

BURNING DREAMS

by

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2006

CHAPTER ONE

There are smarter ways to spend the afternoon, thought Rosalind Olchawski on the fourth of October in Buffalo, *than to let a former enemy and rival for the affections of your much younger lover hold a pointed object to your naked back.* Not that Rhea would be overcome with a fit of passion and poke her to death. It would take hundreds of tiny fits of passion, until she died the death of a thousand paper cuts. Rosalind couldn't picture it. Rhea didn't lose control like that. And, she had to admit, her relationship with Rhea had grown from open hostility, past armed truce, and into mutual respect. It helped that the love object in question, the ridiculously handsome twenty-year-old girl seated at the counter, was a shared passion for both of them. They were bound to make peace, once Taryn had made it plain that she was keeping both her brand-new older lover and her oldest friend. Whom she just happened to still live with.

Thank God for Joe, Rosalind thought as a mantra. *Good on you, Joe. You make everything better. You bring calm.* Joe was Rhea's lover, and had been for two years. A father of a teenage daughter, a masterful cook, a loving and calm presence in the happy maelstrom of a pagan queer household. Rhea was occasionally hard to take, but Rosalind could leave her to the easy stability of Joe and scamper back across the street to her own house, with Taryn in tow.

Rosalind's hands gripped the back of the chair. Her mouth fell open.

Focus on something. She'd never been in Rhea's shop before; that would do. A Pound of Flesh was just around the corner from Mariner, down Elmwood from Allen. A green and yellow Victorian converted into a place of business. The shop displayed a small Erie County Health Department permit in the window. Rosalind had hung her coat on the scrollwork coat rack to the left, just inside the door. The shades were drawn over the windows, but illumination came from Rhea's work light and the red and blue candles in ceramic holders shaped like dragons. The scent of sandalwood fought with burning sage, weaving layers of blue smoke in the air. A hand-lettered sign tacked to the door offered tattoos and body art, piercings and jewelry.

Focusing on the details of the room was not working. *Focus on the past?* If she went for the long view, Rosalind thought, it might put her to sleep. Not all that much exciting had happened to her from the age of infancy up until a few weeks before. She had been, until very recently, a mature, collected, responsible, warm sweater and mittens kind of woman, a little nearsighted, rarely without a book, conscious of how other people felt. A perfectly normal thirty-three-year-old divorced English professor.

Until the night she went out to a gay bar with a friend from the theater department to be set up on a blind date with a guy from Poetics. The guy turned out to be a boor and a bore, but the night was not a total loss. The drag show was fascinating. Arousing. Rosalind had taken one look at the girl performing as Elvis and had to have her. It made no sense, in light of her history up until that moment, but, Rosalind reasoned, can we always be bound by history? She had managed to take the drag king performing that night out for coffee.

"Coffee." *I will never think of that word again without quotes. Coffee is never just coffee,* Rosalind thought. Love had snuck up on her. Sex had been waiting at the corner to tap her shoulder. Life itself unzipped, and within a few days, everything that Rosalind knew about herself had been turned inside out. She wasn't just a nice, warm sweater and mittens divorced woman, she was a passionate adventurer, willing to fling herself into the midst of a world she never knew existed. A world of drag kings and transmen, witches, magic, ghosts, and gender transgression where every boundary was only a doorway. There was a lot to learn, but Rosalind wasn't afraid. She knew the secret: Love

trumps fear, brings it low and dances on its head. If you can bring yourself to open your arms wide enough, you just might fly.

She should be well used to doing crazy, impulsive, follow your heart and damn the torpedoes sorts of things. The flag of freedom was flying from her gunwales, Rosalind thought. Borders were made to be crossed. What had Taryn said to her, well, growled in her ear just this morning? *Fear is a sign you are doing what you should. If it's easy, everyone would do it.* Needles? Just sharp pointy little things. Nothing much to face, compared to what she'd faced down in the last few weeks. Meeting a twenty-year-old drag king in a gay bar, having a mad, passionate affair? Done it. Accepting that things don't always make logical sense. She'd had to learn a different language. Had to accept that not only did she love this beautiful boy, she'd loved her before. They'd known one another in a previous life. Rhea had told her all that after she'd refused to stop seeing Taryn. The witch hadn't liked her in the beginning; now she knew why. There were debts to be paid, a cycle of pain to be broken. Rosalind's presence meant that Rhea was about to die. In their last lifetime, Rosalind had abandoned Taryn and so broken her heart, she never recovered. That was a lot to face down. Yet they'd done it, all of them, chosen to break the cycle and let Love win. Let everyone live.

Did that mean that they were all free? That there were no more entanglements from the past? The cycle was broken. Rhea lived. She was with Taryn. There was peace in the household.



The woman holding the needle paused, feeling the tension in her subject's back.

"Hurts?" Rhea asked, pulling the metal away from Rosalind's skin.

Rosalind was tempted to lie and not interrupt the ritual, but she knew that Rhea would be able to tell. There is no profit in lying to a witch. "Yes. A little," she admitted. Rhea's hands were cool and sure on her back, a touch that held no fear, only a profound recognition of boundary. Rosalind felt the temperature of the older woman's hands and wondered what she might have been like as a lover. It was hard to

imagine Rhea in the throes of passion. How had she ever been Taryn's lover? Taryn was nothing but fire, and from all reports, she was worlds calmer than she used to be. Rosalind glanced guiltily over her shoulder, certain that Rhea had read this errant thought.

"There are two ways we could go. We could stop," Rhea said.

"No." It was immediate. Pain or no pain, this was something Rosalind was determined to do. She remembered the exact moment when she'd made the decision, when the clarity had hit her like the tide. It had been three days after Taryn had shown her the design, the flowering dogwood branch, the golden serpent, and the broken arrow. She hadn't really considered it then. She was simply flattered that Taryn had drawn it for her. But she wasn't the kind of person who got tattoos, so she set the idea aside without truly considering it. She loved the tattoos that covered Taryn's body, the map to her history, a testament to her pain and her sense of humor. She couldn't imagine Taryn's back without the bull dagger, or her right arm without the head of Alexander. It made perfect sense for Taryn, who was, admittedly, very young and very fierce. Rosalind had never, even in her most private moments, considered herself fierce.

They'd been making love on the floor of the living room of her new house; the bed on the second floor was just too far away. The lovely hand-knotted Persian rug she'd chosen to match the tiles on the fireplace was now bunched up under her back, giving her burns. One of Taryn's legs was still caught in her jeans, one boot was off, tossed under the couch. Rosalind's skirt had joined the rug under the small of her back. Her blouse had spit buttons all over the floor in a failed attempt to remove it. Endorphins were throwing a party in her skull, cheering the girl on. Rosalind's fingernails spiked down into Taryn's back in her effort not to scream. She was very aware of her new neighbors, and the windows left open. They would have to get used to the noises coming from Dr. Olchawski's house, but not in the middle of the afternoon.

There she was, skin to skin with her lover, tangled clothing and a faint sheen of sweat between them, and the distance was too much. Even the orgasm that ripped through her, closing around Taryn's hand in a long, possessive embrace, was not enough. With a sense of grief, Rosalind felt her body's climax ebb. Her soul was still reaching out

to her, even as her hands slid off her lover's broad shoulders. "No," Rosalind said, the feeling catching in her throat. "It's not enough."

Taryn sat up very quickly, looking hurt. "It's not?"

"Not that, angel." Rosalind brushed the hair away from Taryn's face. "Not my body. My body is very happy right now, as you well know." She reached down and took Taryn's hand, drawing it up her inner thigh. The wetness soothed the hurt look on Taryn's face. She relaxed, flexing her fingers on Rosalind's skin.

"Then what?" Taryn asked, in a voice that threatened to increase the wetness on Rosalind's thigh. Rosalind turned on her side, looking up into the face of her lover.

There were blue shadows under aching blue eyes, remnants of a highly emotional few days. But the slackness of grief was gone from her face, leaving it vibrant with life. She looked tired, but Rosalind knew that much of the missed sleep hinted at in Taryn's face was of her authorship and could be claimed proudly. The relaxed posture of her body, the ease and speed with which Taryn smiled was also her responsibility, and Rosalind gladly accepted credit. She struggled to put words to how she was feeling, something she rarely ever had to do.

"My body is yours. All you have to do is walk into a room and I get wet. Sometimes it's like I can hear you coming, feel heat from you, before I know you're there."

The corner of Taryn's mouth quirked up into an automatic smile of pride.

"But I want more. I want all of you. I want to take you inside, make you a part of me," Rosalind said.

"I am a part of you, Rosalind."

It was the way Taryn said her name that did it, the final push. There was such passion layered into the syllables, she felt the blood come to the surface of her skin, reaching out. "I want to wear you on my skin, all the time. I never want to be away from you."

Taryn's eyebrows rose. "You sure? It's not the kind of thing that goes away."

"Neither is how I feel about you," Rosalind said, and the warmth moved from her heart outward, making the distance between them unbearable. She pulled Taryn back down into her arms.

Rhea had been approached and asked to do the tattoo. The raised

eyebrow and Mona Lisa smile were the first answer Taryn and Rosalind got. “Took you long enough. I’ve been planning this for days.”

So Rosalind found herself in *A Pound of Flesh*, too distracted by the bite of the needle to enjoy the name of the shop. Rhea had taken one glance at Taryn’s design and predicted three sessions. This was the first, the outline of the tree and the serpent. From the way it felt, Rosalind wasn’t sure she could go through with it. Rhea seemed to hear this thought, or read it from her body. “I can do this another time,” she said, quietly pulling the needle away.

“It’s fine. No, really. I took ballet for years. You call this pain?” Rosalind said, and forced a laugh.

“I could block your pain. It’s a simple matter of pressure points.”

Rosalind heard the hesitation in Rhea’s voice. “But? It’s not just a matter of blocking the pain, is it? What’s the catch?” Had Rosalind been looking over her shoulder, she might have seen the complex look of approval that Rhea shot across the shadowed room at the girl who leaned against the counter. She did hear the note of pride in Rhea’s voice when she spoke.

“I say this to you as one of the family, not as anyone I might do work on. Pain is a form of communication. If you can keep a sense of place, of stillness, during the experience, you’ll learn what it has to tell you on the other side. Especially with a mark like this one. It’s your first. It’s bound up with your symbols of power, and it was drawn with the hand of love. I advise you to go through the pain and see what is there, but it is your choice.”

“Let’s do it,” Rosalind said with determination. Her body, now expecting the bite of the needle, tensed like a bowstring. Rhea shook her head and placed the palm of her hand on Rosalind’s shoulder.

“There are ways of staying aware without wallowing in it. Taryn?” Rhea said, summoning Taryn to push off the counter and lope across the floor, moving from the light of the candles to the circle of Rhea’s work lamp. Rosalind’s attention shifted immediately to Taryn, delighting in her approach. Rosalind never tired of looking at Taryn, of absorbing the shock of her presence in a room.

Electric blue eyes under coal black brows gave her a brooding, intense look, at once dangerous and enticing. Her face, a study in planes and angles, was wrinkled with concern she hesitated to voice. It was a

face that men glanced at, drawn by the strength, that women glanced at, then returned to, lingering. There was something about the blending of characteristics too hard to be called pretty but too striking to be ignored. It was a face that raised questions, that unsettled and aroused. On first look, she might be called interesting, on second, beautiful, if the beholder had time to allow that word to ripen into an embrace of character. Boy or girl, both or neither, Taryn was simply sexy, thought Rosalind, watching her walk, unconsciously moistening her lips.

Taryn dropped into a crouch in front of the chair, her eyes level with Rosalind's. Rosalind looked into the endless fields of blue, forgetting the pain, the needle, even her own name. There was only the recognition she felt every time she and her lover locked eyes. *I could drown in here and never regret a moment*, Rosalind thought, unaware of the smile that lit up her face.

"Hey," Taryn said, her voice warm.

"Hey," Rosalind answered, aware now of the size of her smile. *Lord, I hope she has this effect on me when I'm fifty. I'll be the old lady with the lithium grin roaming the streets of Buffalo.*

"Hurts, huh?" Taryn asked, interrupting Rosalind's fantasy.

"What hurts?" she asked. The needle touched her back, making her shoulder jump. "Oh, that. Yes, a bit. But you did warn me."

"Just stay here with me. That's it. Look at me. That's my girl," Taryn said, her voice a caress.

"Damn right. Don't you forget it. I don't get my body inked for just any chick I'm dating," Rosalind said, and frowned at her.

Taryn cocked her head thoughtfully. "I'm the first chick you've dated."

"Technicality." Rosalind felt Rhea begin the work on the dogwood flowers, and grimaced.

"Hey. Tell me a story," Taryn said, drawing her attention back.

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"What about?" Rosalind asked, the muscle in her shoulder jumping.

"Tell me about your home. Where you grew up," Taryn said, and there was no resisting that tone. It melted the tension from Rosalind. She found it easy to start speaking, to focus on nothing but her lover's eyes.

“Once upon a time there was a town folded away between low green hills. Outside of Poughkeepsie, along Freedom Road, out by the border where the farmland started, was a house. That house was yellow and brown, surrounded by mulberry and pine trees. There was a dogwood tree in the very back of the yard, near a stand of bamboo. On the other side of the yard—it was kind of L-shaped—was a garden. In that garden grew vegetables, flowers, the normal garden stuff. There was a great mystery to the garden. The green beans that grew there would vanish overnight. But only halfway. Now, in this yellow and brown house lived a boy, who isn’t important here, but he threw fits if he was left out of anything, even this story. This boy had an older sister, a very wise and thoughtful girl.”

“Bet she was gorgeous, too,” Taryn said.

“Oh, perhaps someday somebody might think so. For the time of this tale, we’ll say she was in her awkward years. Say between ten and thirty-three,” Rosalind said lightly.

“No. We say she was gorgeous, because she was,” Taryn insisted.

“Fine, fine, I won’t argue with you. She was a looker, boy, a regular Jayne Mansfield. It doesn’t matter for the story.”

“It always matters. She was gorgeous. Say it.” The look in Taryn’s eyes gave a new definition to stubborn.

“All right. She was gorgeous. But it would be a long time before she knew it. Okay? Where was I? Ah yes, wise and thoughtful. This girl decided to get to the bottom of the green bean mystery. Since nothing odd happened in the garden during the day, she reasoned, it must be something that came at night. Could be an animal, sure, but this girl hadn’t grown up enough to forget the supernatural. So the heroine of our tale knew what she would have to do. The window in her bedroom overlooked a slanting roof that ran down to the woodpile. A pine tree grew between the pile and the house, providing a makeshift ladder. With the right amount of balancing, it would be possible to leap from roof to tree, and then down the woodpile.

“This undertaking would need help, so the girl considered. Her little brother would blurt out the plans the minute he was confronted. She needed someone who would do anything she asked and never say a word if they got caught. She decided on her best friend, the next-

door neighbor she'd grown up with. He was informed of the plans and agreed to meet her at night by the woodpile and help her jump down.

"The girl took the red flashlight from the kitchen drawer to bed with her. When she was pretty sure her parents were asleep, she eased the window open and crawled out on the roof." Rosalind paused, enjoying the look of interest on Taryn's face. That focus and attention were for her. She had the feeling that no one had told Taryn stories as a child. It was a pleasure she came to only as an adult.

"You get busted?" Taryn asked.

"I'll get there. Her friend was waiting, just as he said he would be. At night the space between the end of the roof and the top of the woodpile looked like an abyss. The trunk of the pine tree looked miles away. She'd never made this kind of leap, only imagined it. She thought about turning back. The lure of the mystery drew her on, and her sneakers started to slip on the tiles. So she closed her eyes and leapt out into the dark.

"She felt the rough bark grab at her hands and slide through. Her feet hit the top of the woodpile. The wood gave way, cascading down onto her friend, who waited to catch her."

"Did you get hurt?" Taryn asked.

"No. The friend stood his ground and cushioned the fall. The woodpile was scattered, the noise woke everyone in the house, and they got an all-night talking-to."

"I want to know what happened to the guy," Taryn said.

"Paul ended up with a fractured ankle. Poor boy, he was just following my lead, but he saved me from getting crushed."

There was a subtle change in Taryn's face. The set of her jaw firmed with the mention of the name, but Rosalind missed it as Rhea pulled the needle away.

"Done," Rhea said, setting the needle aside. Rosalind twisted around in the chair, looking at her shoulder.

"That's it?" she asked, incredulous.

"For this session. I have the tree and the snake done. We can do the color next time."

"But it didn't hurt nearly as much," Rosalind said.

"You were distracted. You had help. It made the pain manageable. You still went through it." Rhea pulled off the rubber gloves. "I'm going

to clean up. Sit still for a few minutes. Let your body calm down. The endorphins will start hitting you soon.”

“Does this count as a special occasion?” Rosalind asked Taryn as soon as she saw Rhea’s back vanish into the hallway. The candlelight was flickering oddly in front of her eyes, forming shapes of galloping horses and dancing women.

“You bet. You feel like celebrating?”

Rosalind crooked her finger, summoning Taryn closer. Taryn obligingly leaned in, tilting her head to the side. She found Rosalind’s hand and rolled into the caress. “I’ll tell you how I’m feeling. I want you to go home, put on your harness, and bring the toys over to my place,” Rosalind purred into her ear.

“Thought you had office hours this afternoon,” Taryn said with feigned detachment. The motion of Rosalind’s hand was underscoring her request in the most convincing way.

“I’m about to come down with the flu. Care to join me?” Rosalind punctuated the question by biting Taryn’s ear.

“I’m feeling it.”

“That’s my boy.” Rosalind grinned. Her nerve endings were returning from the gulag they’d been exiled to and were starting to throw a coming-home party. The lines of fire Rhea had trailed across her skin kept up a banked heat, moving from pain to sensation. There was something interesting about how it felt, Rosalind thought, as the tide came in, lifting her up with it. It wasn’t so bad now, like giving blood. A sting, then that floating feeling. Only there had been a thousand stings, and the floating was levitation. Taryn was right. This might be worth the experience after all. The background hum she’d just started to detect in the room sounded like bees waking up. She saw Taryn turn her head, and for a moment, there was a trail of blue fire left in the air, an afterimage.

Rhea clicked the electric lights back on. Jealous, Rosalind thought fuzzily, mentally sticking her tongue out at the older woman. Rhea looked right at her.

“Some. But that’s to be expected,” Rhea said, cleaning up her work area.

“What?” Taryn asked, standing up from her crouch.

Rosalind shook her head. You couldn’t think too loudly around Rhea.

“Answering a question. It wasn’t directed at you,” Rhea said calmly. She set a patch of gauze on Rosalind’s shoulder. “Leave this here for twenty-four hours. Taryn can teach you how to care for it. Are you ready to move?”

“Yes,” Rosalind said, experimenting with standing up. It was a wonderful thing, the way her muscles responded to her thought, even if everything felt like it was in slow motion. She slid her arms back into her shirt. “Thank you, Rhea.”

“You’re welcome. I have to run. There’s going to be company at the house tonight. I have to get more food and wine.” Rhea picked her black shawl up off the counter.

“I didn’t know we were expecting anyone,” Taryn said.

“We’re not. But someone is coming, and I expect him to get here late and in need. Taryn, you can lock up.”

Rosalind walked up Elmwood Avenue toward the corner of Allen. The air had started to cool. It felt like water over her skin. October proved noticeably colder than September, hinting at the onslaught of winter. It amazed her that Taryn still walked around in a T-shirt, refusing to wear a jacket. *Too butch to feel the cold?* Rosalind thought, and snorted. *We’ll see how tough she is the minute she gets sick.*

Rosalind had proposed a game. She would walk at a casual stroll up Elmwood to Allen, then down Allen to Mariner. Taryn had to go down Elmwood to Virginia, then up Mariner. If she made it to 34 Mariner, fetched the toys, and beat Rosalind home, she won. Taryn stood still on the porch of A Pound of Flesh, as if considering the offer. Rosalind expected Taryn to ask what the prize would be, but she didn’t. One moment she was standing there, the next she was vaulting over the porch rail and tearing down the street like her boots were on fire.

“That’s what I like about you, kid. Your enthusiasm,” Rosalind called out after the vanishing Taryn.

Even at a reasonably paced stroll, Rosalind made it to the porch of 41 Mariner without any sign of Taryn. She sat down on the steps and waited. It didn’t take long for the front door to 34 to slam open and for a figure to vault off the porch and dart across the street, a red nylon bag swinging from her fist. Taryn bounded up the steps, the flush to her cheeks from the crisp air, or the game.

“Beat you here,” Rosalind said.

Taryn held up the bag like a string of fish supporting an alibi. “I

had to find something to carry the toys in. I ended up stealing the bag Joe packs his sleeping bag in when he goes camping.”

“Taryn, you didn’t.”

“He won’t notice. When was the last time he went camping? So you won. What do you get?” Taryn asked with a disarming grin.

“You,” Rosalind said. She held out her hand, and Taryn pulled her up.

The room Rosalind had chosen as the bedroom was on the second floor, with a set of bay windows overlooking the backyard garden. The light came in through the windows in the afternoon, making an inviting rectangle of heat on the bed. Taryn walked up the stairs, bolted toward the bedroom, and launched herself onto the bed. Rosalind mentally winced, hearing the protest of the springs under this attack. There was a can of WD-40 under the sink in the back bathroom. She made a note to treat the springs as soon as the weather was nice enough to leave the windows open. Taryn sat up, pulling her legs under her, and started to fight with the drawstring on the nylon bag. Rosalind sighed.

While Taryn was becoming more civilized through contact with her, some things didn’t change. Taryn had started to pick the towels up off the bathroom floor after she showered, didn’t stand quite as long in front of the refrigerator with the door open, and rarely smoked in the house. Rosalind had never said a word, but Taryn saw what Rosalind did and how Rosalind reacted to her. She was like an animal learning the new territory by experience. She rarely made the same mistakes twice, except for the quilt.

Rosalind’s mother had made the quilt by hand as her going-away gift when she went to Ithaca to do her doctorate. It had been on every bed she’d slept in since, even at the foot of the bed she’d shared with her ex-husband Paul. She had never mentioned that to Taryn, but Taryn seemed to sense it, and reacted to the quilt like it was an enemy. During the night the quilt would find its way to the floor or be bunched into a corner of the bed by the seemingly innocent, sleeping girl. The rivalry between them extended to Taryn’s refusal to remember to remove her boots before vaulting onto the bed.

It bothered Rosalind enough that she’d actually mentioned it, asking Taryn if she would take the boots off before jumping on the bed. Taryn would comply for a day, then forget completely. Rosalind reminded herself that this was a luxury, in a fashion, because of who

wore the boots and her eagerness to spring into her bed. That didn't exactly work, though the part about Taryn's willingness to spring onto the bed was gratifying.

Taryn felt Rosalind's look and glanced up. She dropped the bag and looked at her feet, like a dog caught tipping over the garbage can. She ducked her head, muttered an apology, and unlaced the boots hastily. She tore them off her feet and tucked them under the bed. The sight made Rosalind laugh. Who would ever believe that a single glance from her would make Taryn react so quickly?

"What's so funny?" Taryn asked, fighting with the knot on the bag.

"Nothing. I just like you." Rosalind sat down next to Taryn on the bed. "You hate the quilt, don't you?"

"Uh, no, not... I mean it's..." Taryn said, shrugging.

"Stand up," Rosalind said. Taryn did, and Rosalind took the edge of the quilt in her hands and tore it away from the bed, sending pillows everywhere. She bunched it into a ball and tossed it into the closet. "No more quilt. Can I give you a hand with that knot?"

Taryn upended the bag, spilling the contents across the bed. There were toys of various sizes and hues, some realistic, some outlandish, a bottle of lube, a handful of condoms in silver foil wrappers scattered like coins in the pile of black leather straps and buckles. Rosalind picked up a condom and turned it, the metallic wrapper catching the light.

"Why? You don't exactly need one," she asked.

"Always a good idea if you want to play well with others. Besides, they're fun," Taryn said and grinned.

"Honey, I've had to use them since high school, and they were never fun," Rosalind said gently. She knew how Taryn could bristle at any mention of her sexual past, associating it primarily with her ex-husband. *Not too far off the mark*, Rosalind thought. *I never was much of an adventurer. I must be making up for it now.*

"No. Use them like that, and they suck. Use them with me, and they're fun." There was a gleam of challenge in Taryn's eye.

Rosalind decided that she must have looked skeptical, because Taryn snatched the condom back from her.

"I'll show you. I'll go get geared up and come back in." She took the pile of leather straps and a few condoms in her right hand, and stuffed most of the toys back into the bag.

“What should I do?” Rosalind asked.

“Take off all your clothes. Sit there and try not to think about anything,” Taryn said as she ducked out the door.

Rosalind folded her hands in her lap. That was unfair, she thought. Get naked and not think of anything? Was there something snide in the way Taryn had said it, a glimpse of a smirk? Of course she could sit here and not think of anything. Foolish thing for the arrogant boy to ask. It wouldn’t be more than a few minutes, anyway. How long did the harness take to put on? She’d seen Taryn wearing it but had never seen her put it on. Taryn liked the mystery of showing up already packing.

There had been that one night when they’d gone out to dinner with Rhea and Joe. Taryn had worn her gray suit, held the chair for her like a perfect gentleman. When Taryn sat down, Rosalind had put her hand in its accustomed spot on Taryn’s thigh. Naturally her hand drifted during the course of the meal, lazily caressing the smooth gray fabric and the leg underneath. She’d been in the middle of a sentence, talking to Joe, when her hand wandered across Taryn’s inner thigh. She stopped dead. Rosalind knew that particular spot like the back of her own hand. This was new. She faltered, fishing for the end of her sentence, while her hand identified the shape through the trousers.

“Uh ...well...” she’d said in response to Joe’s question about her class.

“Yes?” Joe asked, trying not to smile.

Taryn had shifted in the chair, giving Rosalind’s hand more territory to explore. Taryn’s smile was all innocence, her arm casually resting on the back of Rosalind’s chair. Mercifully, the waiter came around with coffee, saving Rosalind from having to form a complete sentence. Taryn was beaming at Joe. Rosalind promised herself that Taryn was in for it later. And she had been.

How long did it take to put on the harness? It had to have been a few minutes already. It couldn’t be all that difficult to manage. It looked rather like a bridle when it had tumbled out of the bag, a mass of straps and buckles. Reminded her, in fact, of summer camp when she was fourteen.

She’d had to tack a horse for the first time. Rosalind had been able, through determination and luck, to avoid actually getting on a horse up till then. The truth of the matter was the things scared her.

They were far too large for her to believe that a slip of metal in the mouth would do more than annoy them. Her instructor had handed her a shapeless mass of leather straps and told her to put it on the horse's head.

This posed a problem. Rosalind was a good deal smaller than the horse, and from the way it kept rolling its eyes at her and laying its ears back, it wasn't about to cooperate. It wasn't like a dog. You couldn't just tell it to sit. How did you reason with a ton of flesh? She tried grabbing at its head, but the horse just tossed it up and snorted, sending her skittering a few steps back. It wasn't like Black Beauty at all, or the Black Stallion, where riders had a mystic communication with their noble steeds. She was lucky the damned thing didn't step on her.

Okay, thinking about nothing wasn't working.

Rosalind was an adult. She could acknowledge that. Taryn was probably out in the hall, having a good laugh about it, knowing how her mind worked. What was taking Taryn so long, anyway? You'd think she'd have this down to a science. It couldn't take this long. She just had to put on waist straps, and leg straps...did she leave them buckled, and step into it, or adjust it after it was on?

This thought led quite naturally to picturing Taryn stepping out of her jeans and stepping into the harness. Rosalind pictured Taryn's hands pulling the strap tight against the muscle of her thigh with the economy of long practice. She imagined Taryn selecting a toy from the bag, considering it, weighing it in her palm, then shaking her head. The right one would make her grin that feral smile she had when she was pleased with herself. Taryn would hold the steel ring in her left hand and slide the toy in with her right, not even needing to look. One smooth motion. Her hand would drift back, adjusting it so that it hung just right...Rosalind glanced around the room and wondered if she should invest in a ceiling fan. It was warm for October.

A suspicious thought crept into Rosalind's brain. It was all part of the game. Taryn was taking so long just to play with her, to get her to imagine everything that she was imagining. Part of the big seduction routine. Well, it wouldn't work. She could think about other things. She was an extremely well-read person.

It didn't help that her skin was reacting to the tattoo, sending very specific messages to her brain. But wasn't that always the way,

Rosalind thought. The flesh warred with the intellect. She had years and years invested in the intellect's side of the battle. It was almost unfair. After all, what hold did the flesh have on her? A few weeks of passion and madness, balanced against a lifetime of...well, not restraint. There was no reason to restrain herself. She'd never felt anything that overwhelmed her senses, flooded her mind, made sitting still impossible. Not until that night in the bar, when Ellie had hauled her in to see a drag show...The lights had gone down. Out of the darkness came that slim, broad-shouldered form in the jet-black suit.

Rosalind crossed her legs and looked at the clock. She could think about work. Next week she was wrapping up *King Lear* and starting her students on *Romeo and Juliet*. That didn't help at all. There were fireworks going off all over her skin, slamming bolts of energy from brain to groin and back again. Rosalind shut her eyes, took a deep breath in, held it, then exhaled slowly. *I can do this*, she thought. *Just because my blood is currently being microwaved doesn't mean a thing. It's just like yoga class. Clear your mind. Let any thought that drifts across the mind go. Become One with the Universe.* But dammit, it wasn't the Universe she wanted to become One with. The sound of wood creaking snapped her eyes back open.

Rosalind took another deep breath, but not out of serenity. *Does she have to look like that?* she thought helplessly.

Taryn was leaning against the door frame, arms folded across her chest. There was the barest hint of a smirk on her lips, infuriating and enticing. Her eyes were smoldering, dangerous. Taryn unfolded her arms slowly and hooked her thumbs in the pockets of her jeans, drawing Rosalind's eyes down. There, where her hands rested against the curve of muscle in her thigh, was a suspicious bulge in her jeans.

The long fingers were relaxed, slightly curled, framing the patch of denim that took on a great interest for Rosalind. Taryn's hand moved closer to the inside of her thigh. Even with her penchant for wearing her jeans low and loose, it was evident that she was packing. *She hangs to the right*, Rosalind thought, the incongruity of it not stopping her pulse from speeding up. She watched Taryn's hand cup the bulge suggestively. Rosalind glanced up into her face. Taryn knew that she was being bad and that it was working.

“Come over here and kiss me,” Taryn demanded, the corner of her mouth quirking up.

Rosalind got off the bed and walked very slowly toward her lover. She could feel the connection between them spark to life. The look her boy was giving her was only a part of it. She knew that they were playing, but if she asked for anything, she would have it. Taryn shifted her weight, pushing her hips forward.

The denim stretched over the bulge in her crotch, presenting it for Rosalind’s inspection. It was the knowledge of what was coming that was making it hard to restrain herself, Rosalind thought. The way Taryn wore the toy was an announcement of intent, pure, sexual, and explicit. Taryn had put it on for her, at her suggestion. The power she had in the moment burned through Rosalind.

She hooked an arm around Taryn’s neck and leaned up to kiss her, her lips parting automatically. She felt herself open to Taryn, her body, her heart, reaching out to draw her in. The brief shock of their lips meeting was the shock of how much separation from Taryn hurt and how much pleasure there was in rejoining. She could never get close enough to Taryn. The agony that they were just meeting, that they had been apart so many years, was eased by the welcome Rosalind felt from Taryn’s body.

Taryn kept her relaxed slouch against the door frame, minimizing the difference in their heights. Taryn held Rosalind’s waist in her hands, keeping a small distance between their bodies. Only their lips met, in a kiss that made Rosalind forget that she was standing up. She pressed against Taryn’s hands, seeking to move into her arms, but was held back. It was clear that Taryn wanted the kiss to be their only contact. It was more than a little frustrating, but Rosalind decided to play along and focused her attention on the kiss.

There are kisses that communicate desire, kisses that are born in hunger of the flesh, ones that offer up the soul like a sacrifice. That kiss was the dance of the soul in ecstasy, the breaking down of barriers, the primal force of obliteration of distance between the self and the beloved. In that kiss Rosalind became one with the object of her desire, lost all distinction of herself as separate. She felt her blood running in Taryn’s veins. It was enough to make her believe, all over again, in the existence of the divine.

In that moment, in the heightened state, Rosalind quickly learned why Taryn was moving so slowly. The tattoo had slapped all her nerve endings awake. Now even the bliss of drowning in her love for Taryn was interrupted with pangs of insistent desire. Her body wasn't about to be ignored. The lazy trailing of her lover's tongue through her mouth went from heavenly to maddening. Rosalind was torn. The kiss could go on for hours, from the way Taryn set the pace, and while that was good, it was no longer enough. Rosalind pressed against Taryn's hands with her hips and felt the resistance give, felt herself be drawn into her familiar place against Taryn's body. It was amazing how much better it felt having Taryn's arm close around her, completing the circle. Rosalind sighed and went back to the kiss.

Their hips were level. It took only a moment to connect thought to action. She slid her hand over Taryn's ass, pulling them together. She was nestled up against the toy. Rosalind experimented with pressing forward, then easing back, her hands finding purchase on her hips.

Taryn kept her stance. Rosalind took this as an invitation to explore. She moved her hand up to Taryn's hip, fondling the straps of the harness through her clothing. Rosalind's hand moved to the top of Taryn's jeans, then to her fly. When she lay her palm against the crotch, Taryn sighed. Rosalind stroked the toy, and Taryn moaned against her open mouth. This was Rosalind's dance.

"I want to see you wearing it," Rosalind said, not recognizing her own voice.

"Go ahead," Taryn said, her voice betraying her uneven breathing.

Rosalind undid the buttons on Taryn's fly, one by one. The part of her brain that watched the movie of her life extended congratulations all around and had a cigarette.

Taryn's jeans were down around her knees; her boxers quickly followed. Rosalind hadn't forgotten how long it had taken, at first, to get Taryn out of her boxers. It was still a triumph, how willing Taryn was to shed them. It spoke of the trust between them, the faith Taryn had in her as a lover and a friend.

The harness was stark, achingly black against Taryn's pale skin. The tattoo of the yin-yang was framed by the waist and leg straps. Rosalind ran a finger across it and watched Taryn's hip tremble. The

boxers caught on the toy, and she had to reach in and free it. Rosalind's hand closed over it, feeling the warmth from its resting place against Taryn's thigh. It was a shock, that warmth, from the latex in her hand. She caressed it as Taryn leaned her head back against the wall. Taryn closed her eyes, rolling her head to the side. Rosalind was getting acquainted with her new friend.

Taryn leaned sideways, one long arm groping for her jeans. She managed to snag them with two fingers and reach into her pocket. She straightened back up, managing not to interrupt Rosalind's exploration. Taryn lifted the packet to her teeth and ripped the foil open. "Here. Put this on," Taryn said, handing the packet to Rosalind.

Rosalind took the packet in her left hand, glancing at it.

"It's an act of sweet imagination," Taryn said and kissed her.

That kiss brought Rosalind's soul to her mouth, seeking to rejoin its other half in the body of her youthful lover. It was that easy, and that profound. Rosalind surrendered to it, let down the barrier between the sacred and the profane. There were no boundaries she wouldn't cross for this girl, especially not when she leapt to the top of them and held out her hand.

The toy was a piece of latex, held in place with a steel ring and leather straps. It was also a part of the girl she loved, who wore it for her pleasure. Rosalind rolled the condom down the length of the toy with her left hand, her right hand spread against Taryn's hip. It was the blatant declaration of what was coming, and it surprised Rosalind how much she enjoyed it. It was like claiming the space, announcing her desire. She felt the coursing of power along her veins. She was doing something simply for her own pleasure, not because it made any sense. It made her feel light-headed.

When Taryn lifted her up and carried her to the bed, she tripped on her jeans, nearly falling. They landed with little grace. Taryn laughed. "That was suave," she said, kicking the jeans away.

Rosalind felt a bolt of love go through her, out from her heart. There was room in their passion for this, for laughter, for awkward moments without fear. It nearly made her cry. "If you don't get over here right now, I think I'll die," Rosalind said.

Taryn's head turned, her breath caught. She climbed over to her lover, covering her. Rosalind wrapped her arms around Taryn's back,

slid her heels down Taryn's thighs. They started kissing again; the flare of nerve endings blossomed out from the tattoo on Rosalind's shoulder, involving all her skin.

"I need you inside me. Please, baby," Rosalind said, her nails digging into Taryn's back.

Taryn groaned. Rosalind felt her hips move, felt the toy slide against her thigh. She felt Taryn's hand snake down and guide it. Her head arched back against the pillow. It was exquisite, it was agony, and if Taryn ever stopped, she would kill her. Rosalind felt her hands sliding off Taryn's moving hips and grabbed for the harness. That was better. It allowed her to communicate through pulling. Words were beyond her right now. Her hands held the straps in a death grip, urging her on.

The toy was slipping in its ring, guided by the splendid twist of Taryn's hips. She felt something in her heart crack and leak gold like Vulcan's forge. Taryn was yelling. Rosalind might have screamed something. She wasn't sure.

They came to rest, Taryn sprawled on her, one arm around her back, drawing her close. Rosalind kissed the side of Taryn's sweaty neck. "God loves me." Rosalind's voice took on a drunk meandering, leaving words soft and unfinished, blurring into one another. The feeling expanded out from her skin, filling the room. At that moment, she loved all the world.

"I love everything," Rosalind added.

"You must get tired," Taryn murmured, her face halfway into the pillow.

"Don't you see? Everything is gorgeous. You are gorgeous." She hugged Taryn fiercely, then kissed her neck again.

"I love you, and I say this from love. You should get tattooed more often," Taryn said, rolling off onto the mattress with a sigh.

"I should spend my life in bed with you."

"I'm ready."

"Do you have any idea how good you make me feel?"

Taryn reached out and brushed her fingers over Rosalind's breast. "Yeah. You always let me know. I feel like a rock next to you. You express everything so easily."

Rosalind laughed. "You have no idea. I haven't always been the

debauched dilettante you see before you, lost in a pleasure haze. My whole life, I was not what you'd call expressive. More Mother Teresa than Susie Sexpert."

Taryn snorted.

"What was that?"

"I don't buy the goody-two-shoes crap. You've been waiting to be a troublemaker."

"Baby, I have a confession to make." Rosalind's voice got very serious. Her face lost its drunken look. Taryn froze.

"What?"

Rosalind dropped her eyes, then raised her chin. "This is hard for me to say." She knew she was playing havoc with Taryn, from the set expression on Taryn's face.

"You can tell me anything. You know that."

"It won't change your opinion of me?"

"Not even death will change my opinion of you. You're the best person I know."

Rosalind's head tilted to the side, her smile tender and distracted by Taryn's response. "I was kicked out of the Girl Scouts," she finally said.

Taryn was silent for three full heartbeats. "That's it? That's the big secret?"

"Aren't you going to ask me why?"

"Okay. Why?"

"For eating a Brownie," Rosalind said solemnly.

Taryn moved like a cat hit with a water gun. She snatched the pillow out from under Rosalind's head and hit her with it squarely on the stomach.

"Hey! Brute," Rosalind yelled, curling away from the attack.

"Liar." Taryn aimed a shot at her lover as Rosalind rolled to the edge of the bed.

"Republican," Rosalind said, ready to vault off the bed.

Taryn's hand froze midswing. "That's low."

"Sorry, baby. Truce?" Rosalind managed to make her eyes as big around as she could, and even batted them. It worked. Taryn dropped the pillow immediately. Rosalind wondered if Taryn knew how easy she was, but thought it best not to tell her. She crawled back up onto

the bed, up the length of her body, and settled herself against Taryn's chest.

"I love you, you know?" she asked softly.

"I know," Taryn said. "You're lucky you're all cute. You deserve a pillow thrashing." Taryn exhaled heavily, shaking her head.

"I'm lucky it's against the butch code of honor."

"Chapter three, page twenty-six. Right after rescuing kittens from trees and helping ladies across the street," Taryn said.

"Did you get a lesbian starter kit, too?" Rosalind asked, drawing her fingers along Taryn's collarbone.

"Nah. Butches are expected to rough it for a few years before they mail you your copy of the code of honor."

"Funny. You'd think lesbians thrived on oral history."

The phone on the nightstand rang, making Rosalind jump. She reached for it, but felt Taryn's arms hold her back. "Fuck 'em. Let it ring," Taryn said, pulling Rosalind back down.

The phone rang again. Rosalind looked at it. "It might be Ellie. I told her to call if any of my students showed up for office hours with a real problem."

"Remember the last time you got up out of bed with me to answer the phone? You stayed on for half an hour," Taryn said, her eyes narrowing.

"I just feel so bad for those poor telemarketers. She was going along with her spiel. I couldn't interrupt."

The phone rang again. She gave Taryn the sad look.

"Fine! I'll answer it. I'm not afraid to tell people to go to hell." Taryn reached for the phone. "Hello," she said, her voice as low and grim as she could make it.

Rosalind giggled into Taryn's shoulder. From here, she could hear the bewildered man's voice come over the line. "Um, hello? Hi. Is this Rosalind Ben—I mean, Olchawski's address?"

"What do you want?" Taryn said, her tone flat.

"I want to speak with Rosalind." There was something stubborn and familiar about the voice, but Taryn shifted away so Rosalind had trouble hearing.

"You can speak with me. I'm her husband," Taryn said and grinned at Rosalind.

There was a moment of shocked silence while Taryn held the

receiver. She looked down at the phone, then extended it to Rosalind. "He says he's your husband, too."

Rosalind sat up and took the phone. "Paul?" she asked, her voice calmer than she felt.

Taryn reacted immediately. She rolled off the bed at the mention of his name and grabbed her boots. She was down the hall before Rosalind could speak.

"Ros? Is that actually you?" It was Paul's voice.

"Yes, it's me," she said, listening for the sound of the front door slamming open. So far, Taryn hadn't fled the house.

"Who the hell was that answering your phone? You're not remarried, are you?" Paul asked. It brought Rosalind's divided attention back to the phone in her hand.

"No, I'm not remarried," she said, wanting to put the phone down, wanting to go see if the silence downstairs meant Taryn was waiting for her.

"I called your office at work. The voicemail left this number," Paul said.

"Paul, why in the world are you calling me?" Rosalind asked. She heard the front door open.

"I need to talk to you, Ros."

"Now is not a good time," Rosalind said. Boots clomped down the steps. Taryn was gone.

"We haven't spoken in months. What kind of welcome is this? I know things didn't work out with us, but I thought we were still friends, Ros." He sounded hurt. Rosalind recognized that tone. It brought her frustration level down. She took a deep breath and tried to sound more available.

"We are. But I haven't heard from you in months, and you caught me at a bad time. Why don't we make an appointment to talk?"

"I'll be in Buffalo tomorrow night. I need to see you," he said immediately.

"In Buffalo?" Rosalind repeated, hating how stupid it made her sound. What in the world was he doing in western New York?

"In Buffalo. Have dinner with me. I can meet you at your office at six. Your voicemail said you don't have a class tomorrow night. All right?" Paul asked.

"All right," Rosalind said.

“Great! I can’t wait to see you.” He hung up, and Rosalind dropped the phone back into its hook.

She dressed quickly and ran across the street, her mind full of shards of glass. If Taryn reacted like this to Paul calling her, how would she take the news that he was coming to town?