

The big shaggy dog sniffed and whined at the door. Then, as

the key jangled in the lock, he danced to one side and barked an unexpectedly high-pitched “woof,” while his tail wagged so vigorously it generated a breeze that fluttered the rain slicker hanging from the coat hooks next to the door.

The huge metal fire door opened into the spacious loft and Temerity Bauer came in, folding her white, red-tipped cane as she entered. “Hush it, Runt,” she said. Her straight black hair swung forward as she leaned down and found his moving head. She rubbed behind the ears vigorously, and the dog leaned into the rapture of it, almost knocking the slim twenty-nine-year-old off balance. “All right, that’s enough. Justice?” she called out. “Justice? Are you home?” The blind woman straightened up, stepped around the dog, and started confidently toward the open kitchen area.

In three steps, her foot caught on something that shouldn’t have been there and she flew forward, thrusting out her hands instinctively to catch herself. She hit the hardwood floor, breaking the fall with her palms, and rolled to one side, cursing, while Runt offered assistance by sticking his wet nose in her face and sniffing loudly. Flat on her back, she checked over her hands and fingers, rolling her wrists to feel for any injury. Other than her smarting palms, there seemed to be no damage. Her relief was brief, quickly replaced by a flood of anger. Sitting up, she felt for the offending object and found a small suitcase that had been left in the middle of the floor.

“Justice!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. She heard the door to the hallway open and then the sound of rapid footsteps, too light to be her twin’s.

“Oh, hi, Amanda,” Temerity greeted her brother’s girlfriend. “Just a shot in the dark, but...I’m guessing you guys are going away for the weekend,” Temerity said dryly.

The steps faltered. “Temerity, what are you doing on the...oh my God! I’m so sorry! What an idiot I am, I thought we were going right back out again.” Amanda was kneeling at Temerity’s side by the time she had finished exclaiming. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Temerity waved her aside. “No permanent damage done. But my half-wit brother should have told you.”

“He has told me, a hundred times. It’s completely my fault,” Amanda insisted, hooking one arm under Temerity’s and helping her up.

“Somehow I doubt that. Where is he?”

“In the shower,” Amanda told her. “He wanted to clean up before we left. “Wait a minute, let me see your hands.”

Temerity held out her hands to the young doctor, who took them in her own and turned them over. The tickle of long, curly hair brushing her forearms made Temerity want to giggle as Amanda leaned close to examine her fingers, and the vague, antiseptic hospital smell mixed with lilac perfume, unique to her twin’s girlfriend, teased at her nostrils. Amanda said, “You’ve got a small abrasion here,” she ran a soft finger pad along the outside of Temerity’s right pinkie. “Let’s get that cleaned up and I’ll put a bandage on it.”

Temerity, a violinist with the city’s small orchestra, did not object to the ministrations. Even a minor scratch could interfere with her playing, and an infection could keep her from playing at all. The two women made their way to the kitchen where Amanda held the finger under warm running water, cleaning it with gauze and antibacterial ointment from the kit under the sink and applying a

small band aid.

Footsteps in the hallway across the big room made Temerity turn her head toward her brother.

“You shrieked for me?” he called out, and as his steady strides came closer, Temerity picked up the fresh creaminess of coconut-scented shampoo.

“Yes. I was just curious.”

[LSEP] “About?”

[LSEP] “Well, I thought obstacle course day was Tuesday, and today is Friday. No doubt the element of surprise was all part of the tactical exercise. Didn’t you want to put some low-hanging barbed wire around so I could practice belly crawling, and maybe a pit with pointed sticks in it.”

“My fault!” Amanda called out to him. “I left my suitcase in the entrance, I thought we were going right back out, and you told me Tem wasn’t here when I came in.”

Temerity smiled at the use of her abbreviated name. Justice had been the only one who ever called her that, but since his girlfriend had adopted the moniker from Justice, she had accepted it without complaint. It didn’t hurt that Temerity had liked Amanda ever since she’d been in pre-med with Justice. Though Justice had ultimately shifted out of medicine to finish with a Ph. D. in anthropology and could neither set a bone nor diagnose a virus, he *was* still a doctor, as he liked to remind his sister every chance he got.

A tortured sigh came from him now. “Tem, I’m sorry, but you’ve tripped over Runt and Mouse enough times to know that you still have to be careful.”

“I do? Wow, I guess it true what they say, you learn something

new everyday. You know what else I learned?”

“What?” he asked, like he didn’t really want to know.

“I do not *bounce*.”

Justice glanced at Amanda and Temerity could hear the smile in his voice when he responded. “True. Well, except that one time when they delivered the new sofa.”

“Will you never let that go?” Temerity crossed her arms and glared sourly in his direction.

“What happened with the sofa?” Amanda asked.

Temerity opened her mouth to shut it down, but Justice was already off and running. If she could have seen his gray eyes, she would have been annoyed to find them dancing with amusement. “So, we had this new sofa delivered, and the delivery guys set it down so that it was blocking the hallway while we rearranged the big rug. Temerity comes running down the hallway like an Olympic gymnast headed for the vault, hits the back of that sofa, flips all the way over, I’m talking three-sixty, sticks the landing with her butt on the sofa springs, and gets launched back into the air onto the rug, which was thankfully still rolled up.” His face was screwed up with the effort of not laughing, but he lost the battle as the mental instant-replay sent him into fits of laughter.

“You...were... butt bounced!” he wheezed.

Amanda said, “Justice, that’s not funny!”

“It was *hysterical*!” Justice insisted. “Funniest thing I’ve ever seen, except of course, for some of my sister’s outfits.”

Temerity stood with her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side, tilting her face up slightly to point it directly at her three-inches-taller brother. “Please say you’re leaving soon.”

“Yes, yes. We’ll be out in a few minutes. Patience is its own reward,” Justice teased his sister. “I think that’s from the Bible.”

Temerity smiled sweetly. “So is fratricide,” she said.

“What are you doing this weekend?” her brother asked.

“Working. I have to learn a new piece before rehearsal Sunday. Have you seen Ellen?”

“Barely, she got home from work, slept a few hours and then ran out before noon. Said she was going somewhere with Rupert and wouldn’t be back until late.”

Temerity’s reaction was bittersweet. “Oh right, the revival film festival is this week.” It pleased her that their roommate Ellen, an extreme introvert, had discovered an activity she could enjoy, though it was one that excluded Temerity for the most part. Sitting quietly in the dark and watching classic movies was the one social outing Ellen had learned to brave and even enjoy. It was a huge step for the reclusive young woman, whose early life had damaged her to the point that before she’d met the twins, she’d lived an invisible life.

And who could blame her? Ellen, an almost three-hundred- pound, five-foot-four loner, had barely survived a horrific childhood. When she was five years old, Ellen’s mother had maliciously burned her face on an electric cook top unit and left the wound to fester untreated. When the painful, infected wound had finally sealed itself, the scar tissue had twisted half her face cruelly, dragging down one eyebrow and warping her mouth and cheek. Not long after that, Ellen’s mother ran away, taking only her crack pipe and a half-empty vodka bottle, leaving her small daughter to starve in a halfway house. A series of foster and group homes followed, where Ellen became adept at hiding herself from abuse and ridicule. Because no one wanted to look at her, it was easier than she had thought it would be. She got so good at avoiding

notice that she could go for days unseen and forgotten in a closet or a crawl space; her only comforts were stolen books and an excess of snack foods. Finally released by the state at seventeen, she had set out to find a job that demanded no human interaction and landed on the nighttime cleaning crew of a local Costco, where she snuck in and out to avoid human interaction, content to be ignored and anonymous to the other employees and the rest of the world.

The two had first met when Temerity had literally fallen into Ellen's lap on a bus. Ellen had been so surprised to be "seen" and so intrigued by the blind woman's obvious courage that she had followed Temerity when she got off at her stop, only to rescue her from would-be muggers. Over the next few months, Temerity, to whom the concept of judging someone for their looks was as absurd as it was impossible, had discovered how Ellen helped people who never even knew or cared that she existed, and the two had become best friends and partners in the crime of interfering in lives that needed help. After all, Temerity had said, who would suspect the two of them of meddling? One of them was blind and the other invisible.

Temerity smiled at the memory of their early adventures and felt pride in how far Ellen had come, though the memory of almost losing Ellen was a distinct fissure in those happy peaks. In a grand effort to protect a co-worker from assault, Ellen had taken a bullet in the arm and torn open the scarred part of her face as she fell. The surgeons, friends of Amanda touched by Ellen's act of sacrifice, had worked hard to reconstruct Ellen's face, and the result was a distinct improvement from the twisted scarring she had lived with all her life. But even with the lessening of her frightening appearance, the small act of attending a movie in public was a huge landmark for the woman who had lived her whole life in physical and emotional isolation. Much to Temerity's dismay, a little bubble of resentment rose in her chest at the

thought of being excluded from Ellen's newfound interest and relationship with Rupert, one of Temerity's fellow orchestra members. She reminded herself that, after all, she had introduced them and hoped for this very outcome. She tsk-tsked herself for being so petty when Ellen had tried to include her.

"I could tell you what's happening, like we do at home," Ellen had insisted.

"No," Temerity had told her, "I don't think that would be fair to everyone else. Film buffs are *serious* about quiet in the theatre." Then she had shrugged. "Don't blame them." So Ellen and Rupert had gone together, sneaking in after everyone else was seated and leaving before the lights turned back on, and Temerity stayed home and felt left out.

Temerity sighed and told her brother, "It's probably best. I've got to have my part down cold before the group rehearsals start. Not being able to read the music and play simultaneously, I've got some extra homework."

Justice made a sympathetic noise. Then trying to keep it casual, he asked, "Are you seeing Hugo?" but his sister read the subterfuge in his voice.

"Don't know, don't really care," she said.

"Yeah, right." Justice reached out and punched Temerity's arm lightly. She slapped his hand with well-timed accuracy. "Ouch!" he said. "Well, will you at least ask him to help with walking Runt when Seth doesn't come, even if you're *not* interested in him?" He made a face at Amanda.

"Don't think I didn't see that!" Temerity wagged a finger with disconcerting accuracy in his face.

"What?" Justice asked with profoundly fake innocence.^[L]_{SEP!} "Sorry, buddy," Amanda laughed to Justice, "she knows you too well."

Temerity sat down in front of her computer and selected news items for it to read her as she waited for the couple to gather all their things and say their goodbyes.

“Go on!” she insisted as they both asked her for the third time if she needed anything. “Go have sex, drink wine, wear lacy underwear, and say silly gooey things to each other.”

“Boxers don’t come in lace,” Justice fired back. “Though I do have a lovely mesh jock—”

“Stop!” Temerity commanded. “Don’t want to know.”

“Are you sure...?” Amanda began.

“That my brother owns a mesh thong?” Temerity cut her off. “Sadly, yes. Some horrors cannot be hidden on laundry day.” Amanda laughed, and Temerity ordered, “Get out!” while pointing imperiously toward the door. Her brother caught her hand and squeezed it in his. They interlaced their forefingers, the way they always had, then he kissed her hair and let go.

“Bye, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” he chided. “Like that narrows it down.” Temerity shook her head. “Now beat it.”

When the door closed behind them, Temerity stood where she was, feeling the ripples of stillness expand away from her and then settle into a broad, flat emptiness. She could sense the feeble March sun through the huge warehouse windows that lined the entire back wall of the once-industrial loft. She turned her face up to the bashful warmth and felt the emptiness press down around her. With a sigh, she slipped into a lower place, weighed down by leaden sinkers hooked in her chest. She lowered herself to the floor and then slumped onto her back and lay spread-eagle with her arms out beside her. She felt so depleted that she imagined just seeping into the wood grain like a stain. As often as she’d reminded herself that Justice must leave, reminded herself that he must move on,

that the healthiest thing for them both would be independent lives, the conscious mental efforts to acclimate herself to the impending event had done little to mollify her sense of impending doom. Her fear of that inevitable separation remained as unyielding as the oak planks digging painfully into her shoulder blades, no matter how hard she tried. And she *had* tried—encouraged him, urged him, chided him—to do exactly that, but now, this weekend, she sensed, would be the snapping point of the cord that bound them.

And it scared her to death.

For a long while she thought of nothing, sunk into the grayness of forced solitude without stimulus. After a while, she felt something compressing the soft tissue of her stomach, something heavy, but soft and padding in a steady rhythm. At the same time, a rumbling sound infused her chest with the reassurance of company. She was not alone.

Raising one hand, she stroked the gnarly-eared head of Ellen's cat, Mouse. "Hey buddy," she whispered, and got an answer. "Rrraww," he said, and then bit her hand.

"I'm going to interpret that as... 'get off your ass and feed me,'" Temerity said, lurching upright with an effort. "And don't worry," she added to the substantial feline, "I get the message. That's enough of that self-pity crap. Things change, get over it." She went into the kitchen, used one hand to trail along the edge of the counter until she came to the corner, then leaned down to open the cabinet where the cat food was kept and took out a scoop. She explored with one foot until she heard the plastic bowl scoot across the tiles. As she leaned down to spill the food into the bowl, she scratched Mouse's scruffy head once more and said, "If you catch me being pathetic, bite me again."

The only reply was the satisfied crunching of tasty, bacon-flavored bits.

