

## Part I: Fifteen

I hear the flames of Armageddon  
roaring hungrily in the dark.  
~ Torrin C. Smith, "Armageddon"

Sonny's Journal - September 23, 1998

*I had a dream about Mom and Dad last night. Tom and I were kids again, and we were all out on a Sunday drive. The road was getting smaller and smaller and smaller, until there wasn't enough room for the car. Rather than turn back, we got out of the car and continued. Pretty soon, we were walking on this teeny little ledge over a huge cliff. Mom lost her balance and fell; Dad tried to catch her and went, too. I was so scared; I couldn't look down, just leaned back against the cliff behind me. I don't know what Tom was doing. Then I saw Mom and Dad again. They were floating in front of me — they had wings, like those stupid cartoons, you know? They smiled at me and waved, and then kept on going up.*

*I woke up pretty scared. I almost got up to go check on them before I remembered that they were dead. So I watched some of the Christmas videos instead. Fell asleep on the couch. Weird, huh?*

*Day after tomorrow is the audition for the new guitarist. Tom said I could come and watch. It's too bad about Chris having to leave the band. He's pretty good. Oh, well. Maybe they'll find an even better one!*

"So, can I take that Women's Lit class this winter?" Sonny asked.

Tom Middlestead steered the beat-up Honda through traffic. "I don't know, Sonny—"

"I can pay for it!" she interrupted. "I've still got the money from babysitting last year. Since I'm a resident, the cost per credit is cheaper."

Her brother grimaced and shook his head. "Money's not the issue, sis. The trust fund will cover your education."

Sonny's brow furrowed. "Then what's the problem?"

"I just think you're pushing yourself too hard, that's all. You're barely a sophomore in high school and you're already taking college level classes." He stopped at an intersection and looked at her with eyes that were a darker shade of blue than hers. "I don't want to see you burn out."

Deflated, she looked out the windshield. "Green light," she muttered.

Middlestead reluctantly returned his attention to the road. He hated telling his little sister "no" on anything, even moreso when it concerned a decent education. *But damn it! When she isn't writing, she's reading. When she isn't reading, she's writing. That can't be a good thing.* Watching her out of the corner of his eye, he could almost see the gears working. *You might as well say "yes". She'll talk you into it anyway.* Sighing, he drove on in silence.

As they pulled into the parking lot at the bar, Sonny finally spoke up. "Hey! I didn't know Rita was going to be here!"

Her brother parked the car and glanced at the couple standing at the entrance. "She must have come with Chris. I wanted him to look over the new meat." He shut off the ignition and unfastened his seat belt.

"Cool!" Sonny exclaimed, unbuckling her restraint. "We can sit at the bar and heckle you guys." She tossed an impish grin at her brother and bailed before he could grab her.

“Now wait a minute!” he growled, making the expected lunge. He grinned at her giggle and wagged a warning finger at her. She slammed the door with a grin and jogged off to greet Rita.

Middlestead reached over and locked her door, then exited the Honda and secured it behind him. *Not that anybody'd want this hunk of junk.*

*Near the entrance, a young blond man, tall and thin with closely cropped hair, stood with Sonny and another girl. The pregnant redhead he was wrapped around was laughing as she ran her fingers through the stubble.*

*“What the hell happened to your hair, man?” Middlestead demanded, reaching out to clasp his friend's hand. He nodded a greeting at Rita.*

*Grinning ruefully, the man scratched the buzz cut. “Well, figured they were gonna cut it all off in a couple of weeks anyway.” He shrugged. “Might as well get used to the look.”*

*“Yeah, well, we need our toilet cleaned at home. Can I use you?” Middlestead quipped.*

*Sonny swatted her brother's arm. “Stop that!” Turning to the couple, she continued with a smile, “Never mind Mr. I-Have-No-Fashion-Sense. You look great, Chris.”*

*“Thanks, Sonny.”*

*“And I like it,” Rita said, a warning eyebrow lifted at Middlestead.*

Raising his hands in surrender, Middlestead took a step backward. “Far be it from me to insult a mother-to-be.”

Sonny brushed by her brother, rolling her eyes and pushing him with her shoulder as she passed. She opened the door to the bar, emitting a yelp as a retaliatory swat struck from behind her. Glaring over her shoulder, she rubbed her rear. “Payback's a bitch, Tom,” she warned. “You have to sleep sometime.”

Middlestead looked back at her innocently until she entered the establishment. Once her back was turned, he grinned as he held the door for the couple.

The bar was closed and quiet. A handful of people lounged near a small stage in the back. Most of the chairs were up on the tables, and an older man was sweeping the floor. He looked up when he heard the door, and his face lit up. Setting aside the broom, he stepped forward, arms wide. “Sonny! How are you?”

“I'm great, Lamont. How's business?” She gave the bar owner a hug.

“Not bad, not bad,” he responded. “These guys bring in some steady customers on the weekends. Even if they don't know how to play,” he concluded with a conspiratorial whisper and wink.

“I heard that, old man,” Middlestead growled as he came in. “Are Lando and Max here yet?”

“Yeah.” A work-worn thumb shot backwards. “They're dumping the recycling from last night. You got some people waiting for you by the stage, too.” He dismissed the men, his attention falling on the pregnant woman. “Rita! You're looking wonderful!” Taking the two females in tow, Lamont escorted them toward the bar. “Can I get you beautiful ladies something to drink?”

Middlestead stared after the trio. With a sarcastic grin he said, “I'm fine, Lamont, how are you? Certainly, Lamont, I'd *love* something to drink.”

Chris chuckled and slapped him on the back. “Let's go check out my replacement.”

Eight people lounged around the stage area, all carrying guitars. Most wore the obligatory heavy metal leather jackets, though one was in a button-up shirt and a tie. It was a toss-up as to which was weirder — the preppy or the punk rocker kid in the corner who had red and green hair. Chris climbed onto the stage and began checking over his instrument; Middlestead rummaged around behind the drum set and pulled out a clipboard, which he handed to the first person within reach.

“Hi, I'm Tom Middlestead, drummer for Warlord. I want each of you to go ahead and write down your name and a number where we can reach you. If you have any references, jot them down,

too. This is Chris,” he said, indicating the guitarist. “He’s the one we’re needing a replacement for. Max Hampton and Lando Atkins, our bassist and other guitarist, will be here shortly and we can get underway.”

Eventually, the other two band mates returned from the trash bin. Lando, the second guitarist, was tall and well muscled, with a strong jaw, long brown hair, and a wicked grin. Hampton was short and stocky, his chin sporting a stylish goatee. Both settled down into chairs beside the drummer at the base of the stage. Chris stayed onstage under the lights.

One by one, applicants were called to the stage. The first requirement was to play samples of different musical styles to show aptitude with metal, funk, and blues. The second was a jam session with the departing guitarist. Chris played a few bars from one of Warlord’s songs, and the applicants were required to pick it up and go with the flow. Finally, if any had songs of their own, they were encouraged to play a couple of tunes.

It was a fairly quick weeding out process. One man bowed out even before his name was called, citing a doctor’s appointment and leaving them with a “maybe next time”. The preppie went soon after. The third on the list appeared competent and had definite potential. He was asked to stick around for a while longer. Numbers four and five were good, but not good enough. Of those remaining, one didn’t compose and the other seemed unable to pick up the band’s tunes. That left the punk rocker.

Sonny sat at the bar, keeping time on the brass footrest beneath her shoe. She’d decided that the job was going to go to either the third applicant or the last. She could tell by the tilt of her brother’s head that number three interested him. Chris appeared to be impressed with him, too. She was merely giving the last applicant the benefit of the doubt, since she hadn’t heard him yet.

As the kid with red and green hair climbed under the spotlights, Sonny frowned. She’d all but dismissed the man because of his style of dress. Warlord wasn’t a punk band; its roots were in hard rock and blues. Squinting, she scanned the slight form. Dark eyebrows rose in amazement, and she interrupted her friend’s chatter. “That’s a *girl!*”

“What?” Rita turned and looked at the stage. “No way!”

“Yes, it is! The hips are wide. See?” Sonny watched, fascinated.

Middlestead glanced back to the clipboard. “Torrin Smith?” he repeated. Looking back at the young woman onstage, he raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, that’s me,” a decidedly feminine voice burred. Her hair was shoulder length, with the colored striping messily parted in the middle and long bangs hanging into gray eyes. Near the scalp, a reddish-gold hue was testament to the dye job growing out. The apparition was clothed in baggy black trousers and a black, sleeveless Bloodworks T-shirt; the combat boots were dyed a rich green. She hefted a beat-up guitar and plugged it into the sound system.

The drummer glanced at his companions. Atkins shrugged and leered at him. The bassist scratched at his goatee. Chris, on stage with the newcomer, wasn’t paying any attention; he was keeping an eye on the woman. Middlestead cleared his throat and looked at her. “You *are* eighteen, aren’t you?” he asked, concerned. The band didn’t need an underage member getting into trouble at the bars they played.

Bristling, the woman glared daggers at him. “Yeah. Need to see my ID?”

He pursed his lips, deciding to let it drop. *Hell, it’s not like it’s going to be an issue. She can probably only play punk and ska anyway.* “No, no problem. Let’s go ahead and get started.” He gestured for her to begin.

Sonny's eyes were riveted to the stage. Usually, the women played pop, not metal. It wasn't often she saw a woman play in the rock genre, though it had been getting more popular in recent years.

After a moment of almost spiritual silence, the woman broke into the strains of a popular heavy metal ballad from the sixties. She stayed there a few moments, then melted into an old blues number. From there, the music floated on to another Sixties metal tune, followed by progressive rock and thrash. She spent three to five minutes on each song, moving effortlessly between them. Eyes closed under the spotlight, she seemed far away.

When the music faded, Sonny found herself up by the stage, standing behind her brother. "Wow," she said. "She's better than number three."

Impressed, Chris nodded grudgingly at the woman and began clapping. She inhaled deeply, opening her eyes as the people in the room also began to applaud.

Middlestead shook himself from his reverie. He agreed wholeheartedly with his sister, but the audition wasn't finished yet. "Well, okay, Torrin, that's great," he finally said, as the applause died down. "Are you familiar with any of our songs?"

The Christmas-colored hair shook as she busied herself with her guitar. "Just what I've heard today."

When the drummer nodded at Chris, the guitarist said, "You know the drill then. I start a set, you join in." At her nod, he began.

As strains of music filled the air, Sonny felt something against the back of her legs. She looked up to see the owner, Lamont Atkins, smiling at her and holding a chair for her to sit. Grinning her thanks, she settled down to watch the proceedings. Rita joined her, but Sonny was oblivious, all her attention on the woman onstage.

Chris began a familiar song, one of the more difficult sets the band played. He hadn't used it with the other applicants, and Sonny felt a stab of anger that he might be setting the woman up for failure. Her anger dissipated as Torrin took up the gauntlet and ran with it, her own instrument providing harmony and counterpoint to Chris's. There was very little flubbing as she played, interweaving the tune with her own and improvising along the way.

In front of Sonny, the other band members sat in silence. Finally, Hampton left off scratching at his beard to lean over and mutter, "Her," to the drummer.

Middlestead glanced over in surprise. "Let's just wait until we see if she can compose, alright?" he asked in a whisper. The bassist shrugged nonchalantly and resumed fingering his beard.

With the second part of the audition complete, Atkins finally spoke up. "Not fucking bad, girlfriend," he commended.

Gray eyes narrowed in suspicion, searching for sarcasm. Finding none, she determinedly set her jaw relaxed a bit. A slight blush pinked her skin. "Thanks," she mumbled.

"You write your own tunes?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, I've written a couple."

Middlestead piped up, "Okay. Let's hear one."

She hesitated. "I'm not a good singer," she warned.

"Doesn't matter," the drummer said. "We'd only use you on back up vocals anyway. Lando and Max do most of the leads."

The woman nodded, then brushed her bangs from her eyes. After a few adjustments to the equipment, she began. It was a simple melody — deep, slow, and smooth. Chris listened for a few moments and, unable to help himself, began an accompaniment.

*She's right*, Sonny thought. *She's not a good singer. At least not metal.* The woman was able to carry a tune, but her voice was unusually high-pitched for the music she played. Despite the delivery, the lyrics caught Sonny's attention.

I'm slithering through the  
Darkness of my soul,  
Crawling through the ooze  
Of my perverted sensibilities.  
I yearn for deviation,  
Want to feel just this once.  
Not this smothering warmth that  
Surrounds me, sickens me, seduces me in...  
Her guitar and voice became rougher, gaining an edge that grated on the nerves.

This darkness.  
Is this all there is?  
Darkness.

Torrin broke into a guitar solo, her instrument mourning the loss of light and love, Chris following her lead as he played backup. Sonny noticed movement to one side of her and glanced over to see Atkins's fingers twitching as he followed along. She grinned as the woman on stage began to sing again, her voice smooth once more but no less intense.

Watch the metamorphosis,  
Distorting who I am  
Weakening, hardening.  
How long can I remain here,  
Living with this suffocation?  
I reach out blindly  
And pull you in.

Then it was over and quiet filled the room. Silence reigned. Everyone stared dumbly at the woman as she began disconnecting her guitar from the equipment.

*It's like she's a completely different person when she plays*, Sonny observed. *Everything just stays bottled up inside and then she explodes.* Finally, Sonny stood and began clapping, breaking everyone's reverie. "That was great! Do you have any more?"

Torrin peered through the spotlights to locate the unfamiliar voice. "Yeah, a few."

"She's the one," Atkins murmured to the drummer. On the other side of Middlestead, Hampton nodded in agreement. On stage, Chris was looking pointedly at the rest of his band mates.

Middlestead glanced at his companions. "Alright then, Torrin. Can you stay a bit longer?"

She nodded curtly, red and green hair flopping, before stepping down from the stage and resuming her seat.

For courtesy's sake, the other finalist was given a second shot, but he was not nearly as talented. After several minutes of discussion, all the unsuccessful applicants were herded to the door. Torrin Smith, newest member of Warlord, remained seated in the corner, a black stocking cap on her head and the leather jacket she had donned gleaming in the light from the stage.

Sonny's Journal - September 25, 1998

*Well, Warlord has a new guitarist. And it's a girl! Actually, she's a woman. She doesn't look much older than me, though.*

*I got to see Rita today. She's only four months along, but she's definitely showing! Chris should be out of basic training and AIT before the baby's born. He ships out in two weeks. All the paperwork is signed. Rita's hoping he gets a stateside post first. Otherwise, she won't be able to fly to wherever he gets posted until after the baby's born, and she really wants him to be there for it.*

*I think I might have talked Tom into letting me take that college course this winter. I guess he's worried that I'll go bananas and freak out or something from all the stress of schoolwork. All I had to do was remind him of his obsession when he was fifteen — rock and roll... And now look at him: his own band, regular gigs, and making enough money to live on even if they haven't hit the big time yet.*

*I just want to be a journalist. Nothing exciting. Well, maybe it could be exciting. It'd be pretty cool to be a consultant somewhere like Europe or something — that would be so fantastic. Or maybe working a crime beat in L.A. or New York. Have my name right up there with Dan Rather's. Yeah, I could dig that!*

*Oh! And Shelly called tonight. The party she was talking about is going to be next Friday night. She said that Jay would definitely be there, even if he's a jerk. It's going to be a little scary, though. There's supposed to be a lot of seniors going, too. Hope us poor lower classmen don't get razed too much while we're there.*

“... The look on his face! It was priceless!” the blonde gushed, snickering. “I *told* you he was a jerk.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Sonny dug her hands deeper into her jacket pockets against the chill air and continued walking.

It was after eleven p.m. in downtown Portland, and Shelly and Sonny were walking along the SW 5th Street transit mall, heading for the bus that would take them home. Despite the crisp weather, there were quite a few denizens in the downtown area. Some were people waiting for buses, others were just hanging out or moving from one place to another to stay warm.

The party had been a major mistake. Quite a bit of alcohol was flowing, as was often the case with a heavy senior contingent in attendance. Sonny was no stranger to beer and limited herself to one. She was a minor. And a girl. And a lower classmen at that. Her level headedness turned out to be an asset. There was a boy she had been lusting after ever since she'd seen him on the track team, and he was there. Jay was popular and could have had any girl he wanted, so when he showed a lot of interest in her, Sonny could hardly believe her luck.

Eventually, the couple had made it out to the back deck. They were as alone as they were going to get, with a hundred teenagers crammed into a three-bedroom townhouse and adjacent yards. He made a pass; Sonny caught it. Tentative kisses soon escalated toward a more heated exchange. It had been oh-so-romantic. Until the young man attached one hand rather blatantly to her breast, his lips on her throat and moving slowly southward. She demurred. There were people present, and she wasn't about to go any further without getting to know him better. He pushed the issue, insistent, not letting up.

Sonny got scared. Following close on the adrenaline rush of fear was anger. There was a scuffle, an angry shout followed by a grunt of pain as her knee came into contact with one of Jay's more sensitive areas. Sonny stomped away, blushing in anger and embarrassment as she pushed past her wide-eyed girlfriend. Jay yelled after her as his friends hooted at his inability to score.

*Jay the Jerk*, Sonny thought over and over, like a mantra. She was still pretty pissed off, especially when Shelly had told her that she'd seen a couple of his friends exchanging money. She was more

furious with herself than anybody, however. *God, you're an idiot. You knew he was an asshole.* She shook her head.

"Did you see Stephanie?" Shelly asked.

"What...no, I didn't. What about her?"

Her friend leaned forward, dark eyes sparkling with glee. "She's wearing Todd Victorian's letter jacket! Isn't that *cool?*"

Disinterested, Sonny nodded and continued walking. Shelly chattered along beside her, oblivious to Sonny's silence.

Their bus stop appeared devoid of other people, though there was an odd looking heap on one of the benches. *Somebody's clothes?* Sonny thought idly as they neared. She distracted herself from her anger over Jay by wondering who would leave a jacket and extra clothing at a bus stop on a night as cold as this. The girls were steps away before she realized that it was a person. Pale blue eyes narrowed, she watched the body as they entered the bus shelter. Shelly's sudden silence and sharp intake of breath indicated she had seen the bum, too.

"Sonny!" Shelly whispered, her brown eyes wide. "There's a corpse over there!"

She shook her head. "No. He's still breathing, see?"

Hips and shoulders on the bench, the transient's legs stuck outward as if the person had sat down and then fallen sideways. Dark trousers, ragged at the hem, combat boots, and a black shirt of some sort were visible. The leather jacket was pulled halfway up to cover the head and shoulders more completely. As the girls watched, the legs stretched out a bit, green boots digging their toes into the cement in a reflexive action.

Sonny frowned. Something was familiar. *Where have I seen boots like those?*

*Shelly was still chattering, albeit in a whisper now, verbally speculating about who the bum was, where he came from, how he got there and in such a state. She interrupted her whispered monologue with a gasp and a squeak as Sonny moved forward to squat by the unconscious figure. "What are you doing?"*

"I think I know her," Sonny explained with a glance over her shoulder.

"Her? *That's* a her?"

Nodding absently, she returned her attention to the person on the bench. "Torrin? Is that you?" Another stretch of the legs was the only response. Sonny tentatively reached out and grasped the shoulder, gave it a shake. "Torrin? Wake up." Encouraged by a feminine-sounding rumble, she pulled the jacket back a bit and saw red and green hair.

Shelly stood out of arm's reach, nervously shuffling from one foot to the other. She watched Sonny try to wake the transient, eventually getting her to sit up on the bench. "Eeww, Sonny!" she exclaimed with a grimace. "She's puked all over herself!"

Sonny kept Torrin propped up with one hand firmly on her shoulder. An odor of stale cigarettes, alcohol, and vomit floated off her. There was vomit on the T-shirt — *Same one she wore at the audition last week*, crossed her mind — and on the leather jacket. Fortunately, most of it had run down the side of the bench and into a puddle. The woman slumped in a boneless heap, mumbling under her breath and unable to open her eyes. *Whatever she's on, she's gone.*

*Sighing in consternation, Sonny glanced around, her eyes lighting on the monitor exhibiting the bus schedules. Bus will be here any minute.* She wasn't going to be able to muscle Torrin onto the bus, then off and the four blocks from the stop to her house. The band was playing tonight and wouldn't be done for hours yet, so she couldn't call them for a ride. *Now what?* She spotted the pay phone on the wall of the shelter. After some quick calculations, she looked at her anxious friend. "How much money have you got on you?"

“What?” Shelly frowned at her. “What are you gonna do, give it to *her*? She’ll just find another bottle.” She looked over the seated figure with distaste. “Providing she wakes up before the liquor stores close.”

Sonny rolled her eyes and shook her head. “No, silly! If we can afford a taxi between the two of us, I want to get one.”

The girl stared at Sonny for a full thirty seconds before shaking her head suspiciously. “What are you up to?” she growled.

“Look, we can’t leave her here, and I can’t get her home by myself on the bus. With a taxi we can get her right to my driveway.” She heaved a sigh. “I’ll pay you back on Monday when I can get to the bank. You know I’m good for it, Shelly. I’ve got plenty in my savings, just not with me.”

“You’re taking her to your *house*?” Shelly demanded.

Crushing the niggling doubt in the back of her mind, Sonny raised her chin and glared at her friend. “Yeah, what’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong with that? You don’t know this chick from Adam, girlfriend, *that’s* what’s wrong with that! For all you know, she’ll go apeshit and stab you and Tom tonight in your sleep!”

Sonny shook her head. “No, she won’t. She’s the new guitarist for Tom’s band. She’s just tied one on and needs a place to sleep it off.” Sonny looked at the semi-conscious form. “She won’t hurt me,” she said softly, knowing it for the truth.

Shelly argued with her friend until the bus came and went without them. Finally, she sighed explosively and dug into her pockets. “Oh, alright! Here’s five bucks!” Slapping it into Sonny’s outstretched hand, she snorted. “I’m *not* sitting next to her! If she pukes again, it’s gonna be in *your* lap!”

“Thanks, Shelly,” Sonny said with a relieved grin.

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Pain. The world was pain, a dull ache from head to toe. All nerve endings extremely sensitive, screaming at the slightest provocation. Faint rose colors testified to the daylight on the other side of closed eyelids. Even hair follicles complained at the abuse of living. The mouth was filled with sand; the throat, with glass.

Torriin groaned and rolled over, the sheets scraping angrily across her skin. *Sheet? Did Lucifer change my sheets?* Eyes closed against the shards of sunlight that would stab her when she opened them, she lay there frowning at the feel of cool linens against her, the softness of a pillow and mattress beneath. The faint smell of coffee wafted in the air, vying with the stronger and more familiar aroma of vomit. *What the hell happened last night?*

*Scenes slowly flashed across her inner vision — partying inside the Orestes; then outside the Orestes, scoring some dope and feeling no pain. There was a woman — brunette, long, shapely legs in a tight leather miniskirt. Made me wet just watching her walk. Wasn’t there an angry boyfriend, too?* Bloodshot gray eyes opened a crack, and she peered at what was within her field of vision.

A standard white wall met her gaze, before it, a white vanity with gold trim and a large mirror. On either side of the mirror were posters — one of the band KISS and the other of Aerosmith. Reflected within the mirror, she saw a white bookcase on the opposite wall that was full of books and stuffed animals. The top of the vanity was cluttered with bottles of perfume and other personal items.

Torriin’s frown deepened. This was definitely not her room, and as the cobwebs inched away, she remembered that she was no longer staying with her father. *Did I score?* She hadn’t imagined that

the brunette's bedroom would be quite like this. Her nose itched and she sneezed explosively, groaning loudly at the pain in her head. "Ow, shit!" she muttered, her voice cracking as she curled into a ball and put her arms over her throbbing head.

She lay in a fetal position for a long time, drowsing despite her discomfort. With her sensitive hearing, she could detect someone rummaging around in a kitchen somewhere, the sound of a toilet flushing, a shower running, the soft ticking of a nearby clock that drove her to distraction. Eventually, the shower shut off, and soon there were voices, male and female. *The angry boyfriend?*

*Deciding it was better for her to be up, if not necessarily about, when he found her there, Torrin forced herself to move from the bed. Narrowly missing the white trashcan that held vomit, she caught a whiff of the scent and her stomach roiled dangerously. She stood still, eyes closed and breathing deeply through her nose. Regaining control, she looked blearily around.*

*All she wore were her black silk boxers. Did I score?* She shook her head, her aches and pains making it too difficult to tell. Finding a neatly folded pile of black clothing on the opposite corner of the bed, she picked up the shirt and shook it out, nose twitching at the smell of laundry detergent. *Whoa! I'm surprised that shirt made it through a washer without falling apart.* She nudged through the pile and found her trousers, as well as a fresh pair of socks and flannel boxers.

"Shit, I'm going to have to pass out here more often," she observed with a raised eyebrow. She glanced around the obviously feminine room. "Wherever the hell 'here' is." Torrin quickly donned the clean clothing. Finding her boots by the dresser, she located her belt, cigarettes and lighter, wallet and change on the corner. Out of habit, she checked the wallet and found a five-dollar bill still there. "Huh. Well, she ain't a thief," she muttered to herself.

A low voice from the door responded, "No, I'm not."

Torrin stiffened, eyes narrowed. Looking slowly over her shoulder, she saw an ebony-haired girl. *Aw, shit! Don't tell me I fucked a kid last night!* she growled at herself, not showing any of her inner turmoil. *Yeah, but ain't that just like you?* Lucifer's voice asked, a familiar stabbing comment. "Thanks for washing my clothes." She returned to picking up her items from the dresser and putting them in her pockets.

The girl shrugged. "No problem." Setting a coffee cup on the dresser, she walked past and flounced down on the bed, leaning against the headboard. "How are you feeling?"

Torrin shrugged. "As well as I can, under the circumstances." She bent down and picked up her boots. Glancing around the room, she walked over and settled down on the small bench in front of the vanity, not willing to get onto the bed. *Well, put another notch on your belt, Horny Torry,* the voice said. *Looks like you got a virgin this time.* She growled, viciously stomping her foot into a boot. Bending over to tie it, she ignored the strain on her rebellious stomach.

The girl watched curiously. "Your jacket's downstairs."

"Thanks."

"You don't remember me, do you?"

Bloodshot gray eyes peered up at her. "What do you mean?" *Jesus! Was I that fucked up last night? That even she'd notice?*

*"Well, we never were formally introduced, and I think the lights at the bar last weekend kind of messed up your vision." She smiled at the obvious look of confusion. "I'm Sonny Middlestead. My brother's the drummer for Warlord." As comprehension filtered onto the woman's face, Sonny shrugged. "You're lucky I found you at the bus stop. It was near freezing last night."*

*Torrin frowned, trying to make the connections in her foggy mind. She sat upright and winced, grabbing at her head.*

*"You want some aspirin or something?" Sonny asked, sitting up in concern.*

*"Yeah, if you've got it," Torrin muttered darkly.*

*"Kay. Be right back." She padded out of the room.*

*Watching her go, lips pursed, Torrin considered. Bus stop? She didn't remember any bus stop. Wait a minute. A feeling of exhaustion, a hard bench and lights overhead. That must have been it. So maybe I didn't score with her. Good thing, if her brother's Tom Middlestead!*

*Sonny returned to the room and handed Torrin a glass of water and some pills. Thanking her woodenly, Torrin gulped them down, not bothering with the water. "Tck!" Sonny exclaimed. "How can you do that? Makes me want to drink this water in sympathy."*

Torrin blinked and shrugged. "I don't know. Water's not always handy." Another thought slowly made its way through her mind. "Do your parents know I'm here?"

Something flickered across Sonny's face before she answered. "I live with Tom. Our parents died in an accident a couple of years ago."

"Oh." Uncomfortable, Torrin finished tying her boots and rose gingerly. "Guess I should be going now. My jacket's downstairs, you said?"

Sonny quickly stepped forward to intercept her unwilling guest. "Uh, well, yeah, it is. Um..." She blushed. "Can I ask you something though?"

Seeing the faint flush and the icy color of those eyes up close, Torrin paused. *Damn, I wish she were older.* "Yeah?"

"Well, I don't want to pry or anything." Sonny's redness deepened as she prepared to do just that. "Are you homeless or anything?" At the blank look she received, she blurted, "I only ask because you're wearing the same clothes you wore last week. And, if you don't have any place to stay, we've got a spare room, right over the garage. I've already talked to Tom about it." She paused, swallowing nervously. "I mean that's if you *want*. It's no big deal or anything. It's a mess over there, and it'll need some cleaning up..."

Torrin's eyes narrowed and flashed suspiciously. She stepped forward, invading the teenager's space, only stopping when she was a fraction of an inch from her. Gray eyes bored into frightened blue. "Why are you doing this?" she demanded harshly.

Sonny had difficulty thinking. Those eyes demanded an answer, but the woman's breath was soft against her face. She swallowed convulsively as she rallied her thoughts. "I just...I just thought you needed a place to crash," she whispered. "And you're a Warlord now. Warlords stick together." Her heart pounding in her chest, she wondered what this strange woman was going to do.

*Warlords stick together.* A puzzled look crossed Torrin's face. She stepped back a bit, giving the girl breathing room, amused at the visible slump of relief. *You're a Warlord now. Wouldn't do for the new guitarist to be rolled in an alleyway or something. Kind of defeats the purpose, don't you think?* She studied the pale eyes across from her in speculation. Coming to a decision, she said with a faint smirk, "So, what's this room over the garage look like?"

Sonny's Journal - October 3, 1998

*When! Well, I'm still alive, though I had my doubts earlier this afternoon! That Torrin is a real pistol, as my dad would say. Between Tom and me, we were able to talk her into staying in the room over the garage. She insisted on paying rent and all, but it's not much. She'll be making plenty to cover it with the band. And it'll be nice to have another woman here to back me up against my bratty brother!*

*Seriously, though, I was a little scared there for a minute. Thought for sure she was going to take me out! And all I did was offer her a place to stay. Wow! Must be what happens when you spend too much time on the streets. I don't think she's had much in the way of family life. I kind of wonder how long she's been out there. (Excuse me while I shudder.)*

*Well, last night's party was an absolute bust. I've forever ruined any chances of dating for the rest of my life. I kneed Jay in the nuts because he was getting too pushy. He might be a jerk, but he's a cute one. Don't think I'll have to worry about the senior prom in a couple of years. Hell, I don't think I need to worry about the Christmas dance this year! sigh My social life is ruined!*

*Why are boys such jackasses?*

Lucifer lives in my soul.

~ Torrin C. Smith, "Childhood"

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