

Someone for Everyone

Parts 1-10: A work in progress

by Laura McCollough Moss

"Well, aren't you the cutest thing?"

Shelly looked around for the source of the line and one of the better looking bar flies met her gaze. He wore a faded t-shirt with a swoosh graphic that read 'Just Do Me'. True to its mystical nature, her indefatigable heart skipped a beat. She poked Jim next to her and cracked, "I think he's talking to you." That broke up everyone at the bar, and Shelly couldn't suppress a smile as she sipped her Bud Light. The new guy left his stool and walked her way. "I've always been a sucker for a smart ass", he drawled in a deep, smoky tone that caused the blood to leave her legs. "I'm Travis."

"Save it, Travis," she said wearily. "I'm not your girl."

"You might be," he winked. "Of course it would be nice to know your name."

"What's the holdup, Shelly?" someone in the crowd called out. "You've usually left with them by now!"

"Is that right?" Travis slid in next to her and called to the bartender, "Ed, give us two of what Shelly here is drinking."

Shelly sized him up. "I haven't seen you here before."

"I retired from the Army six months ago and came back to town. I grew up here, went to the High School. I'm sorry I didn't stick around, now that I see what I've been missing."

They were on their third round when Ed said, "Last call, folks. I'm closing the place in fifteen."

Travis pulled out his wallet and handed Ed a bill. "Keep the change, Eddie. It's great to see you again. We'll have to get together." Ed nodded. Travis stood and held out a hand to Shelly. "You're coming home with me, aren't you?"

"I should really go," she said shyly. "I have to work tomorrow."
"That shouldn't be a problem, Darlin'. I've got a few miles on me. We'll be finished with whatever we end up doing well before seven AM."

"I don't have to be there until eight," she smiled as she threw on her jacket. "I'll follow you."

As it turned out, Travis only lived about two blocks from the bar. Shelly was pleased to see that the house was well kept and quaint. He was a gentleman, showing her to the bathroom and offering her something to wear before leading her to the queen sized bed. Travis put her completely at ease, and although they finished all that they did well before seven AM, Shelly was very satisfied.

Where has this guy been all my life? She couldn't help but wonder. Don't ask questions, she thought drowsily as she drifted off to sleep. Just thank the Lord that he finally came through.

Sometime in the early morning, Shelly was awakened by something licking her face. Feeling somewhat hung-over, she looked up to see a ratty looking, one-eyed little wirehaired terrier standing over her. "Christ, Travis!" she shrieked. "What is that?"

"That," he said, rolling onto one elbow, "is Pretty Boy. Good morning, Buddy!"

"He is the nastiest looking dog I have ever seen!"

"Yeah, well, I fought in Desert Storm," Travis pulled on his boxers and sat up on the edge of the bed. "I've got a lot of banged up friends. Come on, Pretty Boy, you need to go outside. We'll be back in a minute."

Shelly sat up and looked around. She was dying for a cup of coffee and wondered if Travis kept any in the house. Everybody in the Army drank coffee, right? She yawned, stretched and decided to go out and explore. She looked down at the t-shirt he'd given her to wear. "Soldiers Love Hummers," she read. "Nice." She made her way down the hall and into the clean, sunlit kitchen. She had the coffee brewing within minutes, and was pulling two mugs out of the cupboard when she heard footsteps coming down the hall. "I'm in here Travis," she called. "I hope you don't mind me helping myself!"

"I'd say my son is what you've helped yourself to," sniped a sixty-something woman with jet black hair and bright red lips. She wore skintight jeans that were less than flattering and her fluorescent pink tank top read "Cougar."

"I'm Yvonne Richards. Who are you?"

Travis entered the kitchen and grabbed one of the mugs from Shelly's hand as she stood, motionless and speechless, wondering how she had managed to get screwed by Cupid's fucked-up stepbrother yet again. Pretty Boy lapped water from his bowl on the floor.

"This is Shelly, Von. She's a new friend of mine. I didn't plan for the two of you to meet this way. I thought you stayed at Gordy's last night."

Yvonne's blue eyes, crepe-draped but bright, surveyed the situation. She nodded to Shelly. "I suppose he told you this was his house."

"He didn't say it wasn't," Shelly realized. She had her eyes focused sharply on Travis, who stood with arms crossed, staring at the floor. Honestly, did a man ever say or do what you hoped they would, or needed them to, in a situation like that? Just stood there like the lying jackass that he was. While she stood there in an extra-large t-shirt and a thong that seemed like a good idea when she got ready to go out last night, but now allowed the frosty breeze of Yvonne's disapproval to blow up her ass.

Travis crossed the room and put an arm around his mother. "We hadn't gotten around to discussing real estate, Von." Yvonne chuckled and swatted at him. "Damn it, Travis! Don't you make me laugh. I can't have you dragging every tramp you meet back here! I mean it; I am too old for this shit, Mister."

Shelly set her cup into the sink and turned to face Yvonne. "Don't fight on my account. This tramp is late for work."

Shelly sped down Main Street, racing to work. She'd have to show up in jeans; there was no time to run home and change. She turned on the radio and Bonnie Raitt belted through the speakers, "Let's

give 'em somethin' to talk about!" Shelly shut Bonnie up with one slap of the button. That's all I need this morning, she thought. Oh, great, caught behind a school bus. She picked up her cell and dialed the nursing home.

"Thank you for calling Lakeside?Care Facility, this is Nichole speaking. How may I help you?"

"Well for starters Nic,"?Shelly?said, "please put some coffee on. I haven't had a drop yet this morning. Long story, but anyway I'm running late. What's going on?"

"Nothing, it's quiet. Barney tried to get out again last night, but Seth from Maintenance got him to come back in. Cal came down looking for you. He wants to know what you plan to do about Barney's 'wandering behaviors'. Your interview for 10 o'clock is canceled.? Heather and I are trying to decide if we want to order out for lunch today. Are you in?"

"To tell the truth, I'm not feeling the greatest. I'll pass on lunch. Is the weekend schedule ready?"

"It's ready, but you won't like it. It's shaping up to be another short one. We've called all of the part-times, full-times, and per diems; nobody will come in. ?Cal looked at it, and said you might have to supervise on Saturday."

Shelly took a slow, deep breath. This new administrator?was going to be the death of her. DON's and administrators were rarely bosom buddies, but this guy was a walking anus.? Twenty-eight years old, and thought he knew every-damn-thing, including how to occupy her weekends. "All hands on deck!" he loved to say. His were usually in his pockets.

"Don't worry," she told Nichole. "I'll get Norton to do it. He'll cave for me. You'll have to come up with another day off for him later this week, though. He won't do overtime. Can you get Tracy to come in Monday maybe? It's a holiday, so she won't have school."

"Will do," Nichole laughed. "Thanks for solving *that* problem!" "I just hope it works out. I need to hang up now, before I get a ticket to add to my already delightful day. See you soon, Nic." She stashed the phone and focused on the road.

The bus braked to pick up a motley looking crew of kids. A pale, skinny boy flicked a cigarette butt and stomped on it before climbing on. That brought back memories! Shelly remembered sharing a smoke with her brothers at the bus stop, back in the day. Her mother never knew, because she was already an hour into her shift at the factory. Shelly, Mark and Matt would roll out of bed about ten minutes before the bus pulled up, throw on clothes, brush their teeth and pat down their hair before running to the corner. No breakfast, no lunch. Other kids got on the bus smelling like bacon and eggs; the Davis kids smelled like Newports. They'd go to the office and borrow money for lunch tickets, and then their report cards would be held until their mother went to school and paid off the loans. Poor Mom. Shelly missed her. "Not going to do this now," she said to no one, fighting back tears. Her mother had raised three children on her own, and had worked hard to give them a better life than she'd had. Matt was a lawyer and lived in Chicago. Shelly graduated with honors from nursing school, and worked as a staff RN in ICU at the hospital until the position of Director of Nursing opened up at Lakeside Care. What could she say; it had seemed like a good idea at the time. Mark, the youngest, trained as an electrician and made more money than any of them. Sarah Davis died four years ago; two months after she was forced to retire "due to ill health." Years of smoking and hardship had taken their toll, and she was gypped of her golden years. How ironic was it that her wayward daughter now devoted her life to caring for the elderly? It gave Shelly the opportunity to give others the love and attention that she would never get the chance to share with her own mother.

"It would surprise you, Momma," she whispered as she pulled into her parking space at Lakeside. "But I try to make you proud. I do. I just can't seem to stop fucking up."

That Travis was cute, though. She couldn't help but giggle as she punched in.

Travis looked across the kitchen table at his mother. Yvonne sipped her coffee and took an occasional drag on the plastic cigarette she'd

been using, trying to quit a forty-year habit. Maybe that's why she was such a bitch this morning, he mused. Of course she'd put up with quite a bit from him. He'd married his high school sweetheart, Dinean, who Von could never stand (she'd been right about that one, he had to admit) at eighteen. Moved to California without a pot to piss in and joined the Army at nineteen, and, later, was deployed to the Persian Gulf. That worried her to death. He was, after all, her only child. Got a divorce from Dinean after Yvonne paid her a surprise visit, in an attempt to bond and show support while he was in the Gulf War, only to find her shackled up with a musician and dealing drugs. At least they hadn't had any kids. It was bad enough she ended up with Bruiser, the couple's Chihuahua. That?almost broke his heart, but the dog was pretty near all Dinean ended up with. Yvonne went after her like an angry grizzly whose cub had been threatened, and Travis came home to an intact bank account and all of his property in storage. Von always had his back. She might get frustrated with him, but let anyone else do him wrong, and she let them have it. Her forceful temperament had chased his father off years ago. She'd raised Travis on her commissions selling Mary Kay, and he never wanted for a thing. Now, as a retired U.S. government employee, he was back under her roof, which meant living by Yvonne's rules. It didn't matter if he was forty-six, or sixteen. She was the boss. Travis wondered how he was going to go about setting this morning's debacle right.

"What say, Von, should we go out to breakfast? I'll buy. I'm starved."

"I'll bet you are," she smiled bitterly. "I'm sure you had a busy night." She?picked up?the newspaper and held it high in front of her.

"It wasn't like that, Mother. This girl was different. I really liked her, and?you and I?behaved like such assholes, she couldn't get away fast enough. You could have been decent. You don't even know her."

"All I needed to know I could judge with one look. Trash is what she is, Travis. She's the Davis girl; didn't you remember?her from school? She's lived with half the eligible men in this town, and slept

with the other half. Everybody knows it. Runs that Lakeside dump that I wouldn't put my worst enemy into. Not even your ex-wife."

"Low blow, Von. I seem to recall spending many an evening here alone after Dad left. I didn't know any better at the time, but now I can figure out that you weren't going to book club. Nobody's perfect. You least of all." Yvonne tossed the paper down, cheeks blazing. Travis met her eyes with a level stare.

"Fine," she snapped. "You're a big boy now. Have it your way. But if you think you're going to conduct your affairs under my roof, you are sadly mistaken! And for the record, you don't have the first clue what it was like to raise a child alone. I got lonely sometimes, but I was discreet." So she thought. He'd never told her about the fights on the bus, or the trash talking he'd endured on the football field. Yvonne Richards was no angel, and her liaisons had been no secret; especially the one with Coach Maxwell. She never knew that, for several years, her son had had *her* back. She'd be devastated if she knew, and for some reason he still wanted to protect her. It was muddy, stinking water under the bridge. He'd left town as soon as he could, and only twenty-seven years of life experience could bring him back. He didn't give a damn what anyone here thought of her, or of him.

"That you were, Mother Dear. Why don't you hand me the classified section. I need to start looking for a place to rent."

Hannah Martenson sat on the edge of her bed in 204A, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. Shelly took a seat next to her, placing an arm around the resident's bony shoulders. She'd lost more weight, Shelly registered. Something was going on with her. "Hey, Miss Hannah," Shelly soothed. "I stopped at the nurse's desk on my rounds, and Becky told me you didn't touch your breakfast this morning; or your supper last night. Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm just fine," Hannah's voice was a watery chirp. "I wish everyone would just leave me alone. I told the dietitian that I've never eaten much, and I hate to say it but the food here is nothing to write home about."

Shelly pulled a notepad from her pocket. "I'll have Sarah come back up and talk to you about what you'd prefer to have for breakfast. I'm sure she would do her best to order what you liked, if you let her know."

"Well, I did let her know, six months ago, that I wouldn't mind a hardboiled egg and a piece of toast, but heavens, I had no idea that I'd get it every day from then on!" Hannah sniffed. "That's one problem you have here, Shelly. No variety. Same foods and nothing to do, day in and day out."

She was?right about that, Shelly thought to herself. She would bring it up at the next department head meeting, just as she'd done every month for ten years. Stella, the food service director, had been at the facility for over thirty years, and was past her prime. She wore ace wraps around her legs, for crying out loud; looked like she needed to crawl right into a resident bed and stay there. Although there had been some major changes in the field of institutional dining in recent years, Stella continued to rely mostly on pre-packaged, processed foods, and a menu with a four-week rotation that hadn't changed since Shelly' d been there, and probably not for years before that. And as for things to do, if?a resident?didn't like Bingo?they were pretty much screwed. Tiffany, the activities director, was twenty-one years old. Her previous job had been in retail, at an Abercrombie & Fitch store in the mall. Tiffany was a nice enough kid, sweet, but she didn't have a clue about therapeutic activity, or the needs and interests of the elderly. One time Shelly asked her to have a movie night for the residents, and the kid brought in *The Matrix*!Cal wouldn't get rid of her though; he said because they needed to give her a chance and follow proper disciplinary procedure, but Shelly suspected it had more to do with the way Tiffany looked in her?Lakeside polo.

Mindy, the CNA, emerged from Hannah's bathroom wiping out a bath basin with a paper towel. She tossed the basin into the bedside stand before walking over and kneeling in front of Hannah, gently resting a hand on her knee. "Hannah, can you tell Miss Davis what you told me while we were getting you washed up this morning?"

Mindy smiled up at her and Hannah began to cry in earnest. Shelly shot an inquisitive glance at Mindy, who only nodded. "Go ahead now, you can trust Miss Davis," she encouraged. Hannah straightened, shrugging off Shelly's arm.

"I thought Mildred was my friend, but last week she took my seat in the dining room! Just rolled her walker right up to the table and sat down before I could get there. She knows I have to go to the bathroom before I eat!"

Shelly knew that the residents liked to keep to their routines, but crying over a place at the table? "I'll look at the seating chart, Miss Hannah. Maybe we can sit you at another seat at that table. Would that be alright?" She noticed that Mindy was staring at her as though she was clueless. What could she be missing?

"I liked the seat I had," Hannah's voice faltered. "Mr. Philips was nice to talk to, and I always helped him open his milk. We enjoyed our meals together, until Millie Johnson decided to plant herself beside him!" Now you get the picture, Mindy's eyes said.

Millie Johnson was a pain in the ass, Shelly knew, and she liked the men. She already kept company with Olaf Franken in the chapel, and Doug Chapman in the activity room. Leaving poor Lionel Philips to Miss Hannah shouldn't be too much to ask. Hadn't Millie been coughing a bit after she drank her liquids? Shelly could send a Speech Therapy referral. A screening evaluation would identify the problem, and Millie would be moved to an assist table. Call it geriatric justice.

"Give me a day or two, Miss Hannah," Shelly smiled reassuringly. "These things have a way of working themselves out, you wait and see. Mindy, would you please give Karen a call in the beauty shop? I think Hannah's going to want to look pretty tomorrow."

Shelly's pager sounded. "I have to run. I'll see you ladies later." She hurried to the desk and grabbed a phone. Sandy, the receptionist, sounded exasperated. "It's an outside call, Shelly. Some guy's called here three times this morning. I tried to tell him you were busy."

Probably a sales rep., Shelly sighed. "I'll take it."

"I'll bet you will, Sunshine," Travis teased, and her body went numb.

"What are you doing for lunch? I owe you a cup of coffee."

Shelly nosed her Ford Ranger pickup into the parking lot at Uncle Joe's Diner on Main. The place was packed; why had she agreed to meet him here? She'd be lucky to get back to work in two hours, let alone one, which was all she could spare. She took a quick look at her hair in the rearview and looked up to see Travis leaning near the diner entrance. He noticed her at the same time, and walked over to greet her with a smile that made her dizzy. What was it about this guy? Shelly smiled back and waved, doing her best to appear nonchalant. That lasted about two seconds, until she closed the belt of her jacket into the locked door of the truck. She pulled at it helplessly as Travis gently took the keys from her hand, opened the door and set her free.

"Don't worry, Hon," he said. "You make me nervous too. You hungry?"

"I didn't think I was, but I always have an appetite for Joe's barbecue. It's awesome."

They stepped inside, allowing their eyes to adjust to the dim interior. Shelly scanned the room for an empty table.

"Travis Richards! Is that you?" squealed Tonya, Joe's waitress. "I haven't seen you in ages!" Her smile faded when she noticed Shelly.

"Oh. Hi Shell. You and Travis know each other?"

Shelly forced a smile. "We do, Tonya. And I need to get lunch and get back to work. Have you got a table?" Travis watched the exchange with amusement. Tonya showed them to a small booth in the corner and disappeared.

"That was pleasant," he smirked, picking up a menu. "Bet she spits in your food."

"Let her try. I take it you two have a history?" Shelly sipped her water and waited for an answer.

"I took Tonya to the prom, back in '82.? She was a fox back then. Unfortunately, her hair's the only thing that still looks the same. I'd rather talk about you. How's your day going?"

"Better than it started out," she blushed. "Thanks for warning me that you lived with your mother."

"Sorry about that. I would've told you eventually. Besides, it's only temporary. As a matter of fact, I rented a place this morning. It's on Chase Street, 529. I hope you like it."

"Whoa. Isn't that rushing things? We've only gone out once."

Tonya returned and stood ready to take their order.

"'Gone out'? Is that what we're calling it? I thought it was more than that." Travis leaned back, crossing his arms. Tonya listened for Shelly's reply.

"I'll have the pulled pork sandwich, with onion rings and a Coke," she said, handing back her menu. Travis ordered the same before Tonya retreated, reluctantly, to the kitchen.

"As I was saying, I thought we had something going," Travis challenged.

"What do you want me to say, Travis? I like you, but I barely know you."

"You know where I came from. That tells you a lot about who I am. I'm sitting here telling you I want to be with you. There's something special between us, Shelly. It's just a feeling I get."

"That 'feeling' is a hard-on. It doesn't last," she snorted. "Sorry. I'm afraid I'm not used to sincerity."

"And I'm new to being sincere," Travis winked up at Tonya as she set down their plates. "The hard-on's the easy part." Tonya stared at him with her mouth open as Coke poured over her shoes.

Shelly shook salt over her onion rings and knew she was in love. Shit.

Shelly was harried and out of breath when she sat down for the afternoon care plan meeting.

"Somebody had a nooner!" accused Melanie, the Social Worker. "Look, she's blushing!"

"Cut it out, Mel," Shelly grinned, setting up her laptop. "You're just jealous."

Melanie stroked her very pregnant belly. "I tried to keep up with you. See where that got me? Berta Harrington's daughter is coming in at 1:15. That's the only one we have today. Who is he?"

"His name is Travis. We met at Eddie's last night." She gave a detailed account of the events of the past fifteen hours. There were no secrets between them.

"You are full of surprises," Melanie marveled. "How do you get into these situations?"

"I'm still trying to take it all in myself," Shelly said, shaking her head. "I think he might be a keeper though."

"Like you've never said *that* before," Melanie's voice was straining with the effort of bending down to pull a jar of peanut butter out of her briefcase.

"Yeah, well, we'll see what happens. He's invited me to help him move into his new apartment tonight. I'll keep you posted. Now, if you don't mind, I think we should try to review Berta's care plan before her daughter gets here. Have there been any problems with them?"

Melanie dipped into her jar before accessing the file. "Just a few," she said wearily. "Not enough staffing, especially on the weekends. She lost a nightgown in laundry, hates our coffee. You know; the usual."

"I hear you, believe me," Shelly sighed. "Same shit different day. The staff works their butts off; there just aren't enough of them." She waved her hand at the empty chairs across the table. "Where are Stella and Tiffany? They're supposed to be here."

"Didn't I tell you? Stella's out of work indefinitely; some kind of leg ulcer or something. Cal's trying to contract out for food service. Tiffany called in sick today. She probably got a groin pull last night." She pushed up her bangs with the heel of her hand before taking another spoonful of peanut butter.

"You are bad, Mel, though probably right on where Tiffany is concerned; like I have room to talk. Too bad about Stella, but maybe we'll actually get some decent food around here."

"That would be fine with me. I'd love to scratch it off my list of complaints. The food is the number one topic at Resident Council meetings; even above staffing! I don't think Stella realizes that old people have taste buds."

"Who knew, right?" Shelly laughed. "Here comes Berta and Cynthia now."

A well-kept, attractive woman came in, pushing her mother's wheelchair. It was easy to see where she got her good looks; although frail, Berta was still lovely at ninety-three. Shelly jumped up and helped to make them comfortable. Cynthia sat close to her mother and held her hand. Melanie opened the discussion, leaning in to address the resident.

"Hello Berta, we're here today to discuss your care. Do you have any concerns?"

The elderly lady offered a wan smile. "I'm alright, Melanie. You're always so good to me."

It was Cynthia's turn. "I have some concerns," she began. "I'm here every evening to help Mom with her supper. She's almost always wet when I arrive and I'm sorry but there's no excuse for it. She's not one to complain or ask for help, and I worry about her when I'm not here."

Berta shifted restlessly in her chair. "Oh, it's alright, Cindy. I know the girls are busy, and I hate to bother them. They get to me when they can. I don't want to get anyone into trouble."

Shelly moved her chair closer to Berta's. "I'm sorry this is happening, Berta. I think it may be because Dr. Kelly increased your water pill. You take it three times a day now. Do you remember when you had all of the swelling in your legs, a few weeks ago? You needed more medication to help with that. The good news is that you've lost five pounds' worth of fluid. The bad news is that you need to urinate more frequently; and that is new to the staff. I'll start you on a toileting schedule and put it on the aides' assignment

sheet, so they'll know. I should have done that already, and I apologize." What she didn't say was that the nurses knew about the medication change, and could have anticipated the problem. They hadn't though, and she was responsible. She tried to concentrate on signs of progress; hadn't they noticed the edema and let her know? They didn't have her clinical experience, and so it didn't come easily to them, but they tried. Baby steps, she reminded herself. They would get there in time.

"Thank you, Shelly," Berta said. "I'm afraid I have to get back to my room now. I have to go again. It's such a nuisance. Then I'd like to lie down. I get so tired lately!"

"That's alright. I'll call the unit and let them know you're on your way. Then, if you don't mind, Melanie and I can finish the meeting with your daughter. Cynthia, are you able to come back? It shouldn't take us too much longer."

Cynthia indicated that she would return before escorting her mother out. Shelly closed the door and sat down. "I want to talk to her about Berta's Advanced Directives, Mel. We need to get them in order."

Melanie stood up. "Then I'm going to pee first. This family has had a hard time with this, and I'm not at my best with a baby bouncing on my bladder."

Cynthia came back some ten minutes later with a sober expression on her face. She looked at Melanie. "Is there something wrong? It seemed the two of you wanted to speak to me alone."

Shelly opened Berta's chart. "We wanted to discuss your mother's wishes related to her care going forward, Cynthia. I'm sure you have noticed, and I believe Dr. Kelly has spoken with you about this. Unfortunately, the state of her health is declining. The time is approaching to make some important decisions."

Cynthia's face fell. "I was afraid it would be something like this. Dr. Kelly told me that Mom's kidneys were failing. I spoke to my brother in Florida on the phone last night, and we are considering dialysis treatments for her. How would we go about getting those started?"

"We can talk about that," Shelly ventured, "but I'd like to review the medical record with you first. Here are the lab chemistry reports from this morning. Do you see this 'BUN'? It reads critical at 90, and the 'creatinine' is 4.8. Those values indicate renal failure. The 'BNAT' is 1300; that tells us that her congestive heart failure is not under control. This happens in late-stage chronic illness."

"But wouldn't the dialysis help?" Cynthia rationalized. "It would bring the lab values down."

"Let me show you another test," Shelly said, flipping pages. "This is an echocardiogram that your mom had two months ago, before this latest bout with swelling. The 'ejection fraction' is a measurement of how efficiently her heart is pumping. It was ten percent; normal is sixty percent. Berta is receiving the maximum dose of diuretic- the 'water pill'- and though it is helping for now, she won't be able to tolerate it much longer because of her kidneys. Hemodialysis treatments are stressful on the heart, and have other side effects as well. Patients can have low blood pressure, fatigue and a metallic taste in their mouth that affects their appetite. They are usually placed on fluid restrictions, so they can't drink more than four or five cups a day. If she began the treatments, Berta would be transported from the facility to the dialysis unit three days a week for approximately four hours; with transportation she'd be gone nearly six, and at this point she's exhausted trying to sit up for a meal. Has your mother shared her feelings about the treatments with you?"

"The renal specialist was consulted the last time she was in the hospital. He tried to explain everything to her, but she wouldn't hear it. 'I'm too old', she said. I don't think she understood that, without the treatments, she could die!"

Melanie spoke quietly. "Cynthia, Berta has talked to me, and she was adamant that she did not want the treatments. She told me last week that she was 'ready to go anytime the good Lord wanted to take her'."

A tear rolled down Cynthia's cheek, and Shelly handed her a Kleenex. "I just can't let her go," she cried. "She's been an anchor

for my family. We so looked forward to visiting her; I can close my eyes and smell the house. She would greet us at the door and spoil us for the duration. She was proud of our success, but we couldn't wait to leave our new builds and go home for holidays. I loved getting up in the morning and putting my feet on the cold floor upstairs. There'd be frost inside the windows, but down in the kitchen Mom would be busy whipping up a delicious breakfast for everyone. We used to kid her about her stuffing; she would pack too much into the bird and it would be a little pasty. Do you know that last year, I tried to make mine turn out like that? It's Thanksgiving to us. She's been a wonderful, wonderful mother and friend to me."

"We are all very fond of Berta here," Shelly responded. "Our main goal is that she spends the remainder of her life as she wants. There is no assurance that she would live longer on dialysis. The treatments are intended for patients who have sufficient baseline health and quality of life to benefit from them. Your mother is not a good candidate for the therapy, Cynthia. We can continue to care for her here, in her home, and keep her comfortable. You and your family would be welcomed to spend as much time with her as you wish; even overnight. When the end comes, she'll be in a familiar place, surrounded by people who love her."

Melanie touched Cynthia's shoulder. "She's comfortable with the decision. Her main concern is for you and your brother; she doesn't want you to be upset with her."

"She would think of us first," Cynthia smiled and wiped her face. "It's very hard for me to think about losing Mom, but above all I want her to be at peace. I'll try to explain it to Gerald. Is there something I need to sign?"

"No," Melanie answered. "Your mother has decisional capacity to make her choices, and actually has already signed for comfort care. She does not want to be readmitted to the hospital, and has declined any further aggressive intervention. She has agreed to continue with medication to relieve her symptoms, and is considering Hospice care. I'll let you talk with her about that, and I can make a consult

whenever you decide. I would also be happy to call your brother, to explain all of this and answer any questions that he has."

Cynthia collected her purse and coat. "I would appreciate that. It looks like it's settled, then. I'm going to go home for awhile; I can't face her right now. I'm afraid I would fall apart, and that wouldn't do either of us any good. Could you please tell her that I had to leave, but I'll be back by supper time?"

"Of course," Shelly reassured her, offering a hug that Cynthia gratefully accepted. "And please call me or Melanie if you think of anything else that we can help you with."

Melanie took Cynthia's arm and walked with her to the front door.

"It doesn't get any easier, does it?" Shelly sighed when she returned. "Thank you for being here with me."

Melanie wasn't listening. She was looking at the man standing in the doorway.

"They told me you'd be here," Travis said. "I'm sorry to bother you at work, but I had to let you know that we can't get together tonight."

Here we go, Shelly thought. He's blowing me off already. "What's the problem?"

"I'm on my way to the hospital. I was moving stuff into the apartment and my mom's boyfriend called. They think Von's had a stroke."

"Jesus, Gordy. You scared me. Where is she? Is she alright?"

"They took her to cat scan," he motioned for Travis to sit with him on a hard row of plastic chairs.

"I wanted to go with her, but they wouldn't let me. They're lucky they had her drugged up, or Yvonne'd have given them hell."

Drugged up? "What happened, Gordy? She was fine this morning. Well, pissed off at me, but that's nothing new. I had only left her a few hours before you called."

The older man ran a calloused hand over his eyes. Travis saw that he had engine grease under his nails, and still wore his coveralls. When he spoke, he was choked up.

"I was workin' on Jimmy's late model and I stopped to grab my coffee. I called her like I al'ays do, but she wadn't answerin'. Then I tried her cell phone and she didn't answer that, neither. I just knew somethin' wadn't right. I jumped in the jeep and ran over to the house, and I found her on the floor in the laundry room. The washer was open, looked like she had started loadin' it. Her eyes was open, and she was makin' sounds, but couldn't talk. She reached for me; then she tried gettin' up, and I saw she wadn't movin' her right side. There was blood all over. I guess she cut the back of her head pretty bad when she fell..." he started to cry, and pulled a dirty rag from his pocket.

"I'm sorry, Buddy. I should have been there. What did you do?" Travis couldn't imagine.

"I called nine-eleven and laid down beside her 'til the volunteer rescue come. They were there pretty quick, but I'm tellin' you, it felt like forever before they got there. She got real frustrated because she couldn't talk, and I had to try and calm her down. They got her on a stretcher and headed here with lights n' sirens, and I followed behind. I don't even remember drivin' here."

Travis had always liked Gordy. The guy adored Yvonne and treated her like a queen. He'd been there for her while Travis was away; keeping up the house, fixing her car, making her laugh, and loving her. Tough as she was, Yvonne had a soft spot for Gordy. He and Travis were two of the only people to ever claim her heart in that way. The couple hadn't gotten married because they both had been there done that, and couldn't see any reason for it. Gordy liked to say "I don't need no piece of paper to make you mine, Love," and Yvonne felt the same way.

The swinging doors opened and a tired-looking young woman in scrubs came out. She recognized Gordy and approached the two men. Gordy stood. "Dr. Brown, this here is Travis. He's Mrs. Richard's son. Travis, Dr. Brown. How is she? Can we see her?"

"She's heavily sedated right now. She ran into breathing problems in CT, and we had to place her on a respirator to breathe for her. You can see her, but she's not conscious. I'm sorry."

Travis was upset. "Life support? Don't you need to let someone know when that is happening? I thought you had to have consent!"

"That's not an issue in an emergency. Your mother was crashing, she couldn't give us consent, and the only other person here," she looked at Gordy, "was not a relative, or her Health Care Proxy. When we don't know how a person feels about life support, and there's nothing in writing, we have to treat. Again, I apologize, but I came to tell you as soon as I could."

Gordy looked down at his boots. "Is she a vegetable, then?"

Travis gaped at him in shock.

"It's too early to tell," she said calmly. "Her CT showed a brain hemorrhage. We won't know how much permanent damage is done until the bleeding stops and her condition stabilizes.."

Travis couldn't sit any more. "How can you tell what her condition is if you've got her gorked on drugs?"

"At this point, it's more important to let her rest, and to keep her from struggling against the breathing machine. Being restless and frustrated right now could extend the bleed. We'll know more tomorrow, when we back off on the meds and let her lighten up a little bit. I wish I had something more reassuring for you, but we just don't know anything for sure tonight." She stood and checked her beeper. "I'm needed back in the ER," she told them. "Mrs. Richards is in ICU, on the third floor. You can take that elevator there."

"I'll take them up, Cheryl," Shelly offered. She'd been standing behind him, and Travis couldn't remember when he'd been happier to see anyone, ever. She took a hand from each man after she pushed the "3" button.

"This is my old stomping grounds," she reassured them. "Yvonne will be in good hands."

"Aren't you comin' in?" he took her hand, ready to pull her along.

"I don't know, Travis," Shelly pulled her hand away gently.

"Somehow I think I'm the last person your mom would want to wake up and see here. I just wanted to be on hand for you, if you needed me."

"I can't thank you enough," he said solemnly, taking both her hands in his. "To tell you the truth, I think I need you to go in there with me. I'm having a real hard time wrapping my head around this whole scene. My mother's never been sick a day in my life. Now I have to see her hooked up to all this shit they have here, and I'm not sure I can handle it." He let go and sagged against the wall. Shelly went to him and smoothed his crazy hair.

"That's all you had to say. Let's go on in, then."

Gordy was standing at Yvonne's bedside, stroking her cheek. "You're gonna be jus' fine, Love," he whispered. He didn't notice them beside him. The ventilator bellowed measured breaths by way of a tube in Von's mouth, which left space for her tongue to lay awkwardly between her lips on one side. There was no life in her face; no expression, and Travis thought he'd rather see her mad at him than like this. Shelly offered a brief tutorial of the various equipment in the room; the monitor, with Yvonne's heartbeat, and breathing rate, and oxygen level, the IV pump with the many medications and fluids going in through a 'central line' in her neck, the respirator, and the pumps squeezing her legs to keep her from getting a blood clot. Travis pointed to a clear plastic bag hooked to the side of the bed. "That's the catheter that's draining her urine," she explained. "They need an accurate count of the fluid that goes in and out. It helps them to manage her vital signs and the pressure in her brain." When Travis went pale and leaned on the bedrail, Shelly quietly pulled up a chair and helped him into it.

"I'm sorry to sound so clinical, Travis. I just want you to understand what's going on."

Travis clasped his fingers behind his neck, and placed his elbows on his knees. "I've seen my soldiers in bad shape before; plenty of times. We'd do our best to carry them off the field and get them to help, but a lot of them were critically wounded, and many didn't make it. I'd check on them as their commander, but the others in the platoon would stay nearby, night and day, until the injured was taken by helicopter or in a body bag. It would hit them hard, but I had to try not to let it in; it happened too often, and I had to stay in control

if I had any hope of keeping the rest of them safe the next time out."

Shelly bent down next to him, sliding an arm around his waist. "That must have been Hell for you."

"It was," he turned to look at her, "but it didn't come close to this. Whatever happened over there, I had her to come back to if I could manage to stay alive. That's what kept me going. I've been stateside for sixteen years, and only came back for holidays until I moved home for good this month. I thought we had lots of time to be together."

"She knew you loved her," Gordy said to Travis, but his eyes never left Yvonne's face. "There 'as never any doubt about that."

A man with short-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair and a stethoscope around his neck stood at the foot of the bed. "I'm Kevin, Mrs. Richards's nurse. I'm going to ask you all to step out for fifteen or twenty minutes while we turn and suction her. There's a waiting room at the end of 'B' hall; we'll call you on the phone out there when you can come back in." He looked at his tech-y watch. "If you haven't eaten, this might be a good time to run down to the cafeteria; it closes in an hour and there are only vending machines available after that."

Gordy started to cry again, and Travis kissed his mother's forehead before they left the room. Travis kept an arm around Gordy to keep him steady, and Shelly led them down to the basement. "There's a guest cafe on the first floor, but the employee cafeteria is the best place to go," she told them. "It's cheaper and has way better coffee."

"Sounds good to me," Travis said wearily. Gordy excused himself for a few minutes to use the bathroom and call his son, Jimmy, to give him an update.

Shelly told Travis to get them a table, and she went through the line for coffees, creamers, sugar packets and three slices of pizza for them. Ah, hospital food. If you weren't already a patient, it would make you one.

They sipped their coffee in silence. No one was particularly interested in eating. Shelly felt that she should try to cheer them up.

"She looked pretty good!" she said brightly. "Her vital signs were stable, and she didn't show any signs of having pain. Let's hope she gets a good night's rest, and they can try weaning her off the vent tomorrow." Poor Gordy looked every bit of his seventy years. "You need to go home and get some rest yourself, Mister." Travis nodded in agreement.

"I'm not goin' anywhere," Gordy stated resolutely. "The two of you can go home tonight, but I'm stayin' right here with her. I already told Jimmy; he's gonna let Biscuit out and take her home with him." Biscuit was Gordy's aging Golden Retriever.

Shelly gathered up their trash and carried it to the barrel. "I'll go back up with you for an hour or so, and then I'd better call it a night. I have to work tomorrow. I wish I could get out of it, but I can't." She placed a hand on Travis's shoulder. "Will you be alright here without me?" He reached up and laced his fingers through hers.

"I'm better when you're here, but I understand. Gordy and I'll camp out here tonight; in the room, in the waiting room, wherever they'll let us stay. I can't leave either until I know Von's alright."

As they made their way to the elevator, there was a call over the P.A.: "Code Blue, ICU. Code Blue, ICU."

Shelly and Gordy jumped on the elevator. Not wanting to wait, Travis took the stairs, three at a time, to the third floor. He burst through the door and saw that his mother's room was brightly lit, with the curtains closed around the windows. There was a crowd of hospital staff in the hallway, and he could see several pair of legs surrounding her bed. He started to go in, but an orderly held out his arm. "You don't want to go in there right now, Dude," he warned. "They'll come out and let you know what's going on as soon as they can." Travis shook free of the young man's hold and pushed past the curtain.

Six or seven doctors and nurses turned to look at him as one of them said, "Call it. Time of death, seven thirty-one."

In shock, Travis swept the wrappers, needles and tubing that littered his mother's bed off with his arm. No one stopped him when he sat down on the edge and hugged her lifeless body. No tears

came; it was too deeply ingrained in him to hold them in, but he felt more alone than he ever had.

An older man with a badge that read 'Walter Parrish, MD' patted his arm brusquely. "I'm sorry son," he rasped. "We did everything we could. I think the hemorrhage in her brain extended. I can order an autopsy if you'd like."

Travis shook his head. He couldn't see the point. She was gone, wasn't she? The reason why didn't really matter. Shelly entered the room with Gordy in tow. She knew, with one glance around, what had happened. Gordy knew, too.

"Sweet Jesus Christ!" he cried. "Oh my God, what am I going to do?" Dr. Parrish guided him to the corner of the room and spoke softly to him in an effort to offer comfort. Travis stood up and hugged her tightly, so tightly.

And then he cried.

"Hi, is this Randi? This is Shelly Davis. Yeah, how are you?...That's great to hear. I need to order flowers for a funeral...no; it's nobody in my family...they're for the mother of a friend of mine. I know, it's too bad- it was totally unexpected. What would you recommend?" Shelly sat at her desk, twisting the phone cord around her fingers. Was this bizarre, or what? Just yesterday she'd had an uncomfortable first meeting with Yvonne, and here she was this morning buying her a dozen pink roses. "That sounds good," she said, bringing her mind back to the task at hand. "The viewing is tomorrow evening at Shubert's, and the funeral is Friday morning. Can you bill my account?... Thanks so much... 'Bye now...You too." She hung up the phone and turned her attention to an impatient Cal, who'd sat across from her, jiggling his leg, the entire time she'd been talking. What a dweeb he was. "I'm sorry," she said, "that was something I had to take care of. What's up?"

Cal took a few more seconds to gnaw on a hangnail before answering. "I came down here for report," he sniffed, "I like to know what's going on around here." He wiped the wet finger on his pantleg.

Try pulling your head out of your ass and sticking it out into the hallway sometime, she wanted to say.

"I know you do," she lied. "I'm sorry I've had so much going on the past few days. Thankfully, the building's been pretty quiet. We've had one fall this week; Arnold Haskins on B. He tried to get into bed without help Monday night and didn't make it. Complained of right knee pain, but we did an xray and it was negative. He's doing okay."

"Did you initiate a chair alarm?" Cal wanted to know. "That's all I need is that son of his on my case again."

"No..." Shelly answered. "Arnie is confused and forgets to ask for help, but he can usually get the job done on his own. This was his first incident in three months, which is good considering his risk factors. I don't want to alarm him unnecessarily."

"I agree," Cal smirked. "Let's wait until he breaks a hip. I'll let you explain that one to the state."

Shelly gritted her teeth and engaged her filter; the one that pushed rational words from her mouth when she wanted to tell someone to fuck off. "If he continues to move about on his own, he will maintain more strength and mobility than he would if we forced him to sit in one spot all day. It's about the quality of his life, Cal. If he breaks a hip doing what he wants to do, well, that's a chance we have to take. I'd be happy to explain that to the state."

"And Barney?" Cal challenged. He always got nasty when she stood up to him. "He was in the parking lot Monday night. If Seth hadn't been out there dogging Lizzie Mills- wait; I mean 'walking her to her car', who knows where the old fart would've ended up? I'm busting my ass trying to get grant money to establish Lakeside as a premier dementia facility. How does it look if we can't keep track of our damn residents?"

"Lizzie left the floor and Barney followed her. She's his favorite nurse, because she resembles his daughter Ann. She knows that she needs to have someone from nights divert his attention when her shift ends. All it takes is a Fred Astaire movie, and Barney will sit on the couch for two hours. The problem had already been identified,

and she didn't observe the care plan. She was too worried about meeting Seth."

Cal was distracted by Tiffany, who was outside bending down to help a resident step onto a tour bus. "I want Lizzie suspended."

"I talked to her yesterday. She felt terrible about the whole thing, Cal. What is she, twenty? This is how they learn. Barney was returned safe and sound, and I'm certain Lizzie won't get on that elevator again without making sure he's busy. While I've got you here, I need to take Friday off. I'm sure you heard I have this funeral..."

"You are entitled to three days' paid bereavement for the death of a relative. I'm not obligated to give you time off for non-family."

"It's November, Cal, and I have twelve vacation days left. I haven't taken more than three or four long weekends all year. I'll arrange for supervisory coverage. Would you like me to run it by H.R.?"

"Never mind," he sneered. "Have a nice time."

Shelly watched him leave her office. "Appreciate your concern," she called after him. When things settled down, she was going to have to seriously start looking for another job. Of course that would mean leaving her staff and residents defenseless, with Cal at the reins. Even though she was sure that she was growing her own brain aneurysm with every month that she stayed, that was one thing she could never do.

Unless I can muster the guts to bump him off, she thought, I'm stuck. Story of my life.

She picked up her cell phone and stared at it. What was the proper etiquette in this situation? Should she call him? Normally, this early in the game, she would rather play it cool; wait for the guy to contact her. But this guy's mother died. Would he want to hear from her, or did he have too much on his mind? No doubt, things had gotten intense in a hurry; not that she minded. She couldn't stop thinking about the way he'd needed her last night. She'd been with men for years in the past without ever having that feeling; that connection, and it felt good. She missed him.

This is foolish, she thought. I've got a million things to do if I'm not going to be here Friday. With a heavy sigh, she set out to round on the units.

She didn't hear her phone vibrating on the desk.

No answer. Travis snapped his phone closed and stuck it back in his pocket. Jarvis Shubert watched him with patient reverence; it was clear this guy was a pro. A regular death expert. He knew just when to speak, what to say, and when he should maintain respectful silence. Travis tried to picture him drinking a beer or sitting on the toilet, and found that he couldn't. Did he comb his eyebrows? Because they looked too well-groomed to be real. Gordy sat thumbing through the tasteful casket brochure.

"Do you think she'd like this here with the pink linin'? I think that's pretty." He traced his fingers over the picture. "Of course, it's pricey. Sixty-five hunnerd bucks, but her policy'd cover it. I want her to have a really nice one."

"The 'Forever Darling'," Jarvis pitched. "It's a honey maple finish on hardwood; one of our most frequently chosen models." He nodded to Travis. "Mr. Richards, do you agree with Mr. Humphrey's selection?"

Travis shrugged, "That's fine, whatever Gordy wants. What's left to do?"

Jarvis straightened his crimson pocket square before answering. "As we were discussing earlier, Mr. Richards, we will need for you to bring in the clothing that Mrs. Richards will wear." He took in Gordy's Nascar cap and Waylon Jennings t-shirt. "Of course, if she didn't have something suitable, we have some lovely dresses for sale."

Travis, feeling self-conscious in his own shirt, one that commemorated his patronage of Hooter's, shot the funeral director an angry look. "My mother had plenty of nice clothes, Mr. Shubert. Gordy and I aren't the best judges of coffin gear, but I have a friend who can help us out. I just can't get ahold of her right now. When do you need to have the stuff back here?"

"Whenever it's convenient for you, Sir, this afternoon or tomorrow morning. Now if I can ask you to choose the cover for the service program and the design for the prayer cards, we should be finished for now. The options are in this book. I'll leave you gentlemen alone so as not to rush you, and I'll return in fifteen minutes or so."

Travis was exhausted and couldn't give two shits about stationery. He watched Gordy looking carefully through the samples and felt ashamed. He knew it was important to give Yvonne a proper send-off, and he wanted to; he just wasn't big on the details. "What are you thinkin', Gordy? Have you picked something out?"

"I don't know, do you like this dove here?" he pointed. "I think that'd be nice for the cards, n' this pi'ture of the hands in prayer fer the program."

Travis patted Gordy's back. "I think both of those will look really nice." He stood and went to the display of items at the side of the room. "What about these candles with the 23rd Psalm on 'em? Should we get a few to put around the room for the service?"

"Well, I was thinkin'," Gordy joined him. "He said they could customize 'em, and I'd kinda like to have the words to 'Abide With Me' put on 'em. That 'as her favorite hymn."

Travis hadn't known that. What kind of son didn't know his mother's favorite hymn? Of course, he'd heard Yvonne listen to much different music as a kid, but guessed he couldn't put Lynn Anderson on the funeral candles. 'I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden...' His eyes stung, remembering the times she'd danced him around the room until they were laughing and out of breath.

"Sounds good, Gordy. Do you know the words?"

"I have the sheet music. She played it on my Casio," Gordy's voice trailed off, and he rubbed his eyes.

"I know this is tough for you," Travis told him. "I hope you know I appreciate all you did for her. She loved you, Gordy."

"Not half as much as I loved her. I don't know what I'll do without 'er. I still can't believe she's gone."

"That makes two of us," Travis shook his head. "This is unreal."

Jarvis stood quietly in the doorway, his hands clasped low in front of him. "I'm sorry to intrude. Have you made your selections?"

They wrapped up the funeral plans and stepped out into the bright afternoon. Travis dropped Gordy off at home. "Do you need help getting anything ready?"

"Nope, I'll be fine. Jimmy took my suit to the cleaner's." He rubbed his beer belly. "I hope I can get into it. I can take care of the other stuff if you can get 'er clothes over there. Wait- lemme run in 'n get that music. You can take that, too."

Travis set off with the dog-eared pages. He'd gotten another idea for something he wanted to include in the service. As he headed for Von's to get started, he dialed his cell.

"Hell-o, Darlin'," he said, smiling for the first time that day. "What time do you get off? We've got a shin-dig to put together."

Shelly pulled the chain on her desk lamp and grabbed her purse. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"I'm upstairs," Travis called when he heard Shelly come through the back door. "C'mon up."

She found him in what had to be Yvonne's bedroom; judging by the huge four-poster complete with its pink satin coverlet and white marabou accents. Travis stood cupping his chin, looking down at three dresses that he had spread out over the bed. "Will any of these work?"

Shelly bit her lip and met his eyes. "Well, " she started, lifting a rayon, leopard-print shift by its hanger, "I'm not sure you want to do sleeveless..." He pointed to a pink, high-neck stretch jersey gown with a band of black ribbon below the bust line. "How about this one? I thought it might be too dressy."

That's one way of putting it, Shelly thought. How was she going to handle this? He had obviously tried so hard. The last choice was a long-sleeved, black sweater dress with a ruffle around the neck. Deciding it was the lesser of three evils, she held it up to the light. "This one's nice," she fibbed. "The coverage is good, and the style looks like her." Did it ever; that was the problem. She pulled him close and gave him a squeeze.

"How are you holding up?"

He took the dress from her and hung it over the door.

"I'm OK, I don't think it's really hit me yet. Gordy's havin' a hard time. They were pretty close."

"Poor guy," she went to Yvonne's jewelry box. Luckily, her accessories were better looking than her clothes. There was a nice pair of pearl earrings and a lovely matching brooch that had a cluster of pearls in off-white, light-pink and gray. "I hope he'll be alright. Do you like these?"

"I do, but I never would've found 'em. Thanks, Hon."

"Glad to help. Now we just need some stockings, shoes, and a garment bag. If you can run down and get me a baggie for her jewelry, I'll find them and get everything packed up."

He stopped at the top of the stairs. "I appreciate all you're doing. It seems to come so easy to you."

Shelly's muffled reply came from inside the closet. "I have experience burying a mother. It sucks."

"I'm sorry to hear that. There's so much I don't know about you."

She struggled with the zipper on the garment bag, a pair of black pantyhose over her shoulder. "Yeah, well, once you know the whole story, you'll probably make a run for it."

Travis laughed on his way down to the kitchen. "I'm in no position to do any such thing, Darlin'. Remember, you ain't heard *my* story yet."

When he came back up, Shelly had everything ready to go. "What else can I do you for?" she smiled at him.

He pulled a button-down on over his t-shirt and tucked them both into his jeans. "We have to take Von's stuff to Shubert's," he said. "Then I thought you might like to ride to the airport with me."

"Sure," she knelt down to tie her sneaker. "Is someone coming in for the funeral?"

Travis nodded toward the nightstand, and for the first time Shelly saw a collage frame in the shape of the word 'GRANDMA'. It held pictures of a younger Yvonne with a little boy.

"We're picking up Sean," he told her.

"My son."

Travis waited in the car while Shelly ran in to drop the garment bag at the funeral home. He needed to check in with Gordy, and call the airport to make sure Sean's flight was not delayed. Besides, he'd seen enough of the place for one day. She made her way through the lobby and it all came back to her; the cool, dry air, the low lighting and the strong smell of lilies. Still trying to process Travis's parental disclosure, she now felt shaky and slightly nauseous. Jarvis came toward her and extended a hand in greeting. He'd done her mother's funeral, and he gave Shelly the creeps.

"Hello Miss Davis," he said. "How can I help you?"

"Hi. I have the clothing you need for Yvonne Richards," she answered, ignoring his curiosity. She pulled the bag from her shoulder and passed it to him. An older woman wrung her hands at the entrance to the business office. Jarvis held up his finger to Shelly and turned to her. "Do you need to speak with me, Alice?"

"I-I'm sorry to interrupt," Alice stammered, "but Mr. Morgan from Morgan Memorials is on the phone, and he said it's urgent. It's regarding the installation of a stone."

Jarvis smiled tersely at the two women. "It looks like I'm going to have to take this call, Miss Davis; I apologize. Alice, can you please show Miss Davis downstairs? She has brought in items for Mrs. Richards in room two, and Marcy is waiting for them." He nodded politely toward Shelly before striding briskly toward the office.

Alice spoke timidly, "Follow me, Dear. It's just this way."

Shelly followed her down a narrow set of stairs into a basement that reeked of formaldehyde. They passed 'room one', and when they reached 'room two', the door stood ajar. "Here you are," Alice said, already beating feet for the stairwell. What, Shelly thought, she's just going to leave me here? She was wondering what she should do next when a young woman held the door open. She had spiked red hair, piercings in her eyebrow, nose and lip, and those see-through discs stretched her earlobes.

"I'm Marcy," she introduced herself. Shelly handed her the garment bag and backed away from the door.

"I was hoping you could come in," Marcy said. "They usually get me a picture so I know how to do the hair and makeup. I didn't get one and I need to know if I got it right."

"Wait a minute," Shelly was firm. "I'm not family. I'm only dropping stuff off. I can go and get her son..."

Marcy was persistent. "It will only take a minute, and I get better input from women. Men are no good at this kind of thing. Please?" Shelly sighed and trailed Marcy into the room. Shit shit shit!

Yvonne lay on a metal table in the center of the room. Her shoulders were bare above a sheet that covered her body, and she looked... "beautiful," Shelly heard herself say.

"I used a nude beige foundation, and tried to accentuate her delicate features with neutral tones," Marcy offered. "She was pretty, wasn't she?"

"Yes she was, I mean I didn't realize she was..." Shelly looked at Marcy. "I'm afraid you can't show her like this."

The girl was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Shelly went to the makeup tray and picked up the brightest red lipstick Marcy had. "I mean, Yvonne wore ivory pale foundation, and blue frosted eyeshadow, and heavy black eyeliner, and this color lip. She used a lip liner, and she applied it well, but it was harsh. And you know how women used to take some of the lipstick and rub it into their cheeks? I'm pretty sure she did that. You did a great job, but her family won't know her like this."

Marcy grabbed a cannister of disposable wipes and pulled one from the top. "Alrighty then," she said under her breath. "I'll just start over."

"Thanks," Shelly unzipped the bag she'd brought. "There's a black dress in here, and stockings and shoes, and here's her jewelry. There's underwear too. Will you need anything else?"

Marcy had sat down on a rolling stool and was already getting to work. "Nope, I'm good. Thanks for the info."

Shelly met Jarvis at the top of the stairs. "Miss Davis, I'm so sorry. Alice is new here... I never meant for you to be escorted directly to the anteroom. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, thank you." She realized she was crying; when had that started? "Someone's waiting for me outside."

She pushed past him and out the door, pausing for a minute to compose herself.

Travis stood next to the car. "Jesus, I thought you got lost in there. Was everything okay?"

"Just fine," Shelly opened the door on her side. "Jarvis held me up. How are you?"

"You know Jarvis, huh? How 'bout them eyebrows?" His smile faded. "Hey, you been cryin'?"

"Nah," she rubbed her nose. "I think I'm allergic to lilies. Ready to go?"

"Yeah," he turned the key in the ignition. "That's why I was about to come find you. My kid's been at the airport for an hour."

They raced toward the airport, which was thirty miles away. Travis thumped the steering wheel and leaned forward as though that might get them there faster. Shelly navigated. "You want to take exit 27A to the 59," she told him. "We just passed 25, so it shouldn't be long now. Which terminal is he at?"

"Southwest," Travis checked his mirrors, accelerated and merged into the passing lane. "His mother's gonna let me have it for making him wait there alone."

Shelly clung to the strap above her window. "He'll be alone forever if we get creamed out here. Take it easy!"

"Just be glad you never rode with me in a Humvee," he chuckled. "This is nothin'."

"Here it is, 27A. We'll be there in five minutes." She rubbed on some chapstick, pulled down the visor and fluffed her hair. "I look like something the cat dragged in," she slapped up the visor. "He's gonna be real impressed."

Travis reached over and took her hand. "You look great, Hon. I'm glad you came with me. Here we go, 'Southwest Arrivals', left lane. I'm gonna try to cruise by and grab him. We don't have time to park."

The pick-up/drop-off lane was filled with hotel shuttle buses and cabs. Travis pulled in neatly between two of them and jumped out of the car. "I'll leave it running in case they make you move it," he called back, heading for the revolving door.

Ten minutes later he came out with his arm around a teen-aged boy. Travis had told her Sean was fifteen, but he was small for his age, with sandy long hair that covered his eyes. He pulled a giant backpack-on-wheels, and had a guitar strapped to his back. What Shelly could see of his face revealed a sullen expression. Travis, on the other hand, was all smiles.

"Look who I found in there!" he said, 'noogie-ing' the kid's head. "Shelly, this is my son, Sean. Sean, meet Shelly."

Sean shocked her by offering his hand through the car window. He shook his hair back to reveal crystal green eyes. "Hi. It's nice to meet you."

Shelly smiled, relieved. "Nice to meet you, too. I'm sorry we were late."

Travis popped the trunk and stowed the backpack. Sean settled his guitar carefully into the back seat before getting in himself. "And we're off!" Travis deftly maneuvered the car into traffic. "You okay back there, Buddy?"

Silence. Shelly looked back to see Sean staring at his lap with his arms crossed. So, she thought, it was only Travis who got the cold shoulder. What was that about? She glanced at Travis, who stared straight ahead. Whatever it was, she wasn't going to find out without asking.

"So Sean," she met his eyes in the side mirror. "What are you mad about?"

Sean addressed the back of his father's head. "Didn't you tell her?"

"No, Sean, I haven't told my very new girlfriend the story of our lives. It doesn't make for great conversation."

"Yeah, well, if she knew she'd probably dump you."

That got Shelly's attention. "Okay, now you have to tell me. This sounds major."

Sean's voice trembled. "I haven't seen my Dad for two years. He let me down in a big way and then left without saying sorry, goodbye, or anything. My Grandma kept telling me he didn't mean it..." he choked up and stopped.

"I'm sorry about your Grandma," Shelly turned around in her seat. "She'd be glad you came."

"I'm glad you came too," Travis said quietly. "And I am sorry about what happened. I've missed you, but I couldn't call. I didn't know what I could say to make you understand."

"I was in eighth grade," Sean began, "and we had Career Week. I told everybody my Dad was a war hero from Desert Storm, and he said he would come and talk to the class. He even drove down the night before and took me to dinner. The next day, I went to school, and he was supposed to come in at ten o'clock, but he never showed. All the kids called me a liar!"

"That must have really hurt you," Shelly said, more to Travis than to Sean. He gripped the steering wheel, clenching his teeth.

"I wore the fatigue shirt he gave me to school every day; the one with 'Richards' on it. I thought then they'd have to believe me. I looked like a loser"

"How could you be a loser?" Shelly asked. "You didn't do anything wrong. It wasn't your fault."

"So I'm the loser, right?" Travis spat. "I did something wrong. It was my fault!"

"From the sound of it right now, that would be the logical conclusion. But it doesn't sound like you," she tousled his hair. "Why don't you set us straight?"

"First of all, I was no hero. I didn't want to do it, but Patty talked me into it."

"That's right, blame it on Mom!"

"I'm not blaming your Mom, Sean. I'm just trying to explain. Patty called and said you were all excited about me coming to your school, and she practically begged me to be there. I wanted to make you both happy, so I said I would. Up until that morning, I had every intention of doing it, I promise you."

"Why didn't you then?"

"I was not a superhero, Sean. I was a soldier who saw some pretty rough combat. I lost a lot of friends, and I felt responsible. I felt guilty for making it home, safe and sound, and going on with my life. I can't expect anyone who hasn't been through it to understand. Your Mom was there; that's where we met. She knows what it was like. It's the reason we couldn't stay together. We brought too much back with us, and we couldn't get past it."

"She's told me some of it," Sean said, "but she'd never screw me over like you did!"

"Watch it, Son," Travis threatened. "She'd never let you be disrespectful, either."

Sean wasn't going to back down. "Why should I respect you, after what you did?"

"I don't know why, Sean," Travis relented. "I messed up, and I'm sorry. I got up that morning, showered, and put on my Class A's. Then I looked in the mirror, and I lost it. I was still in the Army, I still wore a uniform every day, and fifteen years had gone by since I'd been in the Gulf. I thought I'd put it behind me, but I guess I hadn't. You don't go to school and pass out Kitkats and chat about a war. It's not show-and-tell. Those were real lives that were lost, Son. The heroes died in the field. Does that make sense?"

"It was really dumb to wait two years to tell me that. I needed to know."

"Well, now you do. Do you still have the shirt?"

"Practically wore it out," Sean said quietly; looking out the window.

"I'll bet I have something else I can give you while you're here. I'm glad you came, Buddy. It means a lot to me, and I know it would mean a lot to Grandma."

"Sorry guys," Shelly interrupted, "but I have to pee."

"We can stop and grab something to eat," Travis signalled for the exit. "Then I've got to get Sean over to Gordy's. They've got something to work on."

Shelly woke to find Travis propped up on one elbow, watching her. She stretched and smiled. "Hi".

"Good mornin'," he whispered, running a finger down her arm. She shivered. "Watch out now," she laughed. "You don't want to start something you can't finish."

"Oh, I don't think I could do any better than I did last night," he teased. "Thank God Mabel next door is gone to Port St. Lucie for the winter, or she'da thought I was killin' you the way you carried on."

"What can I say," she rubbed his bristly cheek. "I'm a screamer. Sorry."

"No need to apologize, Darlin'. It's a real ego boost. I'm glad my apartment's over an abandoned sub shop, though. You'd get me kicked out of a duplex for sure!"

His apartment. "I forgot you were moving! We need to finish that up."

"No hurry. I've signed the lease and paid the deposit; they don't care how long it takes me to move in. I need to get through the funeral first, and decide what I'm gonna do with this house."

Shelly looked around. "Have you thought about staying here? It's a cute place."

"I don't think so. I want to start fresh. Besides, I've gotta work on the sub shop."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I leased both floors. I want to open the shop downstairs. I'm retired; I have to do something.," he patted her hip. "I can't just be your boy toy for the rest of my life."

She stared at his curls, those blue eyes, that stubble and meaty chest, pulling him to her. "Maybe for the next twenty minutes?"

He jumped up and sprinted across the room. "Let me close the window first! We don't wanna scare the paper boy." He tossed Pretty Boy out into the hall and closed the bedroom door before parading back to her. Shelly cracked up.

"Not the reaction I was hoping for," he pretended to frown before diving in beside her. She palmed his cold butt and kissed his delicious neck.

"There. Is that better?" She wrapped one leg around him, warming her foot behind his knee.

"I guess so," he grinned, rubbing her back.

Had she felt this good, ever? Not that she could recall. She didn't even mind Pretty Boy scratching to get in.

Forty-five minutes later and half an hour late for work, Shelly hopped across the bedroom floor, pulling on her socks. Travis grabbed a ballcap and his jean jacket from the closet. "I'll take you to work, Hon. I need to get to Gordy's and see how he and Sean made out last night."

She buttoned her shirt, talking around her toothbrush, "So what time do you want me there tonight?"

"The visiting hours are from six to eight, but I don't expect you to hang around the whole time."

Coming out of the bathroom, Shelly met his eyes in the dresser mirror. "I want to be there."

"We have to meet Jarvis at five thirty," he sighed, picking up his keys. "That's so we can have a 'private viewing' with Von before everybody else comes. Poor Sean, he hasn't seen her since last summer..."

"It's hard as hell, I'm not gonna lie to you," she said sadly.

Travis put their coffee cups in the sink and shut off the pot. "Let's hit the bricks, Chumley."

They were backing down the driveway when he suddenly stopped the car. There was a man on the front stoop with the screendoor open, knocking on Von's front door.

Travis rolled down his window, "Can I help you? There's nobody home."

Startled, the man turned and looked over the top of his glasses toward the car before hurrying down the steps.

"Christ Almighty," Travis swore. "You have got to be shittin' me."

"I came as soon as I heard," the visitor stopped to catch his breath.

It was then that Shelly saw. The steel-gray curly hair. The crystal green eyes.

Travis threw a tired wave.
"Hey, Dad."

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