

***My Mother  
The Man Eater***

**Tracy Krauss**

Strategic Book Group  
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***Proverbs 31: 30***

Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades. The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-God.

(The Message)

***Isaiah 1:18***

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. (NIV)

## *Chapter One*

Tactical position in place. Zeroing in on target. . . slow. . . steady...

Engage! “Ah! The feel of brushed silk!”

The woman looked up at the attractive, blonde saleswoman. Her eyes flickered self consciously before she lowered her gaze. She dropped her hand, as if the soft rose colored garment was hot to the touch. “Umm. Yes, it’s nice. . .”

The saleswoman retrieved a peach silk garment that was strewn over the rack. “This one is lovely as well. Were you interested in anything particular?”

The woman fingered the velvety material. “Oh no. Not really. I was just looking.”

“Of course. Spend as much time as you like. As you can see, we’ve got lots to choose from. Did you notice this style? It’s just in. Very chic.” She pulled a royal blue lace and gossamer gown from a nearby display.

“Oh. . .” the woman breathed, obvious longing in her eyes. “That is pretty. . .” She reached out to touch the fabric, before quickly withdrawing again. “I couldn’t,” she said, trying not to make eye contact. “I mean it’s so. . . so skimpy!”

“You think? I’ve got some similar designs in all the same fabrics that are a little more modest.” She led the now curious customer to another rack. “You can try on as many as you like; just for fun, of course.”

Half an hour later the shopper left the lingerie department, loaded with two bags of purchases.

Joleen Allen, the successful sales rep, allowed a satisfied smile to flicker across her face as she stowed the receipts in their proper tray under the cash register. Another satisfied customer. Another sale to add to her roster. Not bad for a slow Wednesday afternoon. Let the boss take that and chew on it for awhile.

“You’ve got the gift, Joleen,” commented another salesclerk from the perfume counter next to lingerie. She sauntered to where her counterpart was now straightening the already precisely folded undergarments.

“Times are tough,” Joleen replied with a shrug. Using one of her sculpted nails, she tucked a piece of blonde hair behind an ear. Her dangling gold earrings danced. “I’ve got to make the best of each and every opportunity.”

“Spoken like a true, loyal, Redman’s employee.”

“Come now, Brenda. You’re sounding a bit out of sorts this morning. Was that a note of

sarcasm I detected?” Joleen asked.

“Maybe,” Brenda admitted. “I just about choked on my coffee at our morning staff meeting. You’d think after this many years, experienced employees wouldn’t have to participate in all this ‘Rah, rah, go team go’ company propaganda, you know?” Her short, dark hair bounced as she shook her head.

“Now that hardly sounds like ‘Salesperson of the Month’,” Joleen observed. “I saw your picture posted on the ‘Wall of Fame’ this morning in the coffee room.”

“I went through an awful lot of perfume testers for that honor, let me tell you!” Brenda said sarcastically. “I find it demoralizing, not the other way around.”

“I’m sure management means well,” Joleen offered.

Brenda sighed. “Making people smell good is easy. But you – I’ll bet you could sell a bikini to my 90 year old grandmother!”

“Bring her shopping and I’ll see what I can do,” Joleen countered with a grin. “After all, even 90 year old grandmothers deserve to pamper themselves. You’re only as beautiful as you feel, I always say.”

“Easy for you to say,” Brenda grumbled. “Every breathing male that passes by your department has to roll his tongue back into his mouth. Not fair! Five children and you still have your school girl figure!”

“You’re exaggerating again. Besides, it isn’t easy. It takes a lot of hard work to stay in shape.”

“And it’s your job to convince every customer they can do the same. I just don’t understand how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Convince some of these women to even try some of this stuff on.” Brenda scowled as she removed a hanger that held little more than strings with a bit of lace attached. She looked at it skeptically. “How does it work, anyway?”

“I see myself as a therapist,” Joleen replied, cocking her head to one side. “It’s my job to unlock the inner beauty in every one of my customers.”

“Whoa! You’ve obviously been practicing that line,” Brenda laughed.

“Beauty is all up here.” Joleen tapped her head.

“Whatever works,” Brenda shrugged. “Stick to your philosophy if it helps make sales.

But me? Trying this on would be way too humiliating.”

“What are you talking about? You look great,” Joleen protested. In truth, Brenda could best be described as cute and round. “And *that* has been a very hot seller,” she added, taking the garment from her friend and hanging it up. “Bob might like it.”

“Stop it, okay? I’m not one of your customers.” Brenda shook her head. “You need to get yourself a man, Joleen. You’ve been single way too long.”

“I’m working on it,” Joleen shrugged.

“What is it? Three weeks, now?” Brenda asked sarcastically.

“Six,” Joleen sighed.

“All I can say is, you’re definitely the right woman for ‘this’ job. Anyway, I guess I better get back to my ‘stall’. Even Salesperson of the month can’t afford to let up.”

“Too true. Maybe next month it’ll be my turn.”

“Sporting goods, beware! I’ll have to go down and warn Emmett you’re on the warpath,” Brenda said.

“Right. It wouldn’t be fair to let the same department get all the honors too frequently. He’s so competitive!”

“I didn’t mean the Salesperson of the month thing, I meant the looking for a man thing.”

“Who? Emmett?” Joleen scowled. “He’s definitely not my type. Besides, I’ve got a couple of other prospects.”

“Joleen Allen! Prospects? Do tell.” Brenda surveyed her friend with anticipation.

“Weren’t you going back to work?” Joleen asked, hand on hip.

Brenda checked her watch. “Actually, it’s almost time for coffee break. You coming?”

“I know you, Brenda. You just want information.”

“So? You coming or not?” Brenda’s look was guileless.

Joleen shook her head with a smirk. “I guess. I’ll just lock up my till and let Jeanie know.”

Brenda continued chatting on their way to the elevator. Joleen just smiled and let her friend talk. It was her way. She and Brenda had worked together on the same floor of

Redman's Department Store for six years. They'd seen a lot of changes, both at the store and in their personal lives. Unlike Joleen, Brenda had married later in her life and was just starting a family. Even though Joleen was only a few years older, her children were all grown up. Actually, they really didn't have that much in common. Brenda preferred staying at home in the evenings; Joleen needed a social life. Brenda was short and round, with dark hair and glasses; Joleen was tall and blonde. Brenda had found her soul mate. Joleen was still searching. Despite their differences, however, Joleen felt like Brenda was one of the few constants in her universe. When it came right down to it, Brenda was a faithful friend.

"Actually, you could probably use old Emmett to your advantage, even if you're not interested in him personally. You could have, like, a spy down in his department, and after he sells a piece of fitness equipment you could grab the customer and play on their new found false hope that they're going to get all sexy and skinny and sell them all kinds of sexy, skinny underwear," Brenda said with animation. "You're sure to get Salesperson of the Month."

"You're crazy."

"No, I'm a genius. Besides, we're a team, remember? The 'Redman's' team," Brenda said with mock enthusiasm. "Management wants us to think like a team, so I'm thinking team. Go, team, go!"

"Watch the sarcasm. Management might have spies," Joleen cautioned, motioning to the security camera in the elevator.

"Just having fun," Brenda said sweetly as she waved at the camera. "It's a good job, after all. I just get a little tired of all this 'teamwork' crap. It's like 'Spirit Week' at High School. It's embarrassing!"

"Well, like you said, it's a living."

The elevator doors swished open and the women stepped into the basement which housed stationary, children's toys, and sporting goods, as well as the staff room.

"Hi, Emmett! How are sales?" Brenda called as she and Joleen walked past sporting goods toward the staff room. She gave him a wave.

A balding middle aged man with a paunch, wearing a rumpled white shirt and tie, raised an arm in acknowledgement. He was busy with a customer.

"I can't believe you thought I'd be interested in Emmett," Joleen said through her teeth. Her lips maintained a composed smile.

"What's wrong with Emmett?" Brenda asked innocently. "You're the one with the 'beauty is only skin deep' philosophy, remember? Deep down, he's probably a really nice man."

Joleen gave her friend a withering look. “Real deep.”

“Ah, so it’s a bit of a double standard, I see.”

“I’m sure Emmett is a very nice man, and there is probably someone out there for him. It’s just not me,” Joleen stated.

“And you’ve got other prospects,” Brenda reminded.

“Did I say that?”

“You did. I have it on tape.” They had entered the staff room and Brenda went straight for the coffee pot. “Argh! This coffee looks rancid! I’ll have to make a fresh pot.”

“I might not have time to wait for a fresh pot,” Joleen said. “I want to stop in at shipping and receiving for a minute, too.”

“So tell me,” Brenda asked, leaning her slightly rounded frame against the counter, and crossing her arms. “What’s so special at shipping that you’d have to go bring it up yourself? Let one of the grunts do it. That’s what they get paid for.”

“Nothing wrong with checking for myself once in awhile,” Joleen hedged. “After all, I am the head of my department.”

“Mm,” Brenda nodded. “One of your prospects, I gather? Seems to me I’ve noticed a new, and might I add, very buff, delivery man on the job.”

“Brenda, I’m shocked,” Joleen exclaimed. “What would Bob say? Besides, when have you been one to go down to shipping and receiving?”

“I’ve had occasion to be down there a time or two. He’s a lot better than Emmett, I must say,” Brenda continued, undaunted. “But, what if the guy is married?”

“He’s not.”

“How do you know?”

“I asked him.”

“Really?”

“Well, in a round about way.”

“Geez, Joleen, the guy might think you’re desperate.”

“Maybe I am,” Joleen shrugged. “I’m not the type of person that likes to be alone.”

“When have you ever been alone? In all the years I’ve known you, you’ve had plenty of boyfriends. If I tried to keep up with your social calendar, I’d be a nervous wreck.”

“But that’s just it,” Joleen explained. “I’m getting tired of the ‘social calendar’, as you say. I’m ready for something deeper - more lasting.”

“Something permanent?”

“Maybe. Who knows? Anyway, I figure I don’t have time for long cat and mouse games at the beginning of a relationship.”

“Time? You talk like you’re over the hill, or something.”

“I’m not getting any younger,” Joleen admitted. “And once they find out I’ve got grown children...”

“You started young,” Brenda shrugged.

“True.”

“Or you could try someone your own age, for a change.” Brenda grinned wickedly. “Like Emmett.”

“I’m not even responding to that.”

“Could be your loss,” Brenda shrugged. “Besides, think of all the free fitness promos you’d get in on.”

“Please. Just thinking about it is making me queasy!” Joleen shook herself like a dog trying to get rid of fleas. “See, that’s just it. I just don’t find older men; men like Emmett, very attractive. All men over forty are balding and fat!”

“Hmm. Bob is getting a bit of a paunch,” Brenda mused. “But I kind of find his receding hairline somewhat endearing.”

“That’s different! That’s Bob, and of course you find him attractive, because you love him and he loves you. But most men over forty are in some kind of mid life crisis. Trying to prove they’re still studs - whether they’re married or not.”

“Oh-oh. You’re sounding bitter about something.”

“You’re forgetting I was once married to an older man. Except for the fact that the union produced five beautiful daughters, it was not a happy experience,” Joleen reminded.

“True. But not all men are like Harold. Besides, this reference to ‘older men’ has me confused. You’ve moved into a different category. Men over forty are no longer older. They’re the same age.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate that,” Joleen said.

“Hey, you’re the one who started with the whole ‘I’m not getting any younger’ thing.”

“Great. Maybe I’ll just go up to the next man I meet and say, ‘Listen, I’m actually forty-four years old, but don’t let that scare you away.’”

“Hm, see what you mean. Speaking of Harold, he still bothering you?”

Joleen sighed. “He left another nasty message on my answering machine last night. He blames me because none of the girls want to have anything to do with him.”

“That’s just stupid. He’s the one who abandoned them.”

“He doesn’t seem to remember that part. His version goes that I drove him away and then refused to let him have access to his children. Access my foot! I spent years trying to find the louse so that he could help with child support! And now that they’re all grown up and don’t need his money any more, he waltzes back into their lives and expects them to welcome him with open arms.”

“Tell him to take a hike. He’s got no hold over them, or you, any longer.” Brenda noticed the contemplative look on Joleen’s face. “Joleen? He’s not threatening you, is he?”

“Harold can be very manipulative. I’m afraid he might try to turn the girls against me.”

“So he is threatening you.”

“Technically, no. Not yet. All he’s done so far is a lot of name calling and demanding. He’s asked for money, which I flatly refused. But I know what he’s capable of.”

“Have you got a lawyer?” Brenda asked.

“Why would I need a lawyer?” Joleen scoffed. “It’s just Harold trying to make my life miserable. Again.”

“It’s harassment,” Brenda insisted. “You need a lawyer.”

“Oh great! So I spend an arm and a leg on some nosy lawyer who’ll end up telling me to go home and quit being a whiner. Or worse, I’ll end up with some snake in the grass who’ll try to take advantage of me in my ‘vulnerable’ state.”

“As if that would happen!” Brenda grinned. “Although, it could be interesting . . . more

prospects?”

“Brenda!”

“Seriously, you need a lawyer, girlfriend. I know this really nice man – he’s a friend of Bob’s dad – who is very reasonable, and from what I understand, very professional. And he’s also old, and since you don’t like older men, there should be no problem keeping the relationship strictly platonic.”

“Never trust older men,” Joleen reiterated emphatically.

“Well, anyway, I still think a good lawyer might come in handy.”

“Thanks. But I doubt I’ll need it.”

“Well, keep it in mind, just in case.”

“Oh, my goodness! Times up and I still need to see Sam!” Joleen dumped the rest of her coffee into the sink and headed for the door. “Could you tell Jeanie I’ll just be a few minutes? I got delayed with the new order?”

“Sam, is it?” Brenda mused. “I want details later!” she called to her friend’s back.

After her conversation with Brenda, Joleen felt a little uncertain. She knew that men were attracted to her; they always had been. But perhaps her methodology was all wrong. The day might soon be coming when sex appeal wasn’t enough. If she was ever to find a lasting relationship, maybe she needed a different approach. And that’s what she wanted, wasn’t it? Something to fill the gnawing void that had been growing inside?

She spotted Sam O’Neill almost immediately upon entering the loading area. He was tall and strongly built; a man toughened by hard work and manual labor. He looked to be in his mid thirties, with handsome chiseled features, tanned complexion and dark hair that curled out from beneath his ball cap. He seemed like a quiet type, though; a bit shy, even.

Old habits were hard to break. Joleen felt the heated excitement of conquest beginning to course through her body. Timing was everything. It was all about tactics.

Outmaneuvering your opponent. She picked her way across the cement floor of the warehouse, looking decidedly out of place in her tight fitting skirt and low cut blouse amid the coveralls and ball caps.

“Oh, hello again, Sam,” she greeted with casual breathiness. Sam O’Neill touched his own ball cap and uttered an indecipherable greeting. He was on the loading dock helping to off load the contents from his delivery truck onto a wagon.

“Do you mind if I take a look at that shipping order for a minute?” Joleen asked, leaning into Sam as she peered at the clip board he was holding. “I simply must get that order of

matching thongs and bras up to the floor as soon as possible. They're selling like wildfire!" She smiled up at him as he turned a slight shade of pink. "Sometimes things get lost in the warehouse for days before I ever see them. Once it's signed for do you think you could help me find the right box and I'll just take it up myself?"

Sam cleared his throat. "Sure," he mumbled. He bent over to look for the correct label and turned an even deeper shade of red. Joleen was also bending over, displaying an ample amount of cleavage. He averted his eyes and picked a box up. "It looks like there are three boxes. You'll need a dolly."

"Really?" Joleen inquired with innocence. "How heavy can lingerie be?" She had managed to position herself so that he had to brush past her on his way to the dolly.

"There you go," he said, as he positioned the last box on the two wheeled cart. She was in his way again.

"Thank you so much, Sam." She made sure she caught his eye and gave him her most winning smile.

"No problem," he replied gruffly, tipping his hat. "Uh, after you." He gestured for her to go ahead.

"Thanks again. See you around," Joleen said, pushing the dolly as elegantly as possible. "Oops!" The top carton slid off. "I guess I'm not very good at steering these things," she sighed. Before she had a chance to retrieve the box herself, Sam had picked it up.

"Do you want help?" he asked hesitantly.

"Would you mind?"

"Looks like the guys are doing fine unloading," Sam said. "This'll only take a minute." He called to one of the other men who nodded, and then took over control of the dolly.

"I can't tell you how embarrassed I am at being so clumsy!" exclaimed Joleen. "Or how much I appreciate your help."

"No problem."

They entered the intimate space of the elevator. Joleen leaned across Sam to press the button. "Ladies lingerie, coming up."

Sam stood ram rod straight, staring directly ahead. He shifted from foot to foot, coughing into his fist before engrossing himself in the ascending numbers above the door.

"So, Sam," Joleen cut in brightly. "We didn't get to talk much the other day. How long have you been delivering to Redman's?"

“About two months.”

“Really? And here we’ve only just met a couple of times. Imagine.”

“Right.” His eyes remained on the flashing numerals.

“But you must deliver all over the city,” Joleen commented.

“Yep. Pretty much.”

“You probably know this city like the back of your hand.”

“I suppose so.”

“I’ll bet you know all the best traffic routes. The quickest way to get from here to there. You’ve probably come across some nice out of the way spots, too. Places you could spend a quiet evening alone, sometime – or with someone special.”

“Uh, yeah. . .”

“Ah, here we are! Ladies non-mentionables!”

They emerged from the elevator. Joleen gave Brenda a slight wave as she and Sam walked past her perfume counter. Brenda just smiled and shook her head.

“Right over here should be fine,” Joleen directed.

Sam skillfully slipped the dolly out from under the cartons. “Well, that’s it then, uh. . . what was your name again?” The tips of his ears had turned pink again and he was rubbing the back of his neck.

“Joleen. Joleen Allen,” Joleen supplied. She placed her hand on his arm. “And thank you again, Sam, for helping me. I’m really very grateful.”

“No problem.”

“And now that you know where I work, you can come up and visit me anytime,” Joleen said.

“Um, right.” He hesitated for a moment. “Or. . . or maybe we could go out for coffee sometime,” he finally stuttered. His face was beet red now and he looked down at the floor.

*Score!* Sam was shy, but he wasn’t stupid. A cat like grin flashed across Joleen’s lips. “Why, Sam! That’s a wonderful idea. How about Friday?” she suggested.

“Okay.” There was pause. “You want to just meet somewhere, or should I pick you up?”

“Why don’t we just meet somewhere? How about Rio’s at, say, seven? Do you know it?”

Sam nodded. “Rio’s at seven.” He shifted awkwardly, scrutinizing a scuff on the floor.

“Wonderful.” Joleen’s eyebrows rose. “Rio’s. At seven.”

“Well, I guess I better get going.” He jerked his head up and gave a stilted wave as he turned to excuse himself, apparently anxious to take his leave now that the ordeal was over.

Joleen waved at his retreating figure, a slight smile of satisfaction on her face. She just hoped he wasn’t always this nervous. She’d have to work on bringing him out of his shell.

“That was quick work,” Brenda commented, interrupting Joleen’s train of thought as she sidled up to her friend.

“Even I’m surprised,” Joleen laughed. “He’s definitely a shy one. I wasn’t expecting a date until . . . oh, next week.”

“Still got all the right moves, I see,” a deeper, sarcastic voice startled both women.

Joleen gasped, and then glared as her ex husband, Harold Allen, stepped out from behind a clothing rack. He looked older than she had ever remembered, but then she hadn’t seen him in a long time. Years of hard living were taking their toll. He still wore his thinning dark hair in a scraggly ponytail; his cheeks and eyes had become sunken and hollow. He had the look of a vulture about to swoop down on some carrion.

He eyed Brenda. “I’d like to talk with my wife. Alone.”

“Ex wife,” Brenda corrected, undaunted. She turned to Joleen. “Listen, honey. Looks like I have a customer. But if you need anything, just holler.” She glared at Harold as she swept by on her way back to her own domain.

“What are you doing here?” Joleen demanded.

“Since I’m not getting any satisfaction by telephone, I thought I’d better show up in person.”

“I’m very sorry, Harold, but I am busy right now and don’t have time to talk,” Joleen informed.

Harold scanned the department store. Piped in music played softly as a few customers

milled past. “Doesn’t look too busy at the moment, Joleen,” he observed, a thin, sarcastic smile never leaving his lips.

“Well, still, I’m at work. This isn’t the time or the place,” Joleen argued.

“You’d better make a time and a place, Joleen,” he said with just the right amount of threat in his voice.

“What do you want exactly?” Joleen demanded, crossing her arms over her chest. “If it’s money, you’re out of luck. I’ve worked hard all these years without any help from you and I’m not about to give you a cent. And as for the girls, they’re all grown up, now. They make their own choices about who they do and do not see. If you want to be part of their lives you’ll have to talk to them about it. But I wouldn’t hold my breath after the way you’ve treated them.”

“You disappoint me,” Harold said. “Such bitterness. Don’t you know that bitterness makes one age? And you wouldn’t want that, now, would you? Not when you’ve still got young, virile males after your – well, you know.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Leave. Now,” Joleen directed, barely controlling her anger.

“You know,” Harold continued, ignoring her. “I often wondered how many other men you’d slept with. A woman like you would find it hard to be satisfied with only one man.”

“I was never unfaithful to you, and you know it. How dare you even accuse me of such a thing?”

“And what if I was able to prove it?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Joleen scoffed.

“Hm. Considering your past history, I don’t think it would be all that difficult. I wonder what the girls would say if they found out. . . ”

“Leave them out of it. Don’t go poisoning them with your - your lies!”

“They’re not lies, are they?” Harold sneered. “We both know that.”

“My daughters and I have a solid relationship. Nothing is going to change that,” Joleen stated.

“And are you willing to test that theory?” Harold asked.

Joleen sighed, suddenly feeling every bit her forty-four years. “I’m tired of this game, Harold. What do you want?”

“Satisfaction,” he stated simply.

“Meaning?”

“It’s always grated on me that you’ve come out smelling like a rose, while I’ve been made to look like the villain. When I was going through a rough time and needed the love and support of my wife, you refused to help.”

“What? I stuck by you Harold – far longer than I should have. God knows I sacrificed to support you.”

“That’s not the way my lawyer sees it,” Harold said smugly. “He should be serving you with papers very soon.”

“You can’t possibly be serious. What could I owe you?”

“Wrongful divorce, retroactive alimony, medical support payments,” he listed with a sly grin. “Shall I go on?”

“But I had the children!” Joleen was dumbfounded. “And what are you talking about, medical payments? You were in jail.”

“I’m not talking about then. Afterwards, when I sought refuge south of the border.”

“What?” Joleen shook her head in confusion.

“Don’t worry. My lawyer will explain it all,” he smiled.

“This is crazy, Harold. I don’t have any extra money. You must know that.”

He ignored her. “Don’t you just love the times we live in?” He laughed. “I was sick and needed treatment. I had no means of supporting myself. It’s a simple matter of negligence, my dear. And now that I’m better, well, all I’m asking for is my due.”

“This is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. It’ll never stand up in court.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Harold shrugged. “But if it does go to court, a whole lot of other nasty business is bound to come to light. And you wouldn’t want that, now, would you?”

Joleen’s mouth was clamped tight, the muscles in her jaw working hard as she tried to gain control of her outrage. “I knew you were low, but not this low,” she managed to whisper. She glanced toward a customer browsing through one of the racks.

“Looks like you’ve got customers,” Harold noted. “We’ll keep in touch.” He sauntered from the lingerie department, stopping to inspect a black and red negligee on the way.

Joleen's emotions were reeling. What moments ago had been a feeling of triumph had now turned into nauseating fear and doubt. Maybe she'd get that lawyer's number after all.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment before pasting on a bright smile. Another shopper was in the zone.

## *Chapter Two*

The noise of the comedy rerun on TV melded with the sizzling sounds of the frying pan. Suddenly the smoke alarm went off.

“Jade! I asked you to watch the stove for a minute while I went to the bathroom,” Jennifer Allen cried as she dashed into the kitchen. “Can’t you even do that much around here?”

“I was watching it,” her sister Jade called absently from her spot on the couch. “You know that stupid alarm goes off all the time for nothing. Make it stop! I’m watching a show.”

Jennifer got up on a kitchen chair and waved a tea towel frantically around the alarm. Her chin length blonde hair swung about her face and she almost lost both her glasses and her balance.

“Just take the batteries out,” another sister, Jinger, advised loudly as she sauntered past. She was putting her own thick blonde curls up into a loose bun as she walked and was wearing only her undergarments.

“Can’t you put some clothes on, for goodness sake?” Jennifer exclaimed, taking a look at Jinger’s skimpy attire.

“Sorry,” Jinger snapped back. “I’m trying to get ready to go out, but *someone* was in the bathroom.” She turned on her heel and disappeared down the hall.

“Quiet! I’m trying to watch a show!” Jade called again.

“Well, if somebody would help me here!” Jennifer exclaimed in frustration.

The front door of the apartment slammed.

“What on earth is going on?” Joleen hollered above the din, as she came in through the kitchen entrance.

“I was making dinner, and now it’s burning, and I can’t get this stupid alarm to quit!” Jennifer explained above the noise.

“Just take the batteries out,” Joleen suggested, making a quick exit from the uproar into the hallway.

With an exasperated sigh, Jennifer did just that, before dumping the frying pan into the sink where the blackened contents continued to sizzle.

Jinger came out of the bathroom holding some mascara in one hand and a mirror in the

other. She had donned a thin robe, but hadn't bothered to belt it up. She perused the remains of the evening meal with distaste. "Hmm. Interesting. What was it?"

"It was supposed to be a stir fry in Thai sauce," Jennifer said ruefully, picking through the mess with a fork. "I found a whole series on international cuisine at the library. And can't you at least get decent before you come out in public?"

"Lighten up! This is hardly public. We're all family," Jinger stated, hands on hips. She continued in a condescending tone, "Now, the secret to gourmet cooking is to *not* cook everything on high."

"And what would you know about cooking?" Jennifer countered. "You always seem to be busy when it's your night to cook. We're left eating peanut butter sandwiches."

"Oh, whatever," Jinger said dismissively, tossing her head. "At least I've got a life."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jennifer demanded.

Jinger just shrugged, as she opened the refrigerator and peered inside.

"At least I try to pull my weight around here, which is a lot more than I can say for you and Jade," Jennifer continued defensively.

"Hey, don't be dragging me into this," Jade called from the living room. "I make supper when it's my turn."

"Oh right. Straight out of the can," Jennifer snorted, cleaning her glasses on a fresh dish towel. "Unless you order in, that is."

"Food is food," Jade replied.

"Girls! This is not sounding at all friendly," Joleen scolded, emerging from her bedroom in a pink track suit. Once again, it looked like she was going to have to take matters into her own hands.

"Don't look at me," Jinger shrugged, digging a carrot out of the crisper and taking a bite. "She's the one getting all huffy," she said, pointing the carrot at Jennifer.

"Only because I feel like I'm the only one doing my share around here," Jennifer sniffed.

"I pay my rent," Jade's voice was heard to say from the living room.

"This month, maybe," Jennifer called back before directing the next statement at Jinger, "Which is more than some of us can say."

"I suppose you're keeping track of my phone calls, too?" Jinger asked with a glare.

“Okay, girls, that is enough,” Joleen interjected. “How can we live together when you’re fighting all the time?”

“Believe me, I wouldn’t be here if I had another choice,” Jinger said under her breath.

“Well, for now you need to choose to make the best of it. How about if I scramble some eggs while you make the toast, Jennifer? I’ve got some things I need to discuss with you girls.” Joleen turned to the cupboard. Jinger glared at her mother’s back for a second, and then swept from the room, her open robe flying out behind her like a cape.

Joleen sighed. She could understand Jennifer’s exasperation with her sisters. As their mother, sometimes she felt it, too. Jennifer was practical, reserved, conscientious. . . It irked her that her siblings didn’t seem to care about carrying their own weight. But then again, sometimes she carried it too far. Jennifer’s smug superiority could be down right irritating. Joleen could see why Jinger balked whenever Jennifer tried to keep them all in line. Jinger was the most like Joleen, herself. She wasn’t one to be pushed around easily. She had her own ambitions, and didn’t appreciate others getting in the way. Now Jade - she was a different story all together. As the baby of the family, she was just plain spoiled.

In a few minutes the meal was ready. Jinger emerged from her room in a sleek black pant suit and high heels.

“Jade! Shut the TV off now and come and join us,” Joleen called.

Jade shuffled into the small kitchen with a stretch and a yawn.

“You really should grow out of the skater girl look, sister dear,” Jinger commented as Jade plopped down onto chair. “It’s definitely getting dated.”

“Whatever,” Jade scowled, reaching for the eggs. Presently, her hair was a semi spiked, messy orange and blonde combination. Last month it had been jet black. Several piercings, including a lip and an eyebrow ring, added to the rebel persona.

“I agree,” Joleen added. “I know you’ve a wonderful figure hidden somewhere under those baggy clothes.”

“I’m not interested in flaunting my goods, mother,” Jade commented dryly. “I think there are enough people doing that in this family.”

“Ouch,” Jennifer quipped smugly.

Jinger rolled her eyes at Jennifer. “Your ‘frump librarian’ look is no better.”

“That was a tad uncalled for, Jinger,” Joleen scolded. “Maybe if you just offered your

sister some makeup tips -”

“I don’t want any makeup tips, thank you very much!” Jennifer responded hotly.

“See? It’s not like I haven’t tried,” Jinger sighed. “But seriously. I can’t believe that my own sisters have no fashion sense. When I become the next designing sensation, you two will simply have to start dressing for success. I can’t have you ruining my reputation.”

“Oh, I forgot. It’s always about you, isn’t it?” Jennifer noted.

“Lay off each other,” Jade interjected. “Both of you sound like a couple of squabbling old hens. Just chill, okay? Everyone dresses they way they want and we’re all happy.”

“I would hardly call that happy,” Jinger pointed out, looking straight at Jennifer. “Unless you call taking pleasure in your own misery, ‘happy’.”

“You always have to have the last word, don’t you?” Jennifer snapped.

“Now who’s having the last word?”

“Girls! You’re sounding positively adolescent!” Joleen exclaimed in exasperation. “It’s not like I don’t have enough stress in my life right now without having to listen to you three!”

“What did I do?” Jade asked. When she didn’t get an answer, she just shrugged. Jennifer remained with her lips pressed stubbornly shut.

“You’re right, of course, mother dear,” Jinger said brightly. “Let’s change the subject. That’s a nice outfit you’ve got on.” She nodded at the light pink track suit Joleen was wearing. “Are you going somewhere tonight?”

“Oh, I’ve got my self defense class,” Joleen replied.

“Self defense? When did you start taking self defense?” Jinger asked.

“A couple of weeks ago,” Joleen answered. “Every Wednesday, remember?”

“Hm, that’s interesting,” Jinger said. “Funny I didn’t know about it.”

“Actually, it’s quite typical,” Jennifer stated.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jinger asked.

“You’re always so busy thinking about yourself, it’s not surprising you forget about what other people are doing.”

“Did you hear that?” Jinger turned to both her mother and her younger sister Jade. “And I’m always getting accused of starting the fights around here!”

“Actually, the class is quite fun,” Joleen continued, trying to avoid another argument between her daughters. “You know, I was thinking. You girls should join me. It could be a mother daughter thing.”

Jade leaned forward in a conspiratorial fashion. “You want the real reason she’s going? The instructor is hot.”

“Learning to protect one’s self is a very important skill that every woman should know,” Joleen defended.

“But you do admit the instructor is a hotty,” Jade laughed. “I heard you say something about ‘tight buns’ the other day.”

“It’s a great way to get exercise and learn a useful skill at the same time,” Joleen ignored the comment. “So? What do you say?” she asked brightly.

“Sorry, I haven’t got time right now,” Jinger said dismissively.

“The Literary Society holds their Author’s Circle on Wednesdays. You know that,” Jennifer spoke with a frown when her mother looked in her direction.

Jade didn’t even wait for the look. “Count me out! Sounds like work. Besides, that whole self defense scene is Jill’s department.”

“Suit yourselves,” Joleen shrugged. “Speaking of Jill, has she called by any chance?”

“Yeah, she called earlier,” Jade informed them. “Said she was dropping by for a few minutes. Something about a family meeting?”

“Thanks for remembering to tell us,” Jennifer snapped at Jade.

“Family meeting? What family meeting?” Jinger asked.

“Just something I need to talk to you girls about,” Joleen replied lightly.

“I hope it won’t take too long. I do have other plans,” Jinger said.

“I promise I’ll keep it short.”

“So what’s up?” Jade asked.

“Let’s wait for Jill. I don’t want to have to repeat myself.”

“Hm. Mysterious,” Jade mused. She made some eerie sound effects until Jennifer shushed her with an irritated frown.

“Is Jasmine coming over, too?” Jinger asked. “If she is, I need to talk to her about getting me in with some of her important advertising friends. I’ve got an idea about how I can introduce one of my designs.”

“No, I’m afraid she couldn’t make it,” Joleen apologized. “She is very busy these days with some important clients.”

“She’s always busy with important clients,” Jennifer noted with a frown. “She never has much time for family any more.”

“That’s because her career is going places,” Jinger explained in defense of her oldest sister. “Her advertising firm is one of the best in the city.”

“You make it sound like she owns it or something,” Jennifer pointed out. “She just works there.”

“Oh, you’re always such a downer,” Jinger complained. “I happen to know that Jasmine is the reason the firm is doing so well. She’s been specifically sought out by some very influential people.”

“So, because she’s busy making the big bucks, she gets out of the ‘family meeting’?” Jade frowned. “Geez, ma. I started a second part time job at the Cineplex. Does that count?”

“She’s not really ‘getting out’ of anything,” Joleen tried to explain. “I just have a couple of . . . issues that I need to bring to everyone’s attention. She’ll have her turn tomorrow. We’re meeting for lunch.”

“You never took us out for lunch,” Jade noted dryly. “We have to settle for scrambled eggs and toast before we get the lecture.”

“A simple family meeting is hardly a lecture!” Joleen said in exasperation.

“It doesn’t seem quite fair,” Jinger agreed with Jade. “After all, everyone is busy, not just Jasmine. I guess that’s the advantage of having your own place. Once I get some of my designs off the ground and can afford my own place. . . ”

“Face it, you’ll be stuck in retail for the rest of your life,” Jade laughed. “And living at home!” Jinger gave her a swat. “Just kidding! Geez!”

“You’ll be the one stuck in your dead end job at the cappuccino bar,” Jinger countered.

“I like my job,” Jade protested. “Not every body wants to be a celebrity like you.”

“You’ve got that right,” Jennifer added.

“Right. Like you love your job proofreading other people’s manuscripts when you could be writing your own stories,” Jinger directed at Jennifer.

“As a matter of fact, I do. At least I’m making a meaningful contribution to society rather than just catering to people’s vanity,” Jennifer countered airily.

“Whoa!” Joleen cautioned, raising a warning hand. “Stop right now, before this gets out of hand again! Honestly, I’ve never heard you girls bicker so!”

“I guess you just haven’t been listening very well over the past twenty odd years,” Jade said.

A buzzer sounded shrilly, interrupting the conversation. “Finally. That must be your sister now.” As Joleen went to answer the door, Jennifer and Jinger rose to clear away the dishes.

“You don’t have to, you know,” Jennifer pointed out somewhat defensively. “It is my night.”

“That’s okay,” Jinger replied with a shrug. “Consider it a peace offering.”

Jill Allen strode into the kitchen after giving her mother a quick hug at the door. Slightly smaller in stature than her siblings, her movements were quick and purposeful, like those of an athlete. She wore nondescript running shorts and a tank top which left her well muscled arms and legs exposed. She sniffed the air. “You burn something?”

“Jennifer made supper,” Jade supplied dryly from where she still sat at the table. Jill flopped down on a chair beside her.

She flipped off the sweat band she wore around her forehead and ran a hand through her closely cropped blonde hair, leaving it standing on end in places.

“Now that’s rather disgusting,” Jinger noted. “I’m glad we finished eating before you flicked your sweaty headband all over the table.”

“I was jogging,” Jill defended. “What’s the point of jogging if you don’t sweat?”

“So that’s what that smell is,” Jade teased.

Jill just laughed. Never one to beat around the bush, she added, “So? What’s up? Let’s get this meeting started.”

“Well, girls,” Joleen spoke from the kitchen entrance. “I’d like to talk to you about

something if you'd come into the living room."

"Must be important if she wants us to move to the living room," Jade noted, not moving.

"What's up?" Jill asked. "What's wrong with right here around the kitchen table?"

"Just come into the living room, please," Joleen answered. She was clearly on edge, as she twisted her hands together, waiting for her daughters to comply.

All four sisters shrugged and moved into the adjoining room. The three bedroom apartment was not large or luxurious, but Joleen had done the best she could to make it tasteful.

"Okay. So here we are," Jinger prompted once they'd all found a seat.

"Yes, well," Joleen began. She sighed heavily, not sure where to begin. "It's about your father." Groans followed.

"Look," Jill interrupted. "You already told us that he's been in contact with you and that he's asked to see us. I, for one, am not interested." She rose from her position on the couch. "Good thing I was going for a jog anyway. I would have hated to completely waste my time."

"Jill, please," Joleen pleaded. "I'm not trying to convince you to reconcile. That's your decision to make. There's more. Sit down, will you?"

Jill sighed impatiently. "This better be good," she snorted as she flopped back onto the couch between Jade and Jinger. "If he wants to see us so bad, let him come and do it in person, rather than hiding behind our mother."

"I really don't care either way," Jinger stated. "I mean, I was pretty young when he left. I really don't feel the need for him in my life right at the moment. Unless he has connections with Calvin Klein," she added with a flippant laugh.

"Girls, you're getting ahead of me," Joleen interrupted. "I told you before that he'd called and might want to see you, but what I didn't tell you was, he's asking for money."

"What?" Jill sputtered.

"I refused, of course, but, well, he also made some very disturbing comments."

"What kind of disturbing comments?" Jill asked suspiciously.

"Well . . . accusations."

"Stupid," Jill said under her breath. "Doesn't he know he has a cop for a daughter? I'll

put a stop to that right away.”

“No! I really don’t want a lot of fuss.”

“But if he’s harassing you -”

“There’s only one reason I even bring it up. You know that I’ve never wittingly tried to turn you girls against your father. Having said that, I do feel I need to warn you. I know what he’s capable of, and I’m afraid he’ll try to trick you girls in some way. Try to turn you against me.”

“He couldn’t do that,” came a chorus of denials.

Joleen shrugged. “So far everything he’s said has been a lot of hot air, and may all just blow over. On the other hand, I have the name of a lawyer, and if it comes to that I may have to take legal action. I want you to know that I love you, and although I have not always been a perfect mother, I’ve tried to do the best that I know how. No matter what your father, or any one else says, remember that.”

“What exactly is he threatening you with?” Jill asked, furrowing her brow.

“Something about support payments, medical bills. . .”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jill sputtered. “That’ll never stand up.”

“That’s what I thought, but apparently he has a lawyer.”

“So you need to get in touch with that lawyer,” Jill stated. “Simple.”

“Is that it?” Jinger asked, sounding bored. “I really do need to go now.”

Joleen looked momentarily hurt. “Oh. Well, I’m sorry, but this is important to me. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Couldn’t we have just done this over the phone?” Jill wondered.

“Obviously I need an excuse to get my own daughter to come for a visit,” Joleen quipped, striving for lightness.

Jill laughed. “What about Jas? She exempt from your little lecture or she just comes to visit more often?”

“She gets lunch,” Jade stated, turning on the TV.

“Well, I’ve got places to go and people to see,” Jinger said, giving her mother a brief kiss on the cheek. “Apparently some out-of-towners with connections are going to that new

club in North Van. I need to go and see if I can get introduced.” She reached for her hand bag on the shelf in the closet. “Speaking of places to go, don’t you have somewhere to be, mother?” She turned to her older sister. “You’ll be pleased to note that our mother has taken up self defense.”

“Really?” Jill asked with interest. “Good for you. And may I ask what brought that on?”

“Good looking instructor with tight buns,” Jade offered from the couch.

“That’s my ma!” Jinger laughed on her way to the door.

Jill looked less amused. “Is there a reason? Other than the one stated.”

“I thought you’d be pleased,” Joleen exclaimed.

“I am. I mean it’s a good thing. Every woman should know how to defend herself. I just think it’s a little coincidental after tonight’s lecture.”

“Now you’re starting to sound like a cop. Relax,” Joleen assured her. “I really am just taking your good advice.”

“As long as you’re sure. I know some people in the department that could keep a look out if it would make you feel better.”

“Thanks, honey. I’ll keep that in mind, but I don’t think it’ll be necessary.”

“I do remember, you know,” Jill stated. “What he’s like, I mean. If anybody remembers it’s me – and Jas. You don’t need to worry about us doing anything stupid.” She gave Joleen a departing hug then called to her other sisters. “Jenn? You going down to your author’s thingy at the Arts Centre? I’ll walk as far as the bus stop with you if you are. And Jade - you stay out of trouble, you hear? You wouldn’t want your own sister hauling you in for anything.”

“Just what did she mean by that?” Joleen wanted to know after Jill and Jennifer had gone.

“Beats me,” Jade shrugged and turned the TV up.

### Chapter Three

Jennifer took her seat in the multi purpose room that was home to the Literary Society's Author's Circle each Wednesday night. The Community Arts Centre had generously allowed the space free of charge for the use of budding writers and literary enthusiasts to come together and discuss their work. It was pretty much Jennifer's only social outing each week and she looked forward to it immensely.

She had started attending the weekly event about four years ago right after she got her present job at the publishing house. She knew most of the people that attended regularly by face, but she still had very few names to go with those faces. She mostly just sat and listened, rarely venturing to offer an opinion openly.

She ached with the need sometimes to share her own meager efforts. But the bite of criticism was not something she was ready to risk yet. One day, when she had polished and perfected her thoughts, she would share. . .

Tonight the group had the privilege of a guest author. She was reading some selections from her most recent book - a series of short stories based on interviews with street people.

"Do you find that your audience has been narrowed because of the explicit way you write?" one listener asked after the author finished a rather graphic story about a teenage prostitute.

"I hope not," laughed the writer, rather condescendingly. "That's reality on the streets. People can't hide their heads in the sand."

"It is somewhat reminiscent of *Go Ask Alice*," another person commented. "Were you trying for that same kind of grittiness?"

"I think this piece is much more focused than the novel you're referring to," the author responded. "And obviously, more current."

"Would you say the ending was rather defeatist?"

"Life on the street usually doesn't end like a fairy tale," the author defended.

The discussion continued in this vein for some time. Jennifer listened intently to the different views presented. Personally, she didn't like the story. It left no sense of hope what so ever.

"Too much swearing."

Jennifer was startled from her own thoughts as the man sitting three chairs over muttered just loud enough for her ears. There was no one else sitting between them, and she turned

to acknowledge his comment, then wondered if he had even meant for her to hear.

She smiled tentatively, quickly turning her eyes back toward the front where the discussion continued. He was awfully good looking, she noted. With chagrin she realized the thought sounded a lot like her mother. She pursed her mouth shut and listened more intently.

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Joleen arrived at the martial arts studio just a few minutes late. She peeled off the zippered jacket of her pink track suit, and joined the class. Several other women were already going through their warm ups, many of them dressed in baggy T shirts and ill matching sweat pants. The group was comprised of about ten or twelve women of various ages and ability, but none looked as fashionable as Joleen in the low cut track pants and white tank top.

She started doing some side stretches, but was startled when the instructor came up beside her. "You're late," he said, looking her straight in the eye.

"Not too late, I hope," Joleen replied smoothly and continued stretching.

"We're an odd number tonight," he continued. "You may have to partner with me for the initial warm up and we'll show the others what to do." A slight smile of challenge played on his lips.

"Fine," Joleen agreed coolly. *So. He had finally taken notice.*

Cody Slade was no shy introvert. He exuded masculinity and confidence. It was hard to judge his age, since he wore his head shaved, but he had a dark goatee and mustache. Joleen guessed him at somewhere in his early thirties. He was no where near as tall as Sam O'Neill, at probably somewhere around 5'10", but the power packed into his well muscled frame was evident.

Cody put the class through their paces, using Joleen as his primary model. It was not the kind of stress relief she had bargained for, but was a very interesting diversion, none the less. When it was time to practice, he released her to work with another female partner so that he could monitor the entire class.

Joleen watched Cody's retreating backside. Jade was right, she thought, a smile playing at the corners of her lips.

Joleen's thoughts were jarred abruptly back to the matter at hand. Her partner was giggling and fussing over what to do next. How did one come across as elegant and enticing while sparring with another female? A very short, rather uncoordinated female at that! Her partner was not making matters easy. The goal was to impress, not make a complete fool of oneself.

“Oops,” the woman giggled. “How did that go again?”

Joleen tried to guide the woman through the defensive move that Cody had just showed them. They stumbled inelegantly, almost falling to the floor.

“Here, let me help you,” Cody offered, coming up behind them.

“Thanks,” the woman laughed. “I’m just so clumsy!”

Joleen tried hard to remain calm and not let her aggravation show. Idiot! She was spoiling everything!

Cody led her smoothly through the motions several times in a row until she seemed to have caught on. Even though he was working with the other woman, his eyes seemed to be focused on Joleen’s. The suggestive smile didn’t leave his lips. Joleen boldly returned his scrutiny. Okay. Maybe things weren’t so bad off after all. If he was trying to send a message, her receivers were tuned in loud and clear.

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Jill stared intently at the information on the screen. The only light illuminating the small office was coming from the computer. Interesting . . . it seemed there might be some unexpected twists and turns to her father’s presence here after all.

Even though she was off duty, as a member of the city police force, nobody questioned her presence at the precinct this time in the evening. Lots of officers followed up on leads after hours – especially the young, single, ambitious types looking for a promotion. Like her. Of course, nobody had to know this particular search was strictly personal.

“What you doin’ here?” a male voice interrupted her concentration.

“Huh? Oh, Daniels. It’s just you,” she said dismissively, turning her eyes back to the screen.

The uniformed officer, leaning casually against the door jam with a coffee cup in his hand, was a broad, good looking fellow with shortly cropped tan hair and tree trunks for arms. “You’re not on duty tonight,” he noted. “What gives?”

Jill shrugged, never taking her eyes off the screen. “Just some info I needed to check out.”

“Next you’ll be trying to make detective,” he teased. “But you’ve gotta do your time in uniform first, like the rest of us.”

“Duly noted,” Jill quipped.

“Anything I can help you with?” he asked, strolling towards the computer.

Jill quickly clicked the minimize icon before he got a closer look. “No thanks,” she replied casually.

He sat on the edge of the desk, cradling his cup. “You know what they say,” he joked. “No porn sites at work. The all seeing eye is always watching.”

“That’s your style, not mine,” Jill scoffed.

“Seriously, though. You won’t be able to keep secrets from me too much longer.”

“Meaning?”

“Next week I’m your new partner,” he said, eyes twinkling.

Jill frowned. “Says who?”

“Go ask the chief if you don’t believe me. Jacobs is going on paternity leave.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Jill said testily. “He’s my partner. But I thought Carrivagio was going to take his place.”

“Just talked to the chief myself. Seems he’s changed his mind,” he shrugged. “Looks like you’re stuck with me.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” Jill said, folding her arms in a defensive posture.

“Why not?” Randy asked. “If you’re worried I’m going to cramp your style, forget it. Whatever went on between you and me before is old news. Past history.”

“Whatever,” Jill said dismissively. “I think I’ll just go and talk to the chief myself.”

“Suit yourself.”

Jill did a quick exit from the website, and rose from her chair. Not that she didn’t trust Randy Daniels . . . there was just too much past history between them. They had been partners for a few months about a year ago. They had even dated for awhile. That’s where the problem came in. Once their relationship had become more than just professional, Randy started treating her differently. He became overly protective - almost patronizing. If there was one thing that Jill couldn’t stand, it was being made to feel weak. She wasn’t weak. Ever. She could stand up to any man.

Five minutes later Jill came out of the chief’s office, a scowl etched across her face. Randy just grinned. “Guess I was right, huh?”

Jill stopped in her tracks, turned, and directed a finger right at Randy's chest. "Don't ever get in the way of me doing my job. Got it? This is for two months only till Jacobs gets back. Until then, we remain strictly professional."

"Whoa!" Randy held up his hands. "Of course. What else?"

Jill strode back to the secluded office where she had been checking the police records. Randy followed on her heels.

"So you gonna to tell me what you're snooping into?" Randy asked.

Jill gave him her best ice queen stare. "Nope. You're not my partner for another four and a half days." With that, she shut the door in his face.

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Joleen lingered in preparing to leave, and was paid off when Cody approached her as she sat on a side bench retying her shoe. "You'll have to focus a bit more on your defensive stance, Mrs. Allen. If I was a predator, you wouldn't stand a chance."

"That's Ms. Allen, remember? I'm unattached," Joleen informed coyly. "Perhaps I need some extra lessons."

Cody laughed. "I think that could be asking for trouble."

"For you or for me?" Joleen asked, studying him out of the corner of her eye.

Cody just smiled. "I think I'll just leave that one alone."

"Well then," Joleen said brightly. "I'd best be on my way. I'll see you next week."

"Same time, same place," Cody said casually. They held each others' gaze for a moment. There was no mistaking the sexual tension.

"Till next week, then," Joleen said rising and slinging her gym bag over her shoulder. She sauntered to the exit without turning back. With a man like Cody Slade, one didn't want to appear too eager.

"Mrs. Allen," he called suddenly when she reached the outer door.

"Ms. Allen," Joleen corrected with a pert smile as she slowly turned around. He was closer than she had expected. Just inches away.

"How about a drink somewhere, before you go home?"

“That depends on where,” Joleen replied.

“My place?” he suggested with a sly grin. They stepped outside and he locked the doors.

“Hm. Let’s save that for next time, shall we?” Joleen responded, still playing the game. “I would hate to have to resort to some of those new moves I learned tonight.”

Cody raised a brow. “That might be fun.”

“Mr. Slade!” Joleen exclaimed with mock contrition.

“There’s a little Irish pub just around the corner,” Cody suggested with a grin.  
“Mulligan’s. We could walk.”

A rush of music and the rumble of voices mixed with laughter greeted them as they stepped into the dim interior. The smell was a heady mixture of beer, perfume and sweat.

Cody directed Joleen up to the bar. “What’ll you have?” he asked.

Joleen shrugged. “Beer, I guess. Somehow it doesn’t seem like the right time for a glass of white wine.”

Cody laughed and ordered two. “The white wine probably suits you better.”

“Interesting tattoos,” she commented as she poured her beer into a tall glass. “The artwork is very detailed. What made you choose a tiger and a dragon?”

Cody had a large, colorfully detailed tattoo on each bicep. One was a ferocious looking tiger, ready to pounce, the other a scaled dragon with razor sharp talons.

“Traditional symbols of agility, power, and danger, all under tight control,” Cody explained.

“Like you?” Joleen asked with a raised brow.

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

“Intriguing,” she smiled and took a sip of her beer.

“You play pool?” he asked.

“A little,” Joleen shrugged, barely containing her smile.

Cody racked up the balls, but when Joleen declined breaking, he took the first turn. After three successful shots in a row he missed, whether by accident or by design, and it was Joleen’s turn.

Joleen set her half empty glass along the edge of the table and walked around to the opposite side. Yellow ball in the corner pocket. Red to the side. She had four turns in a row before she missed by a mere fraction. Pool was one thing Harold had been good at. And he'd taught her.

"You are full of surprises, aren't you, Mrs. Allen?" Cody whistled.

"I guess you'll just have to wait and see," she repeated his own line with a coy smile.

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Jinger surveyed the crowd one more time. Patterns of light systematically cut through the ethereal blueness on the dance floor as the mob moved as one gigantic organism. Her friend Mandy, who got it from a very reliable source, had said that a team of designers from Montreal were supposed to be at this club tonight. So far nothing. Mandy was off rubbing her body up against some cute stranger out on the dance floor somewhere. It looked like Jinger would have to take matters into her own hands.

"Excuse me, bar tender," Jinger called, perching on a stool. "Have you noticed anyone with a French accent around here who might like to buy a lady a drink?"

He gestured toward a table in the corner occupied by four people. Jinger smiled inwardly as her gaze rested on one man in particular. Paul. How opportune.

"Paul? Paul Renwick? Is that you?" she asked, after gliding through the crowd toward the table.

A slim, but handsome, young man with streaked blonde hair looked up from his conversation. "Jinger? How good to see you again." He stood up and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Jinger and I went to the Design Institute together, here in Vancouver," he explained to the others at the table. Jinger nodded at the group of very fashionable, very bored looking individuals. No one seemed overly impressed.

"I'm traveling with some associates from Montreal," Paul continued, turning to Jinger. "May I introduce you to Marguerite, Mario and Jacques?"

"Bienvenue. I hope you enjoy your visit on the west coast," she greeted them in perfect French, which brought a slight smile and a reciprocating nod from one of the men.

"You didn't tell me you spoke French, you sly thing," Paul said, giving Jinger a playful tap.

Jinger just smiled. "I heard you moved to Montreal. So things are going well for you there?"

“Oh, wonderful, wonderful,” Paul gushed. “Would you like to join us?”

“Are you sure there’s room?”

“Of course,” Paul assured, although the rest of the group looked somewhat less enthusiastic.

“So what are you doing back in Vancouver, Paul?” Jinger asked once she had been furnished with a drink.

“Actually, we’re on a bit of a business trip,” he informed. “The head of marketing for Castilano’s wants to launch next year’s spring fashions simultaneously in Montreal and Vancouver, via satellite. The big boss seems keen on the idea, so he sent a team out west to check out the possibilities. In fact, he’s here himself.”

“Are they looking for any more designers?” Jinger inquired.

“Um, the company has its designers already in place,” Paul said quickly, signaling with his eyes toward the three other people sitting at the table.

“I see,” Jinger said. “So do all of you design for Castilano’s?”

“I’m the head designer for the spring collection,” the only other woman in the group informed. She looked to be at least fifty, but was very well preserved. Her stilted French accent only added to the superiority with which she spoke.

One man said something in French which Jinger didn’t catch and they all laughed.

Miffed, but undaunted, Jinger persevered. “Lovely. I’m very impressed with the fall line from your company. Are you planning to incorporate that same sense of natural elements into the spring line as well?”

The woman eyed Jinger suspiciously for a moment, before turning to the man on her immediate left. They exchanged a few low words in French, before she turned back to Jinger. “You will excuse us, Miss. . . Jinger. Mario just reminded me that we have an early start in the morning. Jacques? Will you be joining us?”

The other man shrugged and rose from the table as well. He was the one who had at least nodded a greeting earlier and seemed less affected than the other two.

“You may stay and visit with your friend if you like,” the woman said directly to Paul, granting her permission like an heiress to a lowly benefactor. “We will be expecting you in the lobby of our hotel at exactly 7:15 AM.”

Jinger and Paul watched the threesome wind their way toward the exit. The males stayed one step behind as the woman led them, head held high as a queen’s.

“Sorry about that,” Paul apologized. “These French designers are somewhat suspicious. Don’t you know you never ask a French designer about their new fashion line ahead of time?”

“I was just trying to make conversation,” Jinger pouted. “I was hoping if I came across as knowledgeable I’d make a good impression.”

“That’s just Madam Benoit’s way,” Paul dismissed.

“That was Madam Benoit?” Jinger asked, somewhat surprised. “Just as well I didn’t flatter her too much. I actually hate the evening collection she designed last year. It has got to be the most colloquial work I’ve ever seen Castilano try to market. No wonder nobody’s buying it.”

“Too true!” Paul agreed. “She thinks she’s the centre of the fashion universe, when really she’s just one more fish in a big ocean. Mostly sharks, I might add,” he laughed.

“I guess her bait was good enough for Castilano,” Jinger mused. “Speaking of, way to go, Paul! Good to see that someone from our class is going somewhere.”

“I wouldn’t say that exactly,” Paul shrugged.

“Are you kidding? Designing for Castilano, one of the premier manufacturers of women’s clothing in the country?”

“Well, I’m not actually designing yet,” Paul admitted. “I’m working down in the pattern making department right now.”

“Oh,” Jinger said, trying to hide the disappointment in her voice. “Well, I guess it’s a place to start. At least you’ve got your foot in the door.”

“That’s exactly what I figured,” Paul replied. “And what are you doing these days?”

“Retail,” Jinger said without enthusiasm. “It’s a nice, exclusive dress shop down on Robson, but I’d rather be selling my own designs.”

“Wouldn’t we all.”

“I have nightmares about becoming my mother. Forty-something and still working in a retail store,” Jinger sighed.

“Oh, I remember your mother,” Paul exclaimed. “She’s that sexy number that used to meet you for lunch sometimes.”

Jinger rolled her eyes. “This is my mother you’re talking about, remember?” She sighed

dramatically. “Geez! I was really hoping to make some kind of connection tonight! How am I ever going to get someone to look at my designs with watch dogs like Madam Benoit around?”

“It’s a dog eat dog world,” Paul agreed.

“What about that one guy?” Jinger asked. “The one she called Jacques? He seemed a bit more receptive than the other two.”

“He’s the venue specialist – you know, lighting requirements, techno mumbo jumbo. He pretty much just does what ever he’s told. You know, we want this kind of magic, and poof, he delivers.”

“Hm. And the other guy?”

“Marketing and PR. Again, he pretty much gets led around by the nose. He’s like this with Madam Benoit,” Paul said, holding two fingers together. “He wouldn’t be the one you need to talk to.”

“So who *do* I need to talk to?” Jinger asked glumly, not really expecting an answer.

“You could always try the big boss,” Paul suggested with a shrug.

“Yeah, right,” Jinger scoffed.

“I did say he was here,” Paul pointed out.

“Right, but he’ll probably be busy with the business end of things. If I know heads of corporations, they leave the creative work to the designated help. They have no real interest in talent. Just what makes money,” Jinger said skeptically.

“Not Romeo Castilano,” Paul said. “He’s the grandson of the original founder of the company, and he takes a personal interest in every aspect of the business. He’s always looking for fresh talent, which is probably why Madam Benoit is so territorial. She knows she can be replaced.”

“So how do I meet this Romeo?” Jinger asked with interest. “Without Madam Benoit finding out?”

“Now that part is simple,” Paul said with a twinkle. “There’s a big party being thrown on Friday night. All the ‘beautiful people’ will be there – celebrities, the mayor, you name it. Castilano and crew are all invited, including, of course, yours truly. You can come as my date. It’s pretty simple.”

“Really?!” Jinger squealed her delight. Paul just nodded. She flung her arms around his neck. “Okay. I accept! I can’t believe it! Thanks, Paul.”

“No problem,” he shrugged. “It’s good to feel appreciated for a change.”

Jinger leaned forward on her elbows. “So tell me, Paul. How does a humble pattern maker from the basement get invited on a trip across the country with the head of Castilano’s himself?”

“I’m from Vancouver and they needed a tour guide,” Paul shrugged nonchalantly.

“And I’m sure you made sure they knew that fact before hand,” Jinger nodded.

“Of course. It took some subtle hints, but it paid off,” Paul laughed.

“Which, of course, is another way to make sure you get noticed before you become part of the furniture down in pattern making?”

“Now you’re catching on,” Paul grinned.

“Pretty smart, Paul,” Jinger mused. “Let’s just say I’m glad I ran into you tonight. You’re one guy I think I could use on my team.”

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Cody and Joleen played several more games of pool in the course of the next couple of hours; Cody consuming several beer to Joleen’s two. Around midnight, Joleen protested that she really did need to get home to bed so she could get up for work the next day.

They sauntered back to Joleen’s parked car and stopped beside the driver’s door.

“You sure you’re okay to drive?” Cody asked, running a finger along the piping on Joleen’s track jacket.

“Absolutely,” Joleen replied. “I hardly had any compared to you. But you shouldn’t be driving. I’ll give you a lift where ever you need to go.”

“Not necessary,” Cody answered.

“No, I insist,” Joleen persisted. “I won’t permit irresponsible driving.”

“Not necessary,” Cody repeated, “because I live right here.”

“Here?” Joleen asked, looking around the now deserted parking lot.

“Above the studio,” Cody pointed.

“Oh,” Joleen nodded, noticing for the first time that the two story structure obviously had

either apartments or office space on the top floor.

“So? Want to come up?”

“I think I’d better not,” Joleen replied hesitantly, not really sure why she was balking. Cody was hot and he was interested. So why wait? She didn’t know. Something inside was sending up a red flag. It just seemed a little bit too soon, even for her.

“Come on, Mrs. Allen. You know you want to. . .”

She held back. For some reason, the flush of desire she had felt for Cody earlier had vanished.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“No. Nothing’s wrong,” she denied too quickly.

“Then what is it?”

“I just don’t think I’m ready for this quite yet,” Joleen shrugged, striving to remain composed.

“Geez, lady. You were sending all the right signals earlier,” Cody said, slightly irritated.

“Sorry. That’s a woman’s prerogative,” she snapped back.

Cody stood for a moment, hands on hips, looking up at the night sky. Finally, with a slightly derogatory shrug he turned and walked toward his building.

“I did have fun tonight,” Joleen called to his retreating figure. He didn’t even turn around. She felt like a fool. She *had* been sending all the right signals, so why the sudden change of heart? Reluctantly she slid into her car and shut the door.

She was glad for the cool night air and the drive home. She needed time to think. Above all, she felt confused. Cody was sexy, virile, and obviously interested. So what was her problem? She had told Brenda earlier that she was looking for a committed relationship. But was Cody Slade the type of man to deliver? And if so, on whose terms? She was sick of one night, one week, one month stands. Her life felt empty and she was looking for something more. Now Sam, on the other hand might be able to deliver . . .

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It was past two am, and Jade knew she should be heading home before her mother freaked out again. She really needed to cut with all the rules crap. Her little girl wasn’t a little girl any longer.

“Want some more tea, anybody?” a long haired girl called from behind the counter, holding up a decanter. She was dressed like a hippy reminiscent of the sixties; straight hair, tie-died shirt and leather sandals.

“Had too much of that Venezuelan crap already,” Lenny, one of their number, said. “How about another cap?”

“Cappuccino machine’s been turned off for an hour. You know that,” Susan, the girl behind the counter said. “Besides, I need to finish clean up now. If the boss finds out we’ve been hanging out here this late after closing, I’ll catch it.”

The trendy café had become the late night hang out for Jade and her friends since both she and her friend Susan worked there. Lately, it had begun to extend past closing time.

“I’ll help,” Jade offered, about to stand up.

“Not so fast,” Shane, Jade’s boyfriend, drawled, pulling her back down onto the couch into the crook of his arm. He seemed fairly persistent, so she settled into the warmth his body provided. They had been a couple for about a month, now. Shane wasn’t the most intellectual person she knew, but. . .

“Hey, pass that this way!” Lenny exclaimed as Geoff, Susan’s boyfriend, lit a reefer. He took a long drag, before passing it to Shane on his left.

“You guys shouldn’t be in here with that,” Susan cautioned. “I could get in trouble. Go outside in the alley.”

“Right, and visit my friends the heroine addicts,” scoffed Lenny.

The joint finally made its way to Jade. She took it from Shane’s fingers and inhaled deeply, trapping the fumes in her lungs for as long as possible before exhaling. The dizzying mellow warmth invaded her senses almost immediately. She snuggled closer to Shane. Maybe they’d make love somewhere before she went home. They usually only did it when they were high. . .

“Hey! The boss just drove by!” Susan whispered frantically.

“What?” Jade sat up, bewildered for a moment.

“I said, the boss just drove by!” Susan repeated. “He’ll probably wonder why I’m still here cleaning up so late. Oh, I knew I would get in trouble! Get outside in the alley, now! Then come around and pick me up out front after I lock up.”

The group of four slid out the back door just as they heard the front door opening. They giggled their way down the alley, passing a rugged looking man slouched inside his stair well home. Shane made a derogatory comment and burst out laughing at his own joke.

Jade didn't find any humor in it, but it was hard not to laugh anyway.

She was jostling down the narrow alley between Shane and Lenny, getting bumped at intervals by Lenny's guitar – his constant companion since he was the only one of their group without a girlfriend. Shane flung his arm across her shoulders. Good thing. Without it she might float away.

“That was close,” Susan said a few minutes later as she joined them in front of the café. “I told the boss I dropped some of the Venezuelan green tea on the burner and that's what smelled. I don't think he bought it, though, but he's a stoner himself from way back, so he didn't say anything.”

“I don't know why he doesn't stay open all night,” Geoff complained.

Shane's arm was beginning to get heavy. Jade twitched her shoulder blades, but he didn't remove it

“Hey, man! How about pizza?” Lenny suggested. “I'm starving.”

“Me too,” Shane agreed. “Come on.” . They took off down the street, laughing and shoving one another as they went.

A silver sedan followed at a distance. It stopped briefly while they entered the front doors of the pizza parlor. The driver considered his next move. He could park the car and follow them inside. . . Nah! It had been a busy night, with too many leads to keep track of at one time. Enough was enough. With a brief laying on of rubber, the car sped away.