So he's rich, huh? And hot, right? That's why you don't want to talk about him. But is he single?"

Face still burning from checking on the tuna casserole, Geri nodded.

"Have a steady girlfriend? Not that should be a problem. I mean, I draw the line at married and engaged guys, but before that, all the dudes are fair game."

"I thought you concentrated on your studies," Geri said. "That's why you're taking summer classes."

"I haven't had a date for a month. That's okay, because it's too early for me to get serious over a mere man. But you, dear sister . . ."

"Trying to marry me off?"

"You deserve it, Geri."

For some reason that made Geri sad. As though marriage automatically made a woman happy. Didn't work out so well for Mom. Of course, Veronica meant well, though.

Geri turned off the oven, pulled the Plexiglas dish out with potholders. She said, "I just want to make enough money to pay the bills. And have a skill I know there'll always be somebody willing to pay me for."

"Dogs are easier to handle than men," Veronica said, still grinning. "But can't you have both? Say if you find a guy who's both wealthy and handsome. Good in bed's an extra."

Spoken by her sister the still-virgin. Geri remained silent. Someday Veronica would learn.

"All right, I won't bug you anymore about the pet salon dude," Veronica said. "If he's not showing any interest in you, you don't want to talk about him. What happened with you and that McDonald's guy?" Casual tone of voice.

Not that Veronica was ever casual when it came to men -- for her and for Geri.

"Rend?"

"Whatever his name is."

"We went out one time," Geri said in a voice she tried to match Veronica for casualness. No big deal. "We didn't even go out, really. I spent most of the night at his place watching TV."

Veronica arched her eyebrows. "Most of the night at his place?"

"Watching TV," Geri said. "A college football game. Several movies I don't even remember. We ate pizza and drank beer."

"I don't know from experience, but to me it sounds like a prescription for getting laid."

Geri tonged the salad into the three small wood serving bowls.

"Oh, Geri!" Veronica cried, and threw herself around Geri's shoulders. "I'm sorry! I didn't know, I didn't think."

Geri wiped her eyes with her forearm. Not very ladylike, but it kept the tears out of the salad. "It's all right."

"Is that it? He just screwed you and left you?"

"No, no," Geri said, sniffing. "I left him."

"Just ran out?"

"Just ran out."

"Like that?" Veronica asked, snapping her fingers.

"Like that," Geri said, snapping her own fingers.

"You didn't like it?"

"I loved it."

"Oh."

Geri let her little sister absorb that, and figure out its implications.

"So, what happens next?"

"I keep going to pet grooming school. Nothing."

"Well, I guess, if that's it -- "

"That's it."

"As long as you're not pregnant or sick or anything. Right?"

Geri couldn't speak.

"I mean, you're not pregnant or infected with AIDS or anything silly, are you?"

"Of course not."

"Why do I have the feeling you're not telling me something?"

At that moment, Mom spun into the kitchen, twirling like a ballerina, though on the ball of her foot. Her straight iron hair lay flat on her head as though her stylist put a bowl on her head when cutting her hair.

She wore a white, thick cotton, tight-fitting pair of long white pants and turtle-necked shirt that fit her thin body like a snug sweatsuit. Like a middle-aged Pilates instructor.

"The Empress is hungry," she announced as though speaking of the last of the Romanovs.

"We're on it, Mom," Geri said. She carried all three salad bowls into the dining room.

Veronica grabbed the potholders and took out the tuna casserole.

Chapter 7

Back in Pet Grooming Class

The day after Veronica's dinner at home, Geri sat on a short stool combing Lassie Junior's long coat.

Nearby, the other students sat with other dogs.

She could hardly believe how happy handling the animals made her. She checked over their skin and coats for hidden problems owners often missed. She enjoyed just running brushes and steel combs through their hides.

She had expected them to get restless and nervous, but most of them just sat quietly, tongues hanging out of their mouths, panting heavily.

"There, there," she crooned to Lassie Junior as she worked out the few knots in his shiny fur. She could tell his owner must really take good care of him. "You're such a good boy, aren't you? Yes, and you're so beautiful, you like me to make you perfect, don't you?"

She automatically made sounds in the back of her throat. Blake didn't teach that, but it seemed so natural, she just kept doing it. Maybe she'd heard somebody else doing it while working with dogs.

Whatever she was doing, it seemed to work. Or Lassie Junior was just the natural sweetie he seemed. He must sense her lack of experience, but he remained gentle and patient.

Geri was so happy to be in the class. She realized she was doing exactly what she was meant to do. Veronica's suggestion of becoming a veterinarian was well-intentioned, but misguided.

Vets helped animals, sure. Gave them medicine and treated illnesses.

But it was groomers who enjoyed the one on one attention, spending quality time with the dogs and cats.

Of course, more money was always better than less money.

But Geri couldn't remember when her family had more than just barely enough money, and couldn't imagine living without a strict budget.

So long as she could pay the bills, buy food for herself and Mom, and buy a few new clothes occasionally, that's all she needed. Mom didn't require anything except the secondhand mystery and suspense paperbacks she bought in stacks at the used bookstore, reading one or two a day.

Lassie Junior whined, yelped, shook his head, and wagged his tail, nearly jumping up out of Geri's arms.

Geri moved closer to retain control. "Easy, boy," she said in a soft low voice. "It's all right. What's up?"

"He just wants to say 'hello' to me."

Startled, Geri glanced up.

Blake stood next to her, staring down at both she and Lassie Junior with a wide grin on his face. He squatted, and rubbed Lassie Junior behind his ears.

Lassie Junior quieted, just panting with what seemed like a big smile on his face.

"We're old buddies," Blake said. "Lassie Junior was one of my first customers when I opened up this salon three years ago. He usually doesn't sit still for anybody except me."

"But -- " Geri began. Blake assigned the dog to her as part of the class's on the job training.

"I wanted to see how you two'd get along. Turns out I was right. He obviously likes you even though you aren't me."

"Oh, you're just a big old baby doll, aren't you?" Geri said, addressing Lassie Junior.

The dog made a delighted yelping sound, and turned his head to lick her hands.

Without thinking, Geri pressed her face close to his neck, and gave him a quick hug. "Yes, you are. A natural big honey pie."

Then Geri remembered her teacher was watching. Embarrassed, she jerked her head back, tried to make her face look dignified and professional, and resumed the grooming. Maybe Blake would leave her alone.

But he kept watching and grinning. "I should be jealous."

"What?"

"I mean, of Lassie Junior letting you groom him instead of me."

"Oh." Geri's breath came faster in her chest.

"How many dogs did you have when you were a little girl?" Blake asked.

Geri shook her head. "None. My mother didn't like them, wouldn't let us have any pets, even a goldfish."

"That's unusual. I mean, most groomers have their own animals at home. You must have a natural touch at it."

"I adopted all the neighborhood pets," Geri said, suddenly remembering things she hadn't thought about in years. "I'd go over and ask if Janie's dog could come out and play with me, and I didn't care if Janie came out or not. I wasn't the most popular kid in town."

As usual, Blake wore a white medical jacket over a wash-and-wear button-up shirt. He remained squatting just behind and to her side, and the position flexed his thigh muscles beneath the soft cotton of his trousers. They were so big and well-defined they could belong to an Olympic sprinter.

Do you work out, or did you steal your legs from a dead 200 meter dash gold medalist?

Geri's face reddened, and she turned to look directly at Lassie Junior so Blake wouldn't notice.

If he looked so good just bending his knees, what might his arms, shoulders, and chest look like underneath his shirt? If only he didn't wear that loose white jacket . . .

Except for a brief handshake when she first signed up for class, Geri never before spent any time close to Blake. And now he remained crouched close to her, the room temperature jumped to a steamy sauna. His hot breath broiled the back of her neck.

Geri wished she dressed nicer that morning, that she selected something besides old faded red polyester slacks and a Hollister t-shirt. But she expected to be handling animals, and much as she enjoyed it, didn't want to wear her nicer clothes.

Although her heartbeat rocked her, Geri focused on running her aluminum comb through Lassie Junior's coat. On keeping her hands from shaking. From her nervousness from showing.

"Why don't you try this?" Blake said, and gave Geri several tips.

"That's not in the book, or your lectures," she said.

"I know, just a few advanced little tricks I've picked up over the years," Blake said. So she tried them, and they helped. Just little tweaks on the basic grooming techniques, but they made Lassie Junior look that much classier.

"That does work better," Geri said. "Thanks."

"Thanks for being such a good student." Blake coughed. "Look, I hope you don't think anything, but would you like to go to dinner tonight?"

Not think anything? Not think what?

"I, I don't know," Geri said. "Go to dinner with you?"

"If it's all right."

"Yeah, I mean, yes, I guess so. Sure. Except I'm not dressed for it."

"It's not a fancy place," Blake said. "Formal gowns optional. Seriously, I was just thinking of Appleby's. I eat there a lot by myself, and I feel kind of conspicuous. I'd appreciate it if you'd go with me tonight so they see I'm not really a hermit."

"Appleby's? I'm not even dressed for a McDonald's Drive-Thru window."

Blake stood up. "You'll be fine. I go in these old clothes all the time," he said, gesturing down. "Look, I need to talk to you. We'll just relax, have a good time. Nothing serious. After class is over, just take a seat in the waiting room, if you don't mind. As soon as I can close up, we'll go."

"But -- "

"I've got to go check on the other students," Blake said, and moved on. "I'll be there as soon as I can," he called back to her.

Geri let her breath out.

She had a date for the evening whether she wanted to or not.

She wanted to -- or did she?

She'd never been to Appleby's. Although not a fancy restaurant, it was still a sit-down meal with waitresses and a menu. Not the kind of place to take Mom, even if Mom wanted to leave the house. Not the kind of place anybody would take Geri. At least, no other man ever before had.

And going with Blake, her hot pet grooming teacher . . .

Geri wanted to go. She couldn't miss it.

Yet, she felt a lingering guilt over Rend. He hadn't called or texted her, so he was being an asshole, yet . . .

She ran out on him that night, and she still felt justified, but -- couldn't get him out of her mind.

She enjoyed sex. At least, sex with Rend.

And probably she would enjoy sex with Blake. Did he have an after-dinner bedroom special in mind with her?

Yet, a piece of Geri wanted Rend. Still. Despite everything. Crazy as that sounded even to her.

She felt vaguely guilty for even thinking about letting Blake take her to dinner.

Silly, considering Rend was making it clear he didn't care anything for her . . . but maybe she'd always have a soft place in her heart for her first man, because it was good, even though in the heat of the moment he failed to cover himself with a condom.

No matter who or how many guys she eventually shared that act with.

Because life moved on. Now she was in this pet grooming class, and she realized already it was the most important single step she'd taken for her future.

She easily absorbed the lessons, and according to Blake just now, she was doing well with the animals, but she hadn't graduated yet. She didn't yet have her professional dog grooming certification, or even the state license.

If she washed -- or got pushed -- out of this school, she'd have to start over at another one. And Blake's was the best in the Cromwell area.

Surely he wouldn't kick her out if she didn't . . . go to bed with him, wouldn't he?

He didn't seem that kind of guy. These days, bosses could get in trouble for that kind of thing. But did the same sexual harassment laws apply to pet grooming schools? She couldn't afford to hire a lawyer to find out.

Besides, until he asked her to dinner, Geri had no idea Blake might even be interested in her.

Anyway, maybe he wasn't. He said he had to talk to her, not that he wanted to get her naked.

And -- another besides -- if Blake wanted to bed her, did she want to refuse?

Given his physique radiated sexuality like an aroused lion . . . and he seemed a nice, friendly guy who had never yet lost patience with any of the students, but knew how to put dogs, their owners, and his nervous students at ease . . . why not?

Because she didn't want to risk her dog grooming school graduation and certification and eventual job, that's why not.

So, she'd go out with him, enjoy the food. Keep him at arm's length. If he objected, well . . . she'd deal with that if and when it ever happened.

And if Rend didn't like it, he could just shove it.

That afternoon Blake dismissed class a few minutes before five o'clock. Geri delayed organizing her books and other materials, so she fell behind the other students as they hurried out to beat the rush hour traffic.

She took a seat in the waiting area, empty except for one middle-aged woman with a Chihuahua on a leash. She checked her watch, and picked up one of the copies of DOGS TODAY. She never noticed before, but Blake's salon subscribed to that one, plus DOG FANCY, MODERN DOG, and CAT FANCY.

Anything to help educate the owners.

She was deep into reading an article about diets for obese dogs when somebody said, "Are you Geri?"

Startled, Geri glanced up. She recognized the woman as Pam, one of the salon's current fulltime dog groomers. She looked about thirty. Still attractive, but also heavy-set. She had long, wavy black hair and an attractive though hostile face.

What did Pam have against her? Geri said, "Yes, I'm Geri."

"Blake sent me to tell you he'll only be another ten or fifteen minutes. One of our clients is being kind of stubborn, but it won't be much longer."

Geri glanced at her watch. 5:30. Hunger pangs gnawed at her stomach, but nothing she wasn't used to. She didn't eat an afternoon snack to save money. She didn't want the cash she saved to run out before the sixteen-week class.

"That's fine, thanks," Geri told Pam, then glanced down at the magazine, but then realized Pam hadn't left, but was staring at her.

Not with friendliness in her eyes.

"What is it?" Geri asked.

"I just wanted to understand what he sees in you," Pam said in a surly voice.

Confused, Geri said, "Who sees what?"

"Blake," Pam said. "Now you're his golden girl."

"I'm -- "

"He tells us what a great dog groomer you're going to be, how well you work with the animals."

"I'm sorry, I'm just doing my best. I need a job -- a career -- like everybody else."

"Like you really don't know."

"Know what?"

Pam rolled her eyes. "Blake has big plans to expand his little doggy empire here. Facials. Day spa. Even reiki. Stuff most people can't afford. Just for dogs."

"Yes, he told us that the first day of class. What of it?" Geri said.

"Everybody here knows he's looking for a partner."

Geri nodded. "I guess that makes sense. A business needs money to expand. But what's that got to do with me?"

"He can borrow money from a bank. I mean, a life partner. A pet partner."

Geri shook her head. "I'm sorry, I'm still not following you."

"He's not married, but he wants to be. To a woman who can help him run the business."

Geri opened her mouth, then shut it. She suddenly realized the woman's accusation, and why she hated Geri.

She thought Blake had his eye on Geri, for both her dog grooming talents (still raw and undeveloped, but she was learning as quickly as she could), and her attractiveness.

And was obviously jealous of Geri.

Was it true about Blake wanting to marry a woman who shared his passion for keeping dogs happy and healthy? If so, what was wrong with that?

A dog groomer would be a perfect partner for him.

Of course, love was supposed to enter into the equation as well.

Still, Geri liked the image of a husband and wife working closely together. Sharing not just a house and bed and children -- their personal lives -- but their business and careers as well.

So many men and women led work lives totally separate from each other, it was amazing they found things to talk about when together with each other.

"Blake is taking me out for dinner," Geri said, careful to keep her voice steady and firm. She might someday work with this Pam, and didn't want to make enemies. "It's our first date, and we're not even there yet. So it's too soon to marry us off."

"I'll tell Blake you're still waiting." Pam turned, and zoomed back into the salon.

Chapter 8

Home from Appleby's

When Blake dropped Geri home after they'd eaten dinner, it was still early in the evening.

Geri found Mom in bed reading her latest cozy mystery. Mom refused to talk or even acknowledge her presence.

Which meant either she was angry at Geri for not cooking and eating dinner at home, or she filled up on cheese sandwiches. Geri always kept enough bread, sandwich meats, and slices of American cheese in the refrigerator so Mom could make her own. Just in case.

Geri tried to call Mom to warn her she wouldn't be home for dinner, but Mom refused to pick up the cell phone. And probably didn't read Geri's text.

Like making sandwiches, she could also use a cellphone.

When she deigned.

Either way, Geri couldn't change what happened, so she just went into her own bedroom and called Veronica.

Obnoxious as her younger sister could be, Veronica was still her best friend.

Geri filled Veronica in.

"So, he's in the market for a wife to be a business partner too, so she's got to like grooming dogs too. I always thought you were crazy about dogs, but now it comes in handy. So, when're you getting married?"

"That's one date, and it wasn't even hardly a date. I mean, he didn't get romantic or anything, just talked a lot more about his plans, except he said he finds me attractive, but he doesn't want to get serious until after the class is over."

"That's three months." Veronica's voice screeched out over the tiny cellphone speakers.

"You know older people, they're patient. He's worried about how it'd look. He wants to be fair to the rest of the class."

"Just how old?"

"Only thirty-one."

"All right," Veronica said. "He's not a geezer."

"So, right now he likes how well I work with the pets. And how I look. But he's worried about what other people will say, so he wants to go slow."

"Chalk up two points for your team. When's he want to find out how good you are in bed?"

"Veronica -- "

"Make him wait, I say. He doesn't sound like a horny bastard doesn't think about the future, like that Rend dude you screwed."

Geri gulped, felt as though she swallowed a house. "Urr, that's something I hope you can help me with, dear sister."

"It's always bad news when you call me that."

Geri told her, and added, "I'm afraid to be alone when I do it."

"I'll be there tomorrow evening. Dinner at home again."

"Please," Geri whispered.

Chapter 9

The Test

Veronica, face so serious Geri wanted to slap her, read the instructions as intently as though the pamphlet were one of her college class textbooks.

"It says for best results, especially if you're testing before your missed period, to do it first thing in the morning."

Geri's stomach whirled and twirled like a tornado. She couldn't stop waving her hand up and down. "You want to stay here all night?"

They stood together in the downstairs bathroom. Mom had already retreated into her bedroom with the latest stack of cozy mysteries.

Geri sat on the edge of the bathtub, holding her head in her hands. The air smelled of the three powerful pine-scented air fresheners Mom hung in the small room. Any hint of an ordinary bathroom type odor could trigger one of her panic attacks.

"I've got an eight o'clock class and test in French Lit to cram for," Veronica said.

"Oh, go on to your class. I can't face it, I can't face it." A cramp made her wrap her arms around her stomach. Another symptom, or just a reaction to her nervous stress?

"Are you late?" Veronica asked.

"Hell yes! Eight days. You think I'd be doing this if I weren't?"

Geri could tell from Veronica's face her younger sister thought she should have taken the test as soon as possible after screwing Rend without a condom, but she was too hoity-toity to say so.

"The test measures the level of hormone in your urine," Veronica read. "Human chorionic gonadotropin or hCG. If you drink enough water to dilute your piss, that could screw up the test."

"Half a glass of iced tea with dinner."

"All right," Veronica said. "You're eight days late?"

"I'm not regular," Geri said. "And I didn't want to think about it. I just figured, tomorrow, tomorrow. You know?"

"Until you went out with Blake last night."

"That made me think," Geri said in a dismally sad voice.

"No symptoms? You haven't had morning sickness?"

Geri shook her head. "I feel fine, except when I think too much about this. And my bra must have shrunk in the wash, because it's fitting kind of tight."

"The test itself looks simple enough for a nervous woman to do alone if she had to." Veronica handed her a small, wide-mouthed plastic cup. "Fill this up with pee and set it on the counter." She covered half the stainless steel counter with a double layer of tissue.

Geri marveled at how her own bathroom looked like a foreign country. She never before sat on the edge of the bathtub. Or occupied it with Veronica, not since before they started first grade. Or was in there to do anything except use the toilet or tub, and clean up.

"Let's get it over with," Geri said.

Veronica looked down at her with eyes of gloom. "Remember, it's still plenty early. You can go to the clinic and get rid of it without anyone ever knowing. I'll put it on my Visa and you can pay me back when you start grooming dogs."

Geri hung her head. "Never."

"It's your choice," Veronica said in an infuriatingly calm voice. "Your right. Your body -- "

"I'm not going to kill a baby," Geri said from behind the stone wall in her heart. I know you college women are sophisticated and don't look at it that way, but -- "

"All right," Veronica said in a resigned voice. Geri couldn't blame her. Having a single sister raising a child alone was bound to affect her life too. And she was working hard to finish college to build a better life to herself, while working as a waitress.

"You going to watch me?" Geri asked.

"If you want me to," Veronica said with a laugh that made Geri smile despite how terrible she felt, then stepped outside, closing the door behind her.

God, how embarrassing. Geri pulled her shorts down and squatted over the toilet while she held the plastic cup close to where she expected her piss to flow down.

She wanted to kill Rend just for making her have to take the stupid home pregnancy test.

Yet, surprising herself, she couldn't make herself hate Rend.

That night, she made him so passionate his desire overwhelmed his common sense. Maybe he even believed that old horseshit a woman couldn't get pregnant the first time she had sex.

The point was, he was unbelievably sexy. Unfreakingbelievably sexy.

Geri forgot too.

That uncomfortable little fact gnawed away at the back of her mind like a rat gobbling a chunk of cheese.

If she'd been paying close attention, she would have noticed he did not put the condom on before falling on top of her and plunging inside.

Not really plunging.

No, Rend took his time, thrusting slowly and gently, protecting her from pain as much as possible.

She could have pulled away, thrown the condom packet at him, but she was too busy spreading her legs and arching the small of her back to welcome him inside. Deeper and deeper.

She wanted him just as much as he wanted her. And she was too busy accommodating his delicious girth to care about anything else.

True, as her first experience, she didn't know how a penis with a condom on felt inside her -- still didn't -- but she instinctively realized her vaginal walls were squeezing bare skin, not rubber.

Therefore, if there were a tiny little baby person now growing inside her womb, she was half-responsible for that along with Rend.

But, her periods were irregular. That was a fact. She couldn't remember being this late before, but that didn't mean it couldn't happen.

Starvation and malnutrition could make a woman's body stop menstruating, since it made no sense to give birth to a baby when you had no food to feed it.

Illness could affect a woman the same way, but Geri was healthy.

Women athletes who overtrained could miss periods. Geri was no athlete, but she'd been working harder than usual, taking the class every day and studying half the night.

Who was she kidding? None of that applied to her, except the possibility of random lateness for no particular medical reason except her metabolism marching to the beat of different phases of the moon.

Oh, let this all be a mistake.

Except, deep within her soul, Geri already realized she was pregnant.

The test was just to confirm her fears by going through the motion of measuring a hormone. Human whatever.

Any hormone in her urine better be human.

Because ever-rational Veronica would give her no emotional support without the test results.

Because she couldn't confront Rend without a test result. You just couldn't yell at a man about making you pregnant without even getting a test to make sure. Demanding child support, and then wearing a tampon the next day. Even Geri could see that would be stupid.

So, what was she going to do? She wouldn't need just child support, she'd need someone to take care of it. She wouldn't trust Mom to take care of a hamster, let alone a baby. Veronica had to finish college.

Geri had to finish the pet grooming class, then get a job. Whether at Blake's salon or another one.

Blake. Oh God.

Geri hung her head. Soon he'd see her bloated with another man's baby, and would forget all about making her his business partner or wife.

Maybe he wouldn't even want her working at his salon, because she'd need time off when she gave birth.

What a mess she got herself into.

One night of sex might screw up her entire life.

Why her? Other women had active sex lives from age twelve onward without all these problems.

And she realized: they made boys wear condoms. They went to doctors and got themselves fitted with diaphragms or prescribed the pill.

Those other women took precautions before lying with hot guys on dirty sofas while movies played on the TV screen with nobody watching.

Or were just lucky.

Veronica knocked. From the hallway, she asked, "Did you fall in?"

Bitch.

"I'm so tense I can't get anything out."

"Think about waterfalls."

Did they teach her that at college?

The worst thing was, a part of Geri wanted the test to prove her pregnant.

She would love to take care of a baby girl or boy. Somebody to love. To love her back -- unlike Mom and Veronica. Somebody to live for, to have a future for.

And if . . . Rend -- no, she didn't dare think about him. He didn't want her. He hadn't even called. He wouldn't live with her for a week, let alone for the rest of their lives. What a stupid thing to think about.

Yet -- just in case -- if, when all was said and done, she wound up with Rend, that wouldn't be a bad thing. She hoped.

He wasn't Blake, but did Blake really spin her wheels?

No. He was handsome. He had a great body. He was nice. She admired how good he was at taking care of the dogs and cats. She envied his business. She'd be lucky to make twelve grand a year just grooming the dogs. By starting up his own salon, he must make a lot more than that, and was planning to expand to those luxury services with a high profit margin.

But, stupid as Veronica would think her, given a choice between Rend and Blake, Geri would take Rend.

But only if he would take her too. And that didn't look good.

Not good at all.

Veronica pounded on the door. "Think about waterfalls."

"Screw you!" Geri shouted back, then tried to relax.

She cleared her mind, focused on the full sensation in her bladder, on a blue sky, and finally on a waterfall, and the flow started.

Hard and strong.

She pushed the cup under it, and the hot liquid immediately splashed up onto her hand. Yuck.

She placed the cup, nearly overflowing, onto the counter Veronica covered with tissue, and tried to stop pissing so she could wash her hand off.

"All right," Veronica said after Geri washed off, pulled her shorts back up, and let her sister back into the bathroom. "Are you ready for this?"

"Go head on," Geri said. "I already know, but I want to be sure."

Veronica ripped open the bright blue package and pulled out a plastic oblong that looked like colored marker, with a blue cap at one end and a window for the digital display at the other. She held it horizontal as the directions instructed.

"All right, here goes nothing," Veronica said. She dipped the blue end into the cup of Geri's urine while staring at her watch.

Twenty seconds.

Then pulled it out and placed it flat on tissue. In the digital reading window, an hourglass spun, like an antique version of Microsoft Windows.

"Takes up to three minutes," Veronica said in a soft voice.

The readout didn't surprise Geri.

Even her tears and sobs didn't surprise Geri.

Just Veronica's tears and sobs for her as she held her older sister's face to her shoulder.

Chapter 10

McDonald's Drive-Thru

A week later, Geri drove straight from her dog grooming class to the River Park McDonald's where Rend worked.

She wore a new pair of yellow stretchy shorts. Not too much bigger than her regular size. Not yet. And a plain blue t-shirt.

That time in the evening, cars nearly filled the parking lot. Kids screamed as they ran around the playground area.

A computer printout from her doctor which confirmed the home test result in her hand, Geri jammed through the door as though charging a castle gate.

At least ten people stood in line in front of each register.

No Rend at the counter. Did they change his shift and hours? Then she spotted him on the side, sitting on a big stool in front of the Drive-Thru window where customers picked up their food.

He was filling up soda cups, his back turned to her, so he didn't spot her.

Geri spun around and stiff-armed her way through a pack of young teens, and returned to her car.

She backed out of her parking space, spinning her wheels, and joined the long line of cars on the side, heading for the Drive-Thru lane.

Twenty minutes later, she advanced to enter the official Drive-Thru lane. As her car heated up in the evening sunlight, her heart cooled down. Maybe she ought to return later, after Rend clocked out. However, with the store wall on her left and a concrete divider to her right, she had no choice but to continue.

Anyway, she was hungry.

It took another twenty minutes before she reached the speaker, where she shouted her order: "Two hamburgers, fries, and a small Diet Coke!"

She paid at the first window she reached, but was still two cars away from her food -- and Rend.

The cool air-conditioned air that drifted to her from the cashier's open windows, bringing with it the powerful greasy odor of hamburgers and fries, twisting Geri's stomach with hunger, reminding her she hadn't eaten anything since lunch many hours before.

Was the baby already affecting her appetite? It had to be too small for that yet.

The woman in the black SUV seemed to be having a problem with her order. She'd been arguing with Rend for nearly ten minutes.

Drive away, lady. Drive away.

Cars idled behind Geri as far as she could see in her rearview mirror.

She paid for her food, and, ravenously hungry, wanted to eat it.

She wanted to kick Rend's teeth down his throat.

Finally, the woman in the black SUV drove away, shoulders tensed so tightly up to her ears Geri had to rub her own neck.

The Red Subaru Impreza pulled forward, Geri right behind it.

The man exchanged a few words with Rend, took his bags, and then his two large drink glasses, and pulled forward.

What a hero.

Now, finally, it was Geri's turn to pull up to the window.

But she couldn't take her foot off the brake pedal and goose the accelerator.

She didn't want just her hamburgers and fries, no matter how hungry. Even though low blood sugar dragged her mood to the bottom of a greasy mud puddle.

She wanted to let Rend know he was going to be a father.

And she wanted child support.

And she wanted to let him know how much she hated him.

Even though she also wanted him to love and marry her -- because he wouldn't.

By itself, her car pulled forward and stopped at the window. Geri rolled her window down, and stared. Unable to speak.

Rend looked just as hot as the first day she noticed him, when she came in on a sudden impulse to eat lunch there, and he waited on her at the counter.

He wore long khaki slacks that outlined the curve of his thick thigh muscles. He wore the store uniform, a burgundy knit shirt with bright orange edging, and it emphasized his broad shoulders and power pecs. Underneath the McDonald's cap, his face shone clear and handsome as ever, thin lips with a fierce look in his eye, as though he could push her to do anything.

She remembered how he called her a slut and whore that night, and she wanted him again. Over and Over. Her breath caught in her throat and her pulse pounded the top of her skull. He hadn't meant those words in a bad way. He wasn't angry or even insulting.

Just driving her to the heights of sexual madness.

She did want his body, his cock, covering her and filling her.

Still did, that was the worst thing.

She wasn't sorry she gave herself to him that night, only for not forcing him to put on the condom. Deep in her heart, she realized only Rend could have given her such mind-wrenching, gut-twisting sex, especially her first time.

Not Blake. She hated to think it, but Blake could never send her to the moon and stars as Rend did. Oh, he could make her feel good. He had the looks and the body and the pleasant personality. He had passion and energy. Instinctively, she realized in bed he would take his time, making sure she enjoyed the experience, that she was wet before he thrust himself deep inside her.

And, no doubt, he would make her come. Eventually.

But with the burning fire Rend did? Not hardly.

The air from his open window smelled not only of grilled beef, but of Rend's musk and boiling testosterone.

Rend stared at her, then smiled with pleasant surprise. "Geri." He pushed a small white bag and her Diet Coke toward her. "I didn't know this was your order. How are you doing?"

He sounded so genuinely happy to see her, Geri almost felt ashamed, though she didn't know why.

"Is that all you can say?" she yelled at him.

Confusion seized his face. "What's wrong, Geri?"

"You fuck me and then you leave me alone? What do you think? I'm just a toy you can pick up and drop when you want to?"

"You left me, Geri," Rend said, face contorted with his own pain. You ran out on me that night."

"And you know why, you son of a bitch!"

"I didn't mean to, but you wouldn't listen -- "

"Why didn't you call me?" she asked, half wailing. "Or text? Or something?"

To his credit, seeing her distress, he looked sad, though still puzzled. "You left me, remember, Geri? Ran out early in the morning. Made me drive you home and didn't say a word or kiss me goodnight or nothing. Just slammed the door on me. I thought you hated me. Didn't want to see me again."

The car behind her banged their horn. Geri ignored them. She didn't care if fifty cars sat in line behind her.

"You cocksucker!" She shoved the printout from the doctor through the window, then tossed it at him. Shoved her soda at him. It fell into his lap, the plastic lid popped off, so cold Diet Coke spilled all over his lap.

"I'm pregnant, motherfucker!"

He stood up, brushed the liquid and ice cubes to the floor, and daubed at his slacks with a rag. Slowly.

He looked like a total idiot as he struggled to absorb what she said. "Pregnant?" He gulped. "With my baby?"

Geri grabbed the carry out bag and pulled out her fries. She tossed the packet at him. Some hit him in the face, slicking greasy salt over his eyebrows.

"I ain't never screwed no other dude, you son of bitch cocksucking motherfucker. Tell me again how I can't get pregnant the first time! You want to fight me, go ahead! I know a lawyer. We'll get blood tests. DNA! I want child support or you go to jail. I want help. I want money. You can't get away. I don't care if I have to sell you into slavery on a coffee plantation in Brazil."

To her amazement, as understanding penetrated his thick skull, he grinned. "That's wonderful, Geri."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"I've made crew leader. A little more an hour, and now I'm fulltime. Even get overtime when we're busy. I'm not rich, but I might move up into management . . . I'm not poor, either."

Other cars began honking their horns. "What are you talking about?" Geri shouted. She thought of throwing one of her hamburgers at him. Opening it up first so the mustard and catsup stained his McDonald's shirt.

Rend, goddamn him, didn't even look fazed. He just brushed the fries to the floor, barely noticing them. He stared at Geri with a ridiculous smile on his face. As though happy.

"What the hell you grinning at?" Geri demanded.

"I'm so happy," he said, and she wondered if she heard him right over the near-constant blare of horns.

"Are you crazy?"

"I want to be a father, if there's a good mother. I know you'll be a terrific mother, Geri, especially . . . if you let me . . . you know."

"I need money," Geri said. "I can't quit going to class."

"That dog grooming thing you told me about?" he asked.

That he remembered surprised her. She fell back against the seat, deflated. "I've got almost three more months."

"Then you'll have a job?" Rend said.

"If the teacher doesn't kick me out for being pregnant."

"You'll be working. I'll be working. We'll have enough money. We'll get by."

His calm tone trying to minimize the problems irritated her.

"And who'll take care of the baby?"

"I mostly work night shifts," he said. "I expect dog groomers work days. And my older sister -- you didn't meet her yet -- she and her boyfriend broke up, so she moved in with Pop and me, only he's going to be in jail for a while -- third offense DUI -- and I got her on the crew here but it's only part-time until she works out, but she'd be glad to help. You can move in, and we'll do fine."

"Whoooooaaaaaaa," Geri said. "Back up. You're asking me to move in with you."

He looked down, crestfallen. "Of course, if you don't want . . ."

"You ignore me for nearly five weeks, and now you want me to move in with you? Sleep where? The basement?"

"You ran out on me," he said. "I thought that was it, you hated me. Or I'd've called you a million times. Especially if I'd known you're having a baby. Don't you understand? I --"

Geri held her hands to her face, trying to stop the world from spinning around her. This wasn't going anything as she expected. She expected him to argue and fight, and probably deny the baby was his.

Not be happy. Not . . . what? Get back together with her? Was he trying to do that?

Seriously?

Ridiculous.

With all the horns behind her honking nonstop, she couldn't think.

"Look, I know you hate me," Rend said. "I was wrong that night, and I'm sorry. I just got so carried away, because you're so beautiful and sexy. I didn't mean to hurt you, I swear it. I don't blame you now you still don't want anything to do with me."

Goddamn him, now he was apologizing. What else was he going to do wrong? Geri gulped as though swallowing an entire cake, nearly bringing tears to her eyes.

He kept talking. "I never had a good woman like you before, Geri. I swear. I was so surprised you went out with me, and especially because I could tell you wanted me. When you left so angry, I knew I really fucked up, even worse than the night a few years ago I got drunk and totaled Pop's car."

"Are you trying to tell me you still like me?" Geri said, voice rigid with surprise.

"Like you? I --" He ran his hands down his face. "You wouldn't believe me. Let me just say, I'm sorry. I wanted to see you again, but you made it clear you hated me."

"I was angry, but I thought you'd call me back, but you never did."

Rend slumped down. "I thought -- well, I guess it doesn't matter. If you don't want to stay with me, I understand. I'll help you and the baby, don't worry about anything. And my sister will still babysit for free. You'll like her. She wants a baby of her own, but can't have one. I shouldn't tell you that, but --"

All this time.

"I'm sorry," Geri said. "I better go before they drag me out of here. My burgers're getting cold."

"I haven't seen any other woman after you," Rend said. "I swear. I've gotten drunk a few times, trying to forget you, but that's all."

Geri rolled her eyes, trying to believe him, but finding it difficult. "Next you'll be asking me to marry you," she said in a sarcastic tone of voice.

He leaned his head out of his Drive-Thru window, almost into her car. "I was going to wait until you moved in with me, but, Geri, will you marry me?"

Geri's face turned hotter than a grill. She wanted to put the car into Forward and peel out.

Instead, she leaned her head out the car window, and kissed him.

"Yes," she whispered, wondering if she'd gone crazy.

"What's going on here?" a loud voice yelled, making them both jerk their heads back.

A broad African-American woman with long dreadlocks yelled to Rend.

He raised his right hand, palm out. "Lena, I just got engaged."

Lena returned his high five. "All right, but you got to take your honeymoon off the clock. We've got forty cars backed up in the Drive-Thru. Understand?"

"Bet!" Rend cried.

"I'll go," Geri said. "I'll come back later."

"I get off by ten o'clock!" Rend shouted.

Geri moved forward, then turned around, and blew him a kiss.

Chapter 11

Back at the Ice Cream Shoppe

Simone spooned the last bit of Yummy Butterscotch into her mouth. The story interested her so much she barely tasted it, but at least the sweet coldness lingered on her tongue. "So, what happened?"

Veronica away her empty dish of Chocolate Cookie and Mint. "That's it."

"Your sister moved in with him?"

Veronica nodded. "His older sister's real nice. I even helped the two of them clean the place up. It was a big job, let me tell you. Geri and I stop by Mom's house every few days, make sure she has enough sandwiches. That's all she wants to eat. Long as she has mystery books to read. She likes cat detectives and old Perry Masons."

"They got married?"

"They're waiting for Rend's father to get out of jail, so he can be there."

"I wouldn't," Simone said.

"Me neither, but they're nicer than us. Dumber. Not that it really matters."

A harried looking middle-aged woman led in a troop of ten grade-schoolers.

Veronica winced at the sudden onslaught of wild yelling. Matching Simone's own feeling of annoyance. Couldn't people keep their kids quiet in public?

"What about the dog grooming training?" Simone asked.

"The class is almost over, and Blake the owner has already offered Geri a job as a groomer. She'll start as soon as it's over."

"So, he's not holding it against her."

Veronica looked on the edge of a breakdown. "That's not the point, Simone! Don't you see! She could have had Blake. He's just as sexy as Rend. Rend's hot, but Blake's hotter. And sharper. Rend might become a full store manager in five or ten years, but Blake's going to make a million before he's forty. He's got a good business that's going to grow even bigger, and he plans to milk it for every drop."

Simone ticked off her fingers. "Handsome. Sexy. Available. Rich or on the way to it. But she didn't love him?"

"What's not to love? I mean, Rend is a good guy. I like him. Don't get me wrong, he could be a lot worse, but he's not a Blake."

Simone shook her head. "Not all rich dudes are nice or sexy, but if they are . . . that's a perfect hand -- four aces."

Veronica sighed. "If only she didn't meet Rend, she might be planning her marriage to Blake instead. She's my sister. And she's smart. Except when it comes to men."

"I think she's lucky," Simone said. "In a way. I mean, because Rend loves her and is taking responsibility."

"Okay, she could be worse off," Veronica said. "Except she could still have had the abortion before she looked pregnant, and hooked Blake like a big-mouthed bass."

"She doesn't think that way," Simone said.

Veronica swirled her straw in her soda glass. "So many women are so stupid. We ought to do something."

"Like what? Make virginity fashionable again? Good luck with that. Most women don't want sexual repression any more than the guys."

"But they should," Veronica said. "If they want to marry a good guy. Sexy, handsome, and rich, that's what I want."

"And an artist," Simone said.

"Look," Veronica said. "You and me, we're a lot alike, right? Beautiful, hardworking, and ambitious. Also, we don't look like we came from our old neighborhoods. We look like we belong at Cromwell School of Fine Arts."

"We have to blend in," Simone said. Where was she going?

"But we're not princesses. We weren't born to money. We take out student loans. We apply for scholarships. We work part-time jobs."

"My father worked in the Sandusky Paper Mill," Simone said. "Any silver spoon in my mouth, he would've sold it right away."

"And we're not the only ones at our college. Ever notice, the women clawing their way up, like us, don't bed every clown takes her to a movie?"

"Mostly," Simone said. "A few think that'll get them an engagement ring."

"And does it?"

"Remember Keisha? She was smart, but the first big party our freshman year, she pulled a train in the back bedroom. Nobody knows how many guys had her. Two weeks later --" Simone slapped her hands together. "Gone!"

"Princesses don't pull trains," Veronica said.

"Damn right. They don't have to."

"But they don't hold on to their virginity, either. They only fill their tunnels with one guy a night, but they don't hold back. They don't care if he doesn't respect her in the morning."

"They can afford to take guys for granted because they've got Daddy. At home, they're princesses. They know sooner or later some guy named Baldwin or Humphrey will come along and take her. He won't care she's screwed fifty other guys because he's screwed a hundred other girls. They'll work at desk jobs and play tennis and golf on the side, and they'll fit in at the country club dinners."

"It's a rough life, but it's not ours, so we need every asset we've got, including what's between our legs. How many other working class girls do that?" Veronica said.

"All my old friends spread their legs before leaving middle school," Simone said.

"See? We're unusual. But not unique. Alicia, I'm sure, is also still a virgin. Maybe Janeesia."

"Cynthia and Elena. I think. Brandy? But so what?"

Veronica grinned. "Let's celebrate how smart we are. We start a club, just for us. College women graduating with their hymens intact, so we can marry Blake."

"You want to groom dogs?"

"We'll have a contest. See who marries the best dude."

"That's crazy, Veronica."

"It's not about virginity for religious reasons. It's because we want out of our old neighborhoods. We want to marry the Blakes of the world, not the Rends. Hot guys with money. We'll call it the League of Worldly-Wise Innocents."

The End