

IT WAS LATE Saturday morning, late enough for the sun to peek over the rooftops of the surrounding condominiums and send brilliant shafts of light through the venetian blinds in her bedroom. The tousled, raven-haired head stirred, one sleepy eyelid opening to reveal an incredibly blue eye.

Which immediately shut. "Ugh! Christ tonight!" A hand went up to shield her face from the bright assault, causing the woman lying next to her to awaken.

"Rae?"

"Yeah, sorry. Sun woke me up. Forgot to close the damn blinds last night." A sigh. "Time to get up anyway."

The slender blonde slipped her hand beneath the covers and reached between Rae's legs, feeling the silky smoothness still moist from the prior night's intense sexual activities.

"Cindy, don't." Rae gently removed the hand.

"That's not what you said last night," the blonde stated, smirking. She lifted her hand to caress Rae's breast. "I thought we had a pretty good time, considering how damn long it's taken me to get in this bed."

Rae stared at Cindy, disgusted with herself for having invited this woman into her haven. "I said no." She sat up and swung her long, tanned legs out of bed, evading the blonde's clutches. "Get up, Cindy. Do you want coffee before you leave?"

"Jesus. Thanks, Miss Hospitality. Don't go out of your way for me," the blonde spat. "Do you mind if I actually take the time to dress before I leave, or should I just walk home naked?"

Rae sat on the edge of the bed leaning on the heels of her hands, arms ramrod straight, shoulders hunched. "Listen, I'm hungover, I have a pounding headache, and I have to go run to clear out the cobwebs. And it's very late. I have a thousand things to do." She stopped, knowing the futility of continuing her explanation. Cindy was a selfish bitch, but she had a great body and a wild reputation in bed, which was the only reason Rae had taken her home last night. There was probably nothing she could say that would make any difference to the blonde's damaged ego at this point. "I can drive you home."

"No, that's fine. I'm just going to get my clothes on and grab the subway. I'll be home in fifteen minutes. If you drive me, it'll take an hour. Besides, you're obviously too much of a bastard in the a.m. for me. I like to wake up with a satisfied smile on my face, smelling of good sex. Of course, I usually convince my bed partner to join me for a steamy shower in the morning."

Rae looked over her shoulder, catching the suggestively arched eyebrows, the previous insult surprisingly forgotten. "Sorry, but I'll shower after I run." She sure as hell wasn't going to leave Cindy in her apartment alone for forty minutes. "C'mon, I'll make coffee and you can get home to your next lay." Rae grinned as Cindy backhanded her rear end.

Rae got up and padded down the hallway to the bathroom for her robe. She was tall and buff and blessed with genes as close to perfection as the human race could get. Her walk was more of a soak, a sultry stroll, and her appearance in a room stilled conversation. She had women and men falling all over themselves constantly to get close to her.

The men didn't have a chance. When she was younger, in her teens, the constant attention from guys was a power trip for her. Now men evoked little emotion, other than the benign feelings she held for her deceased father and the deep loyalty and love she felt for a few male friends. She didn't dislike guys, they just didn't do anything for her. She had pondered this personal discovery many times and had eventually come to the conclusion that being gay was never an issue of environment or choice for her. It was innate, as much a part of her as the color of her eyes.

She adored women, even though she felt separate from them most of the time. Rae used intellect and rationality, not emotion, to assess a situation and make a decision. Well, usually. She just had a hard time understanding why she often got a ten reaction to a three situation, especially if she had taken the time to explain her intentions, or lack thereof, beforehand.

She grabbed her robe and headed to the kitchen to make coffee. She hadn't set the timer last night, probably for the same reason she hadn't closed the blinds. A grin came unbidden to her face. *Christ tonight! Cindy was an animal!* She had certainly appeased Rae's sexual frustrations, but the decision to take her home had been made against Rae's better judgment. Now she would pay the price. Again. Both women moved in the same circles, and if she thought last night's shenanigans would go unnoticed or unannounced, she was fooling herself. Cindy would make every detail of their tryst well-known, and it would be the topic of conversation at the bar for many nights. *The price we pay for stupid decisions.*

Coffee made, Rae perched on one of the tall stools surrounding the island in the modern glass and chrome kitchen. Her condo was a testament to her life. The furnishings were sparse but elegant, quality compensating for quantity. The couch and loveseat were Italian black leather; the picture frames on the walls held prints from Picasso's dark years. Hardwood floors gleamed in the daylight, and her bedroom furniture was solid oak, stained black, allowing the wood grain to show through. The apartment was subdued and choice, much like its occupant.

Rae could hear Cindy in the bathroom pattering around, and wondered if she was rifling through the medicine cabinet. She sighed and shook her head, looking back on the evening and again questioning how she could let her hormones effectively neutralize her rational mind.

"You ready for coffee? It's hazelnut," she called down the hall.

"Don't be impatient, Rae. I'll be out of here soon enough." The bathroom door opened and Cindy walked into the kitchen. "Mmm, smells good. So are you going to the bar tomorrow afternoon?"

"Why? What's going on?" Rae poured two cups and slid one across the counter.

"The championship game is tomorrow at one, so Deb is putting on a bash with food and happy hour all day. And night." The blonde grinned.

"Another reason for all of them to drink themselves into oblivion," Rae replied sarcastically. "Don't any of those women work on Monday anymore?"

Rae had a history with the Not-So-Amazon softball league. She had been highly recruited given her natural athletic skills, and had finally ended up wearing the Pink Turf T-shirt. It was supposed to be a fun league, but putting together a bunch of lesbians in a sports environment meant the competition was rarely friendly. Rae had led her team to the championship the first year, and the same group captured top spot in the city soccer league as well. There were cries of foul and accusations of stacked teams with ringers, and Rae had gotten sick of it. Not to mention the "musical partners" phenomenon. One week, the right fielder was sleeping with the third baseman; the next week, they wanted nothing to do with each other and were both after the pitcher. Rae had slept with a select few, but never the partnered women. She had promised nothing beyond a few exhilarating nights together, but that still didn't stop the rumor mill, nor did it stop some women in the league from wanting to claim her as their conquest. She gave it up in her third year, walking away to cries of, "Oh, you think you're too good for us now, huh?" It was more annoying than upsetting, but all was basically forgotten in time, Rae once again becoming one of the most sought-after lesbians in the bar.

"Well, I'm going. The party will be outside on the patio, and they're going to have a pool tournament downstairs." The blonde leaned across the counter towards Rae. "Look. You got what you wanted and so did I." The dark woman lifted her eyes and saw the smirk. "Everyone saw us leave together last night. Even if I said nothing, the rumors would still fly." It was as though Cindy had read her thoughts.

"Just don't say anything, all right? I'd like to keep some aspects of my life relatively private."

"You've got to be kidding! Miss a chance like this? Not on your life!" Cindy laughed. "Don't worry, dear, it will only make them want you more. Ta ta, darling!" She cocked her wrist in the air and waved her fingers at Rae as she sauntered towards the front door. "Go for your run and smile a little or you're going to get those worry lines etched into that divine face of yours." The door clicked shut behind her.

Rae sighed and ran long fingers through her hair. She got up slowly and walked into the bedroom, stopping in the middle as she threw back her head and closed her eyes. "What the hell am I doing?" she mused aloud. "What the hell am I looking for is a better question." But she knew what she wanted. It was just too much to hope for, a second time.

The boardwalk that ran the length of the downtown shore of Lake Ontario was crowded on the weekends. Suburbanites dressed in Dockers khaki shorts and Ralph Lauren polos seemed to believe that spending a little time strolling and window-shopping in the trendy area somehow transformed them from movie and video watchers to theater buffs and filmgoers. Their presence along the boardwalk made them feel more in touch somehow. The boutiques and specialty stores spilled their scents and sounds onto the sidewalks along the beach, and Pachelbel's "Canon in D Major" strained eloquently from a centrally located shop, providing mood music for the eclectic experience.

Rae negotiated her way along the water's edge, trying to avoid colliding with too many middle-aged men who were walking in one direction while ogling bikini-clad women in another. Some men were never meant to wear Speedos. Her long strides ate up the distance quickly as she pounded across the wet sand, wishing she had gotten up earlier to avoid the congestion. Admiring glances and not a few hungry leers followed her progress, lingering on the impossibly long, well-proportioned legs and the tight ass that crowned them. She ignored the looks, having learned long ago to shrug off the self-consciousness that plagued her earlier years in the tall, lanky body.

It was ridiculously hot, even with the lake breeze, and Rae's gray Lycra shorts and sports bra were soaked through. Her black wraparound Ray-Bans shielded her eyes from the intense sun and kept her focus straight ahead. She didn't see him until he had fallen into stride right next to her.

"Hey!"

She faltered, startled out of her oblivion, and turned to glare at the source of the interruption. Her gaze softened as she stopped running and gave the handsome man a brief embrace.

"Hey yourself." She playfully backhanded him in the abdomen. "Wow. It's been a while, Richard. You look good. Doin' okay?"

"I'm fine. How are you?" He took her hands and held them out to her sides, glancing appreciatively up and down her form. "Jesus. I swear to God you look better every time I see you."

"Ha! I do believe you're a tad biased, my friend."

"I may be biased, but I'm not blinded by it. Take those glasses off and let me drown in those baby blues for a minute, would ya?"

Rae complied and gave him a dazzling smile. It had taken them a long time to reach this level in their relationship. They had dated frequently in high school, during which time Richard fell madly in love. She was everything he wanted — smart, gutsy, and beautiful, with a hot temper, a fierce loyalty, and an unpredictable edge that he found wildly attractive. Rae adored him as a friend, but a dark part of her loved the control he willingly relinquished to her, especially sexually. She knew she was gay and, by that time, had already had numerous encounters with women. Eventually she listened to her conscience, knowing that she could never reciprocate his feelings and that what she was doing to him was wrong. She had to end it, for her sake as well as his. She remembered with vivid clarity his intense reaction to the parting, as if it had happened yesterday...

"No, Rae! You can't mean this! Is it another guy? I'll kill him!"

"Richard, there isn't another guy. There isn't anyone, just me. I don't want to hurt you. I care about you so much, but..."

"Then don't hurt me! Damn you! I love you too much! No one will ever love you more than I do!" Richard was screaming, tears rolling down his face. "We can figure it out! Just give me a chance!"

Rae's heart was breaking for him, but she couldn't let him believe in a future with her any longer. He had already asked her to marry him, and she had jokingly replied that he would forget her after high school. He had looked at her with deadly seriousness and said he would never love another like he loved her.

"Richard, you'll always be one of my best friends, and I—"

"No!" he wailed. "I don't want to be your friend!"

They were in his room, downstairs in his parent's house. Derek, Richard's younger brother by three years, had come down to find out what was happening. He looked at Rae, saw the regret in her eyes, and immediately teared up. He and Richard were very close and he knew at that moment that his brother's life would never be the same. He turned and slowly went back upstairs, closed the door to his room, and cried.

After Rae left that fateful evening, Richard got in his car and tore madly through the night. His mother received the call at 2:42 a.m. Richard had wrapped his sky blue Chevette, which he had purchased because the color reminded him of Rae's eyes, around a telephone pole and was in Grace Hospital's trauma unit with multiple injuries. Thankfully, none of them were life threatening. He survived physically intact, but the emotional scar would never completely heal. His heart was broken, rent, beyond repair. He got on with his life, went to college, and became a high school English teacher. He met Janice, whom he eventually married, and they had two children. He was as content as his heart would let him be.

Richard couldn't speak to Rae for many years. Not because he hated her, but because he loved her. Janice knew, but she loved Richard as much as he loved Rae. She resigned herself to the situation and accepted what he gave her, which was everything he was capable of offering. They had a happy home, and he adored his kids.

Rae left him alone and respected the fact that he needed time to heal, knowing her presence would make it impossible. It wasn't until three years ago that they finally spoke again, at their ten-year high school reunion. She walked in and saw him standing quietly with Janice, talking with his old track teammates. The room stilled for a brief moment as Rae descended the stairs into the school gymnasium. No one had really expected her to show up, even though she had been a dominant force in both sports and academics in her years there. She had come alone, aware that bringing a girlfriend would be too much for everyone, herself included.

Richard's head had turned towards the entrance as soon as the conversation lulled, and he stared, a mixture of emotions warring inside him. Janice nudged him slightly, telling him with her eyes to go greet his first love. He gave her elbow a gentle squeeze and headed towards the woman who had owned his heart.

Rae held her breath as she saw him walking over, not knowing what to expect. But as he neared, she could see the veiled emotion in his eyes, a combination of love, regret, and profound sadness.

She released the breath. "Hi there, stranger."

He held out his hands. "You'll never be a stranger to me, Rae." And she knew then that everything would be okay. They hugged gently. "You look stunning. More beautiful than I remember."

Rae was wearing a classic ivory pant suit, with a form-fitting jacket that accentuated her broad, muscular shoulders and pants that graced her narrow hips and tapered to the ankles. Her long hair was unencumbered, the raven tresses flowing freely around her shoulders in elegant contrast to the light-colored suit.

"You look great yourself, mister." She grinned. "Family life agrees with you. I'd like to meet Janice, if that's okay."

Rae had maintained a discreet connection with Derek, who had eventually forgiven her and kept her informed of his brother's well-being. Richard was aware of it and was quietly grateful to his brother for doing what he was incapable of.

"Certainly. She'd love to meet you too. She's heard a lot about you."

"All good, I hope."

"All good from me." Despite the pain he had endured, Richard was an honorable man, and he never allowed anyone to speak a derogatory word about Rae in his presence.

She grimaced, knowing that her life had been the topic of many a crass discussion amongst her old classmates. And she was aware also that Richard had been interrogated many times about why she had “elected” to pursue an alternate lifestyle when it had appeared that they were meant for each other. Without truly understanding the answer himself, he had gallantly defended her, stating that her choices were her own and it did not lessen her in his eyes in any way. His support was the main reason she had not been ostracized by this group, and she was forever thankful to him for that.

Richard held out a tuxedoed arm and she gratefully accepted, walking through the crowd to meet his wife of six years, greeting old acquaintances along the way. Janice was polite but slightly distant until Rae asked about the children, and she warmed immediately to the subject, regaling Rae with photo after photo of two preschool girls mugging for the camera.

They laughed and reminisced about their high school years, avoiding painful memories. They were careful with each other, but relaxed, and Rae enjoyed the evening immensely. When the DJ played an old favorite, Madonna’s “Crazy For You”, Richard stood and requested a dance. Rae glanced fleetingly at Janice and seeing the soft assurance in her eyes, accompanied him to the dance floor.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asked quietly, knowing all eyes were on them.

“Since when have you worried about what anyone else thinks, Rae? Of course I want to do this. I’m fine now. You will never leave my heart. Ever. But I’ve accepted that, and I’m happy. Don’t worry anymore.”

She arched her eyebrows in surprise, and he chuckled. “Derek keeps me informed too. You’re not the only sleuth, completely.” They laughed aloud and started moving together to the familiar tune. “I must admit, though, I wasn’t completely sure of what I would feel if you walked in here tonight. Feels really, really good to talk with you again. And to know I can handle it, with just a little ache.” He grinned, that beautiful boyish grin that she remembered so well.

They danced beneath the streamers and balloons and felt a warm déjà vu wash over them. They were a vision together, both tall and dark, athletic and elegant, moving across the floor, so familiar to everyone there. It was a beautiful, bittersweet moment...

Rae returned to the condo much later than expected, having shared good conversation and a Ben & Jerry’s strawberry/kiwi smoothie with Richard on the beach. But she didn’t regret cutting her run short and not getting her errands done. Richard was a great friend, one she could count on for the rest of her life, and time with him was important, the little of it they did manage to spend together.

She stripped out of her running clothes, now dry from the afternoon heat, shrugged into light sweats to guard against the chill from the central air, and contemplated the rest of her day. She could go into the lab and finish the second quarter productivity report David would be looking for on Monday, she could tackle the mounds of laundry mocking her from the overflowing hamper, or she could relax for a while. She stuck her tongue out at the dirty clothes, decided to take a well-deserved weekend away from work, and sat down at her computer.

The sun was starting to set when she finally stood up and stretched languidly. “Time to take a shower, Rae,” she spoke aloud. “Get your ass in gear. It’s Saturday night and a full moon at that. The ladies will be out tonight.” A small fire ignited in her belly, almost primal in its nature. She grinned, strolled down the hall to the bathroom, and stepped into a steaming shower, letting the hot water strip away the residue of the previous night.