**How Kristen Spent Her Summer Vacation**

***by Nemo***

***Orientation Meeting***

Kristen studied the card in her hand. The man at the front of the auditorium said, "The city provides lifeguard service at a number of locations–public beaches, neighborhood parks, the pool at the rehab center, and so on. They are all listed on the assignment card. Now, strange as it may seem, these are not all considered to be glamour assignments." Most of the people in the auditorium laughed.

There were about two hundred people in the room, roughly equal numbers of men and women. They were an attractive bunch, all trim, fit and genial. Most were in their twenties. Kristen, who had just turned 18, was undoubtedly one of the youngest. She was almost giddy with excitement at being a member of this group. For years she had dreamed of becoming a lifeguard.

Kristen could have been one of the most popular girls at her high school. She had a sweet, lightly freckled face, and she wore her platinum blonde hair in a cute pageboy bob. She knew that the boys’ heads turned when she walked by. Clearly they admired her trim 5’5", 110 lb. form. She had briefly worried that her breasts were too small, but when she noticed how the boys eyed her chest when they thought she wasn’t looking, she decided her breasts were just the right size.

But Kristen hadn’t enjoyed much of a social life in high school. While her friends had gone off to pursue typical teenage diversions, Kristen had spent most evenings in the gym, at the school pool, or in classes, working to develop the strength, stamina and skills that a lifeguard needs. Her hard work had paid off. This was the first day of her summer job–one of the city’s elite team of lifeguards.

The speaker at the front of the room raised one of the assignment cards high over his head. "Each of you has been granted points," he continued, "based on seniority, past performance, and your scores on the tests." Kristen had four points. As a rookie, she had no seniority or past performance, but she had done well on the lifeguard qualification tests.

"You can distribute these points any way you like to ‘score’ the locations on the assignment card. If there are some locations where you would particularly like to be assigned, use some or all of your points to give those locations a positive score. If there are some places you would particularly like to avoid, use your points to give those places a negative score. Most of you will still be assigned at random, but we do our best to honor everyone’s preferences.

"If you don’t like your assignment and can find someone willing to trade, you are welcome to do so. But all trades must be completed today, so everyone can be registered at their final location. Once your assignment has been registered, it’s final–you will work at your assigned location for the entire summer. If any of this is confusing, please trust me–the whole process is not nearly as simple as it sounds." The audience laughed again.

Kristen pondered how to use her four points. She knew they wouldn’t be enough to get her one of the really choice assignments, but maybe she could still use them effectively. She gave the veterans rehab center and the senior citizen’s center scores of —2 points each. "God, I am so shallow," she thought. Lifeguard was an important job, and veterans and senior citizens deserved protection as much as anyone. But she was an 18-year-old young woman, ready at last to begin enjoying life. She had been looking forward to getting a great suntan this summer, and maybe meeting some cute guys. "Maybe I can be noble next year," she thought as she handed in her card.

The rest of the morning was spent filling out a seemingly endless succession of forms for taxes, insurance, a retirement fund and ten thousand other trivial demands of the bureaucracy.

At lunchtime, everyone went to down to the cafeteria together. The more experienced lifeguards mingled with the rookies, and entertained everyone with hilarious tales of pranks, practical jokes, and general tomfoolery from their own experiences in previous years, interspersed with sobering stories of tragedies and close calls. From time to time, someone would tell a short, simple story about a colleague’s heroism. It was obvious that while the lifeguards had a lot of fun on the job, when the going got tough, they worked hard, they were all business, and they were a team.

After lunch, they returned to the auditorium and watched a series of boring training videos about departmental rules and procedures, fire safety, sexual harassment, and the like. There was more paperwork, to document that everyone had seen and understood the videos. Each person received a stack of papers and booklets containing even more rules and regulations. As excited as she had been at the beginning of the day, Kristen’s enthusiasm was almost depleted by mid-afternoon.

"Are you still with us?" Kristen looked up into the dark penetrating gaze of the young man sitting next to her. He brushed his unruly jet-black hair back from his forehead and smiled. "It looked like you were starting to doze off," he whispered.

Kristen shook her head and smiled shyly. "Sorry. It’s been kind of boring," she said.

"Don’t worry, the boring stuff is almost over. I’ve been through this before." He tapped the name tag on his chest. "My name’s Ted. It’s my third year. They’re about to announce our assignments."

The man at the front of the auditorium spoke as if on cue. "Okay, everyone, we have your assignments!" Two clerks came forward and picked up stacks of manila envelopes and began to pass them out. An excited buzz filled the auditorium, broken occasionally by a little shout of joy or disappointment as each lifeguard received his or her assignment. The speaker raised his voice to make himself heard.

"Please note that the envelopes we are handing out include the combination for your locker. Don’t lose this! If you swap assignments with anyone, you must swap envelopes, and you must see the secretary outside the auditorium to register the change."

"First day on the job is Monday. Everybody be there bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at 6AM. Your uniforms and equipment will be ready for you then. If you are not familiar with the location of your assignment, please take some time this weekend and go there."

The noise level was rising steadily. The speaker shouted, "Thank you for your attention. Congratulations to you all! Now, let’s have a great year!" A cheer rose from the entire group just as Kristen was handed her assignment envelope.

She eagerly read the assignment printed on the outside of the envelope. The Point Pleasant Recreation Center. "Rats," she muttered involuntarily. She knew it well. It was only a few blocks from her parents’ home, but it was a kiddie pool, really. There was only one lifeguard on duty, so her chances of meeting a sexy male lifeguard seemed pretty dim, too.

"Point Pleasant? That’s not so bad, is it?" asked Ted.

Kristen blushed. "I suppose not… it’s just, um… not what I had in mind."

"Well, maybe we can trade," Ted said. He reached up and accepted his own assignment envelope from the clerk. "Oh–sorry." He frowned. "It’s, um… it’s Black Knife Beach."

"Still want to trade?" Kristen asked, holding up her own envelope.

"Really? You’re–you’re sure you don’t mind?"

"Not at all," said Kristen, surprised that Ted would be willing to trade a beach assignment for a kiddie pool. Black Knife Beach was way out in the boondocks–but that meant it was far enough from her parents’ home that she could justify moving out and getting her own apartment. "Black Knife Beach. It’ll be great!" She smiled broadly.

Ted looked at her quizzically, then returned her smile. "Okay, if you’re sure."

***Black Knife Beach***

Kristen got up early on Saturday morning, eager to drive out to Black Knife Beach and have a look around.

She grabbed a quick shower, then wrapped a towel around herself and padded down the hall to her bedroom, where she started to pack her beach bag. She slipped some papers into the bag from the orientation meeting the day before, including a map and the card with her locker assignment. She put her sunglasses and a bottle of sunscreen into a pocket on the outside of the beach bag, and she stuffed a couple towels into the bag. The beach wouldn’t be officially open for several more days, so she hoped to have a chance to enjoy the sun and sand before the crowds arrived.

She felt a rising tickle of excitement in her stomach as she opened a dresser drawer and pulled out the bikini she had bought the night before. She loosened the towel she had wrapped around her body and let it fall to the floor. She looked into the bedroom mirror and held the bikini top before her breasts, trying to get a sense of how she would look in the swimsuit. It wasn’t a particularly daring outfit, but it was quite a departure from the one-piece suits she had always worn before.

Kristen felt comfortable with her body. She wasn’t conceited about her looks, but she knew she was pretty. She could see it in the mirror; she could see it in the way men’s eyes followed her hungrily wherever she went.

Her one-piece suits did nothing to disguise her beauty, but they were strictly utilitarian garments, unlike this bikini. Kristen had never worn an outfit designed specifically to show off her body, but now that she was out of high school, now that she had completed years of dedication and self-denial preparing to become a lifeguard, now she felt ready to cast her inhibitions to the wind and have fun.

Her face flushed and the tickle in her stomach grew as she thought about the plan she had formed when she bought the bikini–she would wear the bikini instead of underwear today. With the swimsuit under her clothes, she wouldn’t have to stop at a changing room when she got to the beach. She could stretch out her beach blanket on the sand, then just start taking off her clothes, right there on the beach. She had seen other girls do it. For some reason she didn’t fully understand, it was exciting to think about undressing out in the open. There might be hundreds of eyes watching her.

The more she thought about it, the more vivid the image grew, and the more flushed her face became. Suddenly, with a startled gasp, Kristen was overwhelmed with a sense of embarrassment and shame. What was she–an exhibitionist? Shuddering, she realized that she simply didn’t have the nerve to undress on the beach. She looked at the bikini in her hands. Maybe someday, she thought with regret. Definitely not today.

She put the bikini on top of the dresser, then opened her underwear drawer. She put on her usual underwear, a white cotton bra and panties. Then she pulled on a green t-shirt and a pair of green shorts. The color seemed to complement her smooth tan skin. Finally, she pulled on white ankle socks and clean white tennis shoes.

She put one of her old one-piece swimsuits into the beach bag. She would put her swimsuit on in the changing room, just as she had always done when she went to the beach. After a moment’s hesitation, she grabbed the bikini from the top of the dresser and put it into the bag, too. If the beach wasn’t crowded, maybe she would have the nerve to wear the bikini.

She stuffed a few more odds and ends into the beach bag, then she checked the mirror. With a few quick strokes of a hairbrush, she tamed her dazzling blonde pageboy bob, and she was ready.

The drive to Black Knife Beach was a long one. The beach was well away from the heart of the city, and the road narrowed as it entered the steep hills on the outskirts of town. The road snaked and turned back on itself, climbing some shallow slopes, and dodging around the steeper ones. The many twists in the road must have added ten miles to the length of the drive, and forced every car to creep along at a snail’s pace.

"I’ll go crazy making this drive twice a day for the whole summer," Kristen thought. She needed to find an apartment somewhere near the beach, and the sooner the better.

Finally, as she rounded one sharp curve, she saw one of the familiar wooden signs of the Department of Parks and Recreation. Black Knife Beach, at last. Just past the sign, a narrow gravel road branched off through a thick screen of trees and bushes. Feeling a bit uncertain, Kristen turned onto the gravel road.

The gravel path ran for only about thirty feet, then opened up onto a sizable paved parking lot, with neatly painted rows of parking spaces. The lot was almost entirely empty. A large sign at the edge of the lot reassured her that she had come to the right place–this was indeed Black Knife Beach. Kristen could see the ocean beyond the sign, but she couldn’t see the beach.

She parked near the large sign. As she got out of her car, she realized that the parking lot was on the top of a bluff towering almost a hundred feet above the beach. There was a steep and rocky trail winding down the face of the cliff, leading down to the beach.

Kristen took the beach bag and her beach blanket from the car and walked to a redwood staircase that marked the beginning of the trail down to the beach. A small sign at the head of the stairs read "ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK." The trail was rugged: in most places, it was nothing more than a narrow gravel path. In some places there were hand rails, and in a few particularly steep places, there were short redwood staircases, joining parts of the gravel path.

The steep slopes beside the gravel path were littered with a jumble of dark jagged boulders and rocks. There were many fragments of jet-black rock, broken into pieces with edges that looked razor-sharp. In bygone times, Kristen thought, perhaps people used these rocks to make hatchets, arrowheads, or spearheads. She didn’t know enough about geology to recognize what kind of rocks they were, but it seemed obvious that they were the reason this place was named Black Knife Beach.

In a few places, some of the rubble had rolled or slid down the slopes and partially obstructed the gravel path. It wasn’t difficult to step over the rubble, but Kristen started to wonder just how stable the cliffside trail was. Hadn’t she heard something about people who had died from falls or rock slides at Black Knife Beach a few years ago? It was obvious that improvements had been made to make the descent safer, but it seemed that Black Knife Beach was not for the faint of heart.

Kristen was surprised when she reached the base of the rugged slope. The ground was cluttered with rocky debris for about twenty to thirty yards from the base of the cliff. Beyond that, the beach was an immaculate stretch of pristine white sand. It was beautiful! The surf was light today, and the deep blue water splashed gently against the shore. The beach was almost completely deserted. Far down the beach she could see two or three people splashing about in the water. She turned and looked up at the cliff towering above and smiled. Now she understood why people would risk the perilous trail down to Black Knife Beach. This was paradise!

Not far from the foot of the trail was a small wooden building. A sign near the door at the front end of the building said "Lifeguard Station," and the door was open wide. It seemed like the obvious place to begin her exploration.

Kristen paused for a moment outside the open door. The front part of the building was a small office, with a desk and several filing cabinets. The walls were covered with maps and bulletin boards. There were stacks of cardboard boxes on the floor, and one of the file cabinet drawers was open. Everything was dusty, but there were cleaning supplies arranged on the desk, and it was obvious that someone had recently started working at cleaning up the room.

Kristen knocked timidly on the open door and called out, "Hello? Is there anybody here?" When no one answered, she stepped into the office. Through an open door in the back end of the office, she could see a row of lockers. There were lights on in the locker room. "Hello," she called again, a little louder than before. "Is there anybody here?"

"Yes, just a minute," came a woman’s voice from the locker room.

A naked woman stepped through the locker room door. "Hi, can I help you?" she asked.

Kristen’s face turned beet red. "Oh, I’m so sorry," she said, and backed toward the office door.

The woman smiled, stretched out her hand, and walked toward Kristen. "I’ll bet you’re Kristen!" she said. "I’m so glad to meet you. My name’s Beth. I’m the senior lifeguard here." She grabbed Kristen’s hand and gave her a hearty handshake.

"Uh… pleased to meet you," Kristen stammered.

"I just came in today to try to start getting things in shape for the start of the season next week," Beth said. She looked around the dusty office. "The place is really a bit of a mess."

"They, uh… they said at the meeting yesterday…" Kristen’s mouth suddenly felt very dry. "They said that I should come out here this weekend, and, uh…"–she lowered her eyes to the floor–"try to, uh, take a look around."

Kristen was surprised at how awkward she felt, talking to this naked woman. She and her friends had often had long conversations in the shower room or the locker room at school, without a trace of embarrassment about their nudity. Somehow this was different.

Probably Beth had just got out of the shower when Kristen came in. But her hair wasn’t wet. Maybe she had only been getting ready to start a shower when Kristen arrived. Someone could walk in the wide open office door any second, but Beth didn’t seem to notice. It was almost as if she didn’t even realize that she was naked.

Her body certainly was nothing to be ashamed of. At 5’8" tall and 125 lbs., Beth had the kind of body that could make grown men weep. Her tan skin looked somehow like velvet–it seemed so inviting to the touch. Her reddish-brown hair fell long and loose over her shoulders. The neatly trimmed triangle of reddish-brown pubic hair was as tempting to the touch as her soft smooth skin.

"Have a seat," Beth said, motioning to a chair just inside the door. She turned to the open file drawer and pulled out a folder. "I have your folder right here," she said, as she seated herself behind the desk. She opened the folder and glanced over the contents. "So what do you think of our little corner of Eden here?" she asked.

Kristen struggled to regain her poise. "The beach is beautiful," she said, "but I think you really need to install an elevator."

Beth laughed. "Just think of the trail as the initiation test for Black Knife Beach. Survival of the fittest." She turned another page in the folder, then looked up from the papers.

"We have eight lifeguards here, working two shifts," Beth said. "Because this is your first year, you’ll spend at least the first couple weeks on the morning shift, with me. Just so we can show you the ropes, you know." Kristen nodded.

"We’ll have three women and one man on the morning shift. The afternoon shift is two women and two men. After you’ve learned the ropes, we may shift some schedules."

Kristen looked at the open locker room door. "I notice there’s only one locker room," she said.

Beth nodded. "Yeah, share and share alike. We’re a pretty small station, and, of course, out here it doesn’t make any sense to spend a lot of money putting in two separate locker rooms."

Kristen nodded. With only four lifeguards on each shift, it would be no hardship for the men and the women to take turns in the locker room.

Beth stood up and put Kristen’s folder back into the file cabinet. Looking at Beth’s bare ass only a couple feet in front of her face, Kristen noticed something she hadn’t seen before. Beth had a nice tan, but no tan lines. "Oh, I hope she’s not this casual about being nude when the men are here," Kristen thought, with a sudden rush of renewed embarrassment. She looked again into the locker room.

Beth turned her head and looked over her shoulder at Kristen. "Say, why don’t you go on in and find your locker. Then you can get undressed and I’ll show you around our little half-acre of Heaven."

"That sounds like a good idea," said Kristen. As Kristen walked into the locker room, Beth knelt down and took some file folders from one of the boxes on the floor. She turned and started to file the folders in the file cabinet. She was still naked, and she still seemed completely unconscious of her nudity.

Kristen fished her locker ticket from her beach bag. She found the locker easily, and had no trouble opening it. The locker was empty, except for a baseball cap on the top shelf. The cap had the neatly embroidered logo of the Department of Parks and Recreation, and large letters that read "LIFEGUARD."

"Hey, this hat is pretty neat," Kristen said. "They must be new. I haven’t seen the lifeguards wearing them before."

"No," Beth called from the other room. "The caps were made especially for Black Knife Beach. Nobody else has them."

"Wow," said Kristen. "I guess we’re an elite crew!" She pulled the cap on and looked at the empty locker. "It looks like our uniforms aren’t here yet."

Beth stepped into the locker room doorway and looked at Kristen for a long moment. "No, the uniforms are here," she said. Kristen turned and looked at Beth. "The baseball caps are our uniforms."

Kristen’s brow furrowed in puzzlement. "So… so we have to provide our own swimsuits?"

Beth frowned. "You really don’t know?"

"Don’t know what?" Kristen asked, with a growing sense of dread.

"Black Knife Beach is a nude beach. Nudity is mandatory at all times–no swimsuits allowed." Beth pulled her own baseball cap from her locker. "The cap is the only thing you’re allowed to wear on the job."

"Oh, my God!" said Kristen. Her face turned a ghostly white. "I–I can’t do that!"

"Sure you can," said Beth, with a reassuring smile. "A year ago, I was just as embarrassed as you are. But after a couple hours, the embarrassment was completely gone. After a couple days, I hated to get dressed. Take your clothes off, then let’s go take a walk around the beach. You’ll see."

"I can’t," Kristen protested. "I’ll die of embarrassment! I just can’t!"

"Come on, Kristen. You have to get used to it eventually. Why not start today, when the beach is almost deserted? On Monday there will be more people here, and you’re not going to have a choice. You clearly have a nice body. You don’t have a thing to be embarrassed about."

Kristen’s face turned bright red once again. She pulled off the lifeguard cap and ran her fingers through her hair. "I–I–I’m not a natural blonde!" she choked.

***In Uniform***

Kristen’s eyes filled with hot tears, blurring her vision. "I’m not going to cry," she told herself, struggling to maintain her composure.

Beth fought with her own, very different, emotions, straining to keep from laughing out loud. She clamped her hand over her mouth, and tried to twist the expression in her eyes to look more like compassionate sympathy. She knew at once that she wasn’t going to be able to pull it off. She decided to change tactics.

Beth opened her eyes wide in mock surprise. "Not a natural blonde! I–I’m shocked!" Kristen’s face turned an even brighter shade of red, if that was really possible. "I never would have guessed that you were wearing a wig!"

Kristen giggled in spite of herself. "That’s not funny!" she said, her voice quavering between tears and laughter. She clamped her lips together in a tight pout.

"It’s a problem, all right," Beth said, adopting a more serious tone of voice. "Listen–I think you really have only three choices."

Kristen looked at Beth quizzically and loosened up the pout a bit. "What choices?" she asked.

"Well," Beth said, lowering her head as if lost in thought, "you can color the upper to match the lower. You know, "–she looked intently into Kristen’s eyes and tapped the top of her own head–"go back to your natural color. Light brown, right?"

"Yes," Kristen said. She dabbed at the corner of one eye to try to wipe away her tears.

Beth nodded. "Light brown’s not bad. Really almost more of a dark blonde, hmm?" She quickly stole a glance into Kristen’s tear-clouded eyes. "Second, you could color the lower to match the upper. Some people do that. Not for everyone, I suppose."

Kristen winced a little at the thought, and nodded gravely.

"Third, you could go bald."

Kristen looked blankly at Beth for about two seconds, then seemed to shrink as her face turned a furious shade of red. "Oh!"

Beth broke into a wide, friendly smile. She shook her finger at Kristen like a parent scolding a disobedient child. "And if you DO decide to shave your head, young lady, you just better be darn sure to wear your hat! I don’t want you keeling over from sunstroke!"

Kristen felt dizzy. She reeled for a moment, then burst into unrestrained laughter. She laughed so hard she found it hard to catch her breath.

"I suppose there IS a fourth choice," Beth said, her voice very soft. "You can loosen up a little, Kristen. Chill out. You’ve been turning red more often than a traffic signal–I’m afraid you’re going to pop a blood vessel. Plenty of people don’t have their natural hair color. More than you might expect. You would be surprised at how little of a scandal it causes."

Kristen sighed. She hung her head and stared at the floor for a long moment. Finally, she shook her head and looked up into Beth’s gentle, smiling eyes. "I appreciate your trying to cheer me up, Beth. I really do. But I just don’t think I’m going to be able to do this. Maybe I can talk to somebody downtown and get my assignment switched to another location."

Beth shook her head with a sympathetic smile. "No, you can’t. Once your assignment was registered yesterday, you were past the point of no return. They never change assignments after the orientation meeting. Never."

"But I didn’t know this was a nude beach," Kristen whined.

"Nudists come from all around the world to visit Black Knife Beach," Beth said. "I thought everyone in the country knew it was a nude beach. How could you NOT know it?"

"I’ve just never paid much attention to the news, and politics, and that kind of stuff," Kristen said, quietly. "I was busy with school and swim practice and so on… it never seemed very important to me."

Beth took a deep breath. "Kristen, I know you’ve worked a long time, and worked very hard to become a lifeguard. I know this because I’ve done it, too. Don’t blow it now. You signed up for a tour of duty. It’s not exactly what you were hoping for, and I’m sorry. But if you don’t fulfill your commitment, you’ll never get another chance to work as a lifeguard in this city. Jeez–I sound like I’m in the Mafia. That’s not a threat–that’s just the way it works. You’ve worked too hard to give it all up over something silly like this."

Tears glistened in Kristen’s eyes.

"Please trust me," Beth continued. "The best thing you can do now–the very best thing–is just to take off your clothes. You’re going to feel embarrassed for a while. It’s only natural. You’ve been brainwashed all your life to feel embarrassed, and you’re never going to be free of it until you get undressed."

Kristen was shivering and staring at the floor. She didn’t say a word.

"If it will make you feel better, I can step outside and close the door while you undress," Beth said. Kristen stared at the floor for a long time, then nodded.

Beth stepped through the locker room door and started to pull the door closed. "When you come out, bring a towel. You can’t wear it, of course, but it gives you something to sit on." She pulled the door shut.

Kristen sniffled, and pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of her shorts. She dried her eyes and wiped her nose. Her hand trembled violently.

For a long time she stared at the floor. She couldn’t see any way out of this thing. She had to take off her clothes. If she didn’t do it today, she would still have to do it on Monday, when all the other lifeguards could see how weak and childish she was.

She grabbed the bottom of her t-shirt, and hesitated again. "I’ve undressed a thousand times in the locker room at school," Kristen thought. "Why is this so difficult?" She took a deep breath and tried to make her mind go blank as she quickly pulled the shirt off over her head. She hung the shirt inside the locker.

With her hands still trembling, she unhooked her bra, folded it, and put it on the top shelf of the locker. Icy beads of sweat were forming all over her body. The locker room was warm, but the feel of the air on her bare breasts made Kristen feel very cold.

She sat down on the bench in front of the row of lockers and paused to catch her breath. She leaned over and took off her spotless white tennis shoes. She peeled off the white socks and tucked them inside the shoes.

She could feel her heart pounding, and there was a dull roaring sound in her ears. She opened the snap on her shorts and stood up. For a moment she feared she would faint. "This is silly," Kristen told herself. "It’s just brainwashing." She hooked her thumbs inside the sides of the shorts and tugged them down to her ankles. She stepped out of the shorts, folded them neatly, and put them on the top shelf of the locker.

She stood for a long moment, steadying herself against the locker. Nothing left but her white cotton panties. Wouldn’t it be enough just to go topless this first day? If she could get used to that, maybe she wouldn’t have any trouble taking everything off on Monday. She shook her head–she knew it was foolishness. She gritted her teeth. With her hands still trembling, she hooked her thumbs inside her panties and swiftly pulled them off. She folded the panties and put them into the locker.

As she pulled one of the large white towels from her beach bag, she saw the two swimsuits she had brought along–her usual one-piece suit and the bikini she had bought the night before. She suddenly felt very tired. It seemed like a hundred years ago that she had fretted over whether she would have the nerve to wear the bikini on this beach. Her worries of the morning seemed silly, knowing now that she was not allowed to wear anything.

With a deep sigh, she put the bag on the floor of the locker. She had the towel in her hand. She saw her shoes on the floor, and decided to keep them out. She closed the locker door and bent to pick up her shoes.

As she stepped up to the locker room door, she pressed the top of the towel against her chest with one hand, carrying her shoes in the other. The towel was large enough that it covered most of the front of her body. Cautiously, Kristen opened the door and stepped through.

Beth was seated at the desk, sorting through several stacks of papers. She looked up from her work, and immediately frowned. The towel didn’t cover the sides of Kristen’s body, so it was obvious that she was naked behind the towel.

Kristen forced an apologetic smile. She craned her neck to get a better view through the open office door. "I’m just afraid somebody might walk in," she whispered hoarsely.

Beth shook her head sadly. "Oh, come on, Kristen! The more you make a big production out of this, the harder it’s going to be. If somebody comes through the door right now and sees you hiding behind that towel, you are going to get a lot more attention and feel a lot more embarrassed than if you’re standing there naked. Put down the towel, and try to relax."

Kristen took a few steps to a chair just inside the office door. Still holding the towel against her body, she knelt down to put the shoes on the floor. When she stood up, she folded the towel neatly and put it on the chair. Totally nude, she turned toward Beth. "Okay?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Beth nodded and smiled warmly. "Perfect."

"I–I’m shaking like a leaf," Kristen said. She clasped her trembling hands together, absent-mindedly covering her pubic mound. In an instant she realized what her hands were concealing. "Oh! I’m sorry," she said. With an obvious exertion of will power, she lowered her hands to her sides.

"Kristen, relax!" Beth said. "This isn’t a peep show. You’re not here to ‘show off the goodies’ like a dancer at a strip bar." Beth stood up and leaned against the corner of the desk. Kristen was once again aware of something she had almost forgotten–Beth was completely naked, too. "You’re a lifeguard," Beth continued. "You don’t have the luxury of cringing and hiding, and you don’t have the luxury of strutting around and flashing your stuff. You have a job to do. You won’t be wearing any clothes, but you can’t let that distract you."

Kristen nodded soberly. "Thanks," she said. Her hands felt awkward–she didn’t know what to do with them. She kept them at her sides. Beth could see the tension draining from Kristen’s body as her breathing became more natural.

Kristen looked into Beth’s eyes with a plaintive expression. "How can they do this to us?" she asked. "I mean, it’s supposed to be against the law to go naked in public. This is a public beach. The taxpayers pay for it. We’re government employees. How can they make us go naked?"

"It’s a long story," Beth sighed.

***On the Beach***

Beth moved into the doorway and gazed down the long stretch of white sand. "This is a beautiful beach," she said, "probably one of the finest in the state." Kristen stepped up to look out at the beach over Beth’s shoulder. Far down the beach she could see several people running about playfully. At this distance, she couldn’t be sure whether they were naked, too. There didn’t seem to be anyone else on the beach or in the water.

"For years," Beth continued, "Black Knife Beach was deserted. It was too remote, and access was too difficult–and too dangerous." She looked over her shoulder at Kristen. "If you think it was tough walking down the trail, you should have seen it before the trail was built. You practically needed to be a mountain climber." She stepped just outside the office doorway and tilted her head back to look up the steep face of the cliff. Kristen moved into the doorway and leaned forward so that she could follow Beth’s gaze.

"Sometime in the 1950s–maybe even a little earlier–a small group of brave or foolhardy folks started coming down here and using the beach in the nude. It was illegal, strictly speaking, but they weren’t bothering anyone–there was no one here to take offense–and it was too difficult and expensive to get police down here to start making arrests, so the city ignored them. Live and let live.

"The nudists got together and did a lot of work to improve the access and make it easier and safer to get down to the beach. They built the first real trails, which are mostly gone now. That little ridge there,"–Beth moved a few steps farther from the building and pointed to a place high on the cliff, behind the lifeguard station–"is just about the only thing left." Kristen craned her neck to see where Beth was pointing, but she kept her bare feet firmly planted on the door sill. The back of the building blocked her view of the ridge. She stole a quick glance down the beach, which was empty except for the small group in the distance. With a deep breath, Kristen stepped through the doorway and walked over to stand beside Beth, who had taken another couple steps away from the building. Kristen tilted her head back, and saw the small ridge where Beth was pointing.

"During the 1960s and 1970s, the beach started to get a reputation among nudists and hippies. Access had been improved enough that you no longer needed to be a mountain climber to get down here, and the beach started to attract larger crowds. A few politicians started complaining, and threatening arrests, but it was still too expensive for the city to enforce the anti-nudity laws here, so the nudists just ignored the uproar and continued to enjoy the beach."

A gentle gust of wind moved across the beach. Kristen gasped as she felt the sea air moving over every inch of her body. For the first time she felt the wind against her stomach, her chest, her bare buttocks, moving between her legs and over her naked hips, even gently ruffling her pubic hair. "Oh, my!" she cried. It was as if she had never felt a breeze before.

Beth smiled broadly. "Nice, isn’t it?"

Suddenly self-conscious, Kristen looked nervously down the long stretch of empty beach. "Yes," she said, blushing. "Very nice."

"You know, nobody wants to be assigned to lifeguard duty on Black Knife Beach, except the people who have already worked here," Beth said. "They never want to be assigned anywhere else."

Kristen smiled meekly, embarrassed and confused by her own reaction.

Beth started to walk down the beach, very slowly. "About this time a new crowd started coming to the beach–the gawkers."

"Gawkers?" Kristen repeated.

"That’s what the nudists called them. They would come down just to look–to gawk. They kept their clothes on, and lurked on the cliffs or among some of the boulders back here." Beth indicated the field of rocky debris near the base of the cliff. "They brought binoculars and cameras with telephoto lenses, and they spied on the nudists on the beach. When the politicians got more worked up about the wicked, immoral nudists, the gawkers got bolder. They started coming right down onto the beach, making indecent advances, taking photos without asking permission, making rude and threatening remarks, and generally harassing the nudists. In part because the city couldn’t afford to put police on the beach, things got ugly–very ugly. One summer there was a series of terrible crimes on Black Knife Beach, all committed by gawkers against nudists. Something had to give." Beth sighed and turned back toward Kristen.

Kristen walked quickly to catch up with Beth, who had moved about a dozen yards down the beach. "What happened?" she asked.

"They punished the victims. The politicians decided that Black Knife Beach had to be closed permanently. They sent city crews out to destroy the trails that the nudists had built. They wanted to make it impossible to get down to the beach. They passed new ordinances outlawing nudity specifically on Black Knife Beach, as if all the other anti-nudity laws weren’t enough. For a couple years, it seemed to work, but some of the braver nudists came back anyway. Because it was so difficult to get down to the beach, the gawkers stayed home, and the nudists were once again able to enjoy the beach peacefully.

"One summer, after heavy rains, several people were killed by a rock slide while they tried to climb down the cliff. There’s actually a little memorial plaque up here," Beth said, quickening her pace as she walked toward a large boulder at the edge of the rocky debris field. Timidly, Kristen followed.

"The news caused a political scandal, since it was the city that had destroyed the safe trails." Beth stopped near the large boulder, and pointed out a little metal plaque embedded in the rock, listing the names of the people who had been killed. "Embarrassed, the city sent out a crew to build the trail we have now. That’s when they put in the improvements–the restrooms, the parking lot–and that’s when the city started to provide lifeguard service on Black Knife Beach. The beach patrol came by a couple times a day. The beach was officially reopened, as a clothing-optional beach."

"Clothing-optional?" Kristen asked.

"It meant that people could wear as much or as little as they chose. For the first time, nudity was officially legal on Black Knife Beach. Lifeguards had to stay in uniform–the same uniform they wore at every other city beach, park and pool."

"Those were the good old days," Kristen whispered. She cast another nervous glance down the long, nearly deserted beach.

"Unfortunately," Beth said, "when the beach opened, the gawkers came back, too, in greater numbers than before. For a while, the presence of the lifeguards and the beach patrol seemed to keep them in line, but as time went by the gawkers grew more aggressive, and things started getting ugly again. Several times, lifeguards and members of the beach patrol were attacked when they tried to break up a bad situation. One member of the beach patrol had his neck broken when several gawkers ganged up on him."

"Oh, my God!" Kristen gasped. The job was not just embarrassing, but dangerous.

"Some politicians started talking again about outlawing nudity on Black Knife Beach," Beth continued, "but everyone knew that it was the clothed gawkers, not the nudists, who were causing trouble. So the city council surprised everyone: instead of banning nudity, they made it mandatory. They felt it would scare the gawkers away. The lifeguards and the beach patrol kept their uniforms. Everyone else had to be naked."

"Did it work? Did it get rid of the gawkers?" Kristen asked.

"Only for a few weeks. From time to time one or two gawkers would venture down. When a lifeguard challenged them, and told them to strip or get off the beach, the gawkers quickly tucked their tails between their legs and left. But slowly it dawned in their primitive little gawker brains that if the city hadn’t been able to enforce the anti-nudity laws, we couldn’t enforce the mandatory nudity law, either.

"One beautiful day, when there were over a thousand people enjoying the beach, a gang of about twenty gawkers came down together. They were looking for trouble, and everyone on the beach watched apprehensively. They were led by a particularly nasty character named Tony, who had already spent some time in jail because of his involvement in some of the earlier assaults.

"A young lifeguard named Lisa stepped forward to confront the gang. She was a *petite* girl, barely five feet tall, and very shy–like you. Her entire body was shaking, but she stood her ground. She planted her feet, put her hands on her hips, and with her voice trembling, told the gang that they would have to take off their clothes or get off the beach.

"People all along the beach watched the confrontation with a rising sense of dread. Tony spat on the ground and stepped forward, standing just inches in front of Lisa. ‘Listen, bitch," he said, shoving Lisa back two or three steps, ‘we’ll take our clothes off when you take yours off first.’

"Trembling with fear, Lisa stood there for a long moment. She didn’t back down. In a voice loud enough to be heard by many of the hundreds of people watching in stunned silence, she said, ‘Fair enough!’ She quickly stripped off her lifeguard uniform. The crowd gasped, and Tony and his gang, amazed, shrunk back a few steps. ‘Okay,’ Lisa said, ‘now it’s your turn!’

"The gang seemed paralyzed. Tony’s face grew purple with rage. He burst forward and knocked Lisa to the ground. ‘The hell with you, slut!’ he screamed at the girl prone on the sand. He and his gang started to advance onto the beach, past Lisa. They stopped suddenly, surprised to find themselves surrounded by several hundred angry nudists.

"’You heard the young lady,’ someone said. ‘It’s your turn now. Get your clothes off!’"

Beth lowered her head, as if trying to remember something. "You know, I’m still not sure what happened to those gawkers’ clothes. They certainly weren’t wearing anything when they left the beach that day. And I don’t think any of them have ever come back."

Kristen was stunned. "It sounds as if I should have dropped some swimming classes and signed up for martial arts training instead. Was Lisa okay?"

"Lisa was shaken up, but not hurt," Beth said. "That afternoon, in recognition of Lisa’s bravery, the Black Knife Beach lifeguard crew voted unanimously to adopt our current uniforms. The city approved, and provided our caps so that people on the beach could identify the lifeguards. And that’s the story."

Kristen’s knees felt weak. She was once again intensely conscious of the fact that she was outdoors, completely naked. She turned and looked back at the lifeguard station. To her surprise, she saw that she and Beth had walked more than a hundred yards down the beach. She turned and looked toward the small group at the other end of the beach. They were still some distance away, but she could now see clearly that they were all naked. Undoubtedly, they could see that she was naked, too. She started to tremble from a renewed wave of embarrassment.

Kristen hunched her shoulders and positioned her hands to try to cover as much of her nudity as possible. "Beth, I think we’d better go back now," she said with a trembling voice. "I think I’ve done as much as I can for today."

Beth looked at Kristen with a knowing smile. "A sudden flash of the heebie-jeebies, eh?" Kristen nodded meekly. "Well, going back is no cure. Walk it off!" Beth turned and started walking toward the water’s edge. With a forlorn sigh, and a wistful look back at the relative privacy of the lifeguard station, Kristen followed. She vainly tried to preserve her modesty by covering herself with her hands, but she quickly realized how ridiculous she must look, and gave it up.

Beth reached the water’s edge and turned, waiting for Kristen to catch up. As Kristen came near, Beth pointed into the water and said, "There’s a reef out here, and sometimes the currents can get a little tricky in this area. You’ll want to keep a sharp eye out here, especially during high tides." Kristen stopped, a little startled by the sudden change of subject, and nodded.

All business now, Beth turned and started walking along the beach, pointing out offshore features and hazards. She showed Kristen one area near the cliff where there was still a danger of rock slides. "As much as possible, we try to keep people away from the cliff." She pointed out the concrete block structure where the city had put water fountains and public restrooms. There were two entrances, marked "Men" and "Women." "Everybody is naked," Beth said, "but people don’t seem to be able to handle unisex bathrooms." She shrugged.

Beth pointed out the two strategically located lifeguard towers. "I’ll show you the inside on Monday," she said.

Kristen felt increasingly nervous as they walked ever closer to the small group of naked people at the end of the beach. The closer she got to them, the more she wanted to cover herself, and the more she realized how foolish she would look, trying to cover herself in this place.

***Perfect Match***

There were four of them–two women and two men, laughing and tossing around a frisbee. As if mesmerized, Kristen watched them move–running, jumping, bending, stretching, walking, throwing. They were as naked as she was. They seemed to be completely unconscious of the way things swung, swayed, bounced and jiggled as they moved.

Kristen noticed. She saw them as if they were moving in slow motion. Everything moved according to the laws of physics–she could see that. But there were rhythms and resonances at work quite different from anything she had seen before. It was beautiful, in a way. But how could they be unaware of the spectacle they were providing? How could they possibly not be ashamed that the most private parts of their bodies were flapping, flopping, bobbing and rippling with every movement?

Kristen suddenly felt acutely aware that her own breasts were jiggling, very slightly, with every step she took. With a strong tickling sensation rising in her stomach, she wondered what other sympathetic vibrations might be sweeping over her own flesh as she walked. Perhaps, in her quiet way, she was giving these strangers as much of a show as they were giving her.

Beth suddenly started walking more quickly toward the group. "Hey, you bums!" she shouted. "Don’t you know that the beach isn’t open yet?"

One of the men, tall, with a slender athletic build, tilted his face toward the sky with a look of exasperation. His long blond hair, bleached almost white by the sun, fell past his shoulders. Loudly, his voice edged with anger, he said, "Sheesh! Cool it, guys. The Head Nark is here!" All four of the naked people turned and glared at Beth.

Kristen froze, nervous and alert. Had Beth led her all the way down the beach just to confront these four strangers? Didn’t she know how big a risk she was taking? "Doesn’t she realize we’re outnumbered?" Kristen thought.

Beth walked purposefully, straight toward the tall blond man. She was about two feet from him when the man lunged forward suddenly and grabbed Beth with a powerful bear hug. He quickly jerked her naked body upward, raising her about two feet above the ground.

Kristen could hear her pulse hammering in her ears. On unsteady legs, she raced forward. She didn’t know how she would help Beth, but she knew she had to try.

"Beth!" the man shouted. "I am so glad to see you!" Laughing, he gently lowered her to the ground. Surprised and embarrassed, Kristen awkwardly tried to stop her headlong run toward the man. The tall blond man looked at Kristen with a puzzled expression, then turned to Beth with a smile. "Who’s your friend?" he asked.

Beth turned and beamed at Kristen. "Erik," she said, "I’d like you to meet Kristen. She’s a brand-new lifeguard, and I’m showing her around the place."

Erik turned toward Kristen and greeted her with a big toothy smile. "Excellent!" he roared, reaching out to shake her hand. He gazed steadily into her eyes. "Very cool to meet you, Kristen."

Kristen didn’t know how to react. She nodded nervously and allowed him to seize her hand while she muttered, "Pleased to meet you." She had never seen a naked man before. Erik was tall and very thin, but his muscles were sharply defined and seemed to be made of bands of steel. His long blond hair was parted in the middle of his head and reached well past his shoulders. His eyes had a faraway, dreamy look–she wondered whether he was stoned. He had a wispy blond beard. Kristen glanced down, and saw his penis hanging limp under a wispy blond patch of pubic hair. She didn’t know whether it was large or small, whether it was attractive or repulsive. But to Kristen it seemed interesting. How could he just let it dangle out in the open like this, for anyone to see?

Suddenly she felt that she had been staring at Erik’s penis for an embarrassingly long time. Blushing, she jerked her eyes back up to Erik’s face. He was still smiling and looking dreamily into her eyes. There was no trace of embarrassment or self-consciousness in his expression.

The other three people had drawn near, and Beth introduced Kristen to them.

"This is Maria," Beth said, introducing a tall blonde whose taut lean body looked as if it had been carved from a block of flawless marble by some master sculptor. Maria’s golden hair moved gracefully in the sea breeze. It was cut in a loose, feathery style that made it seem soft and inviting. Kristen, feeling ashamed for checking, quickly noted that Maria’s dense pubic hair was jet black.

Maria advanced with her face downturned. She smiled shyly and blushed when she shook Kristen’s hand. She didn’t say a word. Kristen was puzzled. A moment ago this blonde beauty had been running and leaping about, without a trace of modesty. Now, meeting Kristen, she seemed almost crippled with shyness.

"Paul is Maria’s boyfriend," Beth said, introducing a stocky man with a body-builder’s physique. Paul’s hair was black and cut short–almost like a marine. He wore a tiny crucifix around his neck.

"Kristen is such a beautiful name," Paul said as he shook her hand. He made no effort to disguise the fact that his eyes were taking in everything about her, and he smiled a smile that didn’t seem entirely innocent. "I am delighted to have this opportunity to meet you."

"And this is Erik’s wife, Sheila," Beth said. Kristen shook hands with a short young woman with the same faraway look in the eyes that Erik had, and with long, straight auburn hair, parted in the middle of her head, almost perfectly duplicating Erik’s hairstyle. At a distance she had seemed trim and athletic, but now her body seemed a little heavy. Her stomach stuck out a little, and her large breasts drooped a bit. Perhaps she was in an early stage of pregnancy. She gave Kristen a warm smile and said, "Welcome, Kristen. No wonder you wanted to come to Black Knife Beach. If I had a body like yours, I’d never want to wear clothes."

Kristen felt the blood rushing to her face again, but she smiled bravely and said, "Thank you. What a nice thing to say."

Erik stepped toward his wife. "Sheila, you never want to wear clothes anyway."

Sheila swatted at him playfully with the frisbee. "I do it all for you, buster. I saw some nice outfits on the Home Shopping Channel last week. If you’re not careful, I might just start wearing clothes again."

Erik gave Sheila an affectionate hug. "Oh, I can’t let that happen," he said.

Paul stepped forward and put his hands on his hips. "So, Kristen, do you play volleyball?" he asked.

"Oh, no you don’t!" Beth said, shaking her head emphatically. "Kristen is a lifeguard. If she plays volleyball, she plays for the forces of goodness, not the forces of evil. You find your own players."

"Volleyball?" Kristen asked.

"Beach volleyball," Beth responded. "There’s a sort of ongoing tournament every year. We play Skins vs. Skins, of course. Most of the lifeguards like to play when they’re not on shift." She smiled, and added, "It helps to remind the beach bums who is really in charge here."

"I–uh–I don’t think I could do that," Kristen stammered.

Beth looked at Kristen for a moment, then smiled and said, "Well, we’ll keep working on you, but it’s entirely up to you." Kristen looked up into Beth’s eyes and smiled gratefully.

Beth turned to the little group. "Well, I just wanted Kristen to see the depths that humanity can sink to here on Black Knife Beach. Thanks a lot, folks. You’ve been a big help."

"Glad to be of service," Erik said. He stepped forward and gave Beth a little pinch on the fanny. Beth laughed. Erik gave Kristen a big friendly smile. "I’d like to give you a little pinch, too, Kristen, but I wouldn’t want to be overly presumptuous on such short acquaintance."

"I–appreciate that!" Kristen said.

"Oh, Kristen?" said a soft female voice. Kristen turned to see Maria step forward. "I can see by your tanlines that you haven’t spent a lot of time nude in the sun," Maria said, her voice barely more than a whisper. "You be sure to get a really good sunscreen. You don’t want to burn." Kristen noticed that Maria’s body had faint tanlines–the only tanlines she had seen today, except for her own. Maria blushed and smiled her shy smile. "I’m still trying to get evened out, myself," she said.

"That sounds like good advice," Kristen said, smiling at sweet, shy Maria. "Thanks."

Beth and Kristen turned back toward the distant lifeguard station at the other end of the beach. They had gone only a few yards when Kristen heard Erik’s voice shout, "Kristen! Think fast!"

Kristen turned and was startled to see the frisbee dart by just a few inches from her nose. Instantly, she leaped into the air, and twisting and diving into the sand, she snagged the frisbee on her index finger. Laughing, she stood up, still twirling the frisbee on her finger. "Did you lose something?" she said, and with a sweep of her arm and a snap of her index finger, sent the frisbee sailing back to Erik.

Erik snatched the frisbee out of the air. "Jeez–the girl is good!" he said. "Hey, Beth, if you’re going to bring in a ringer to play on your volleyball team, you’re gonna have to spot us a couple points."

"In your dreams!" Beth shouted, without looking back.

Smiling broadly, Kristen turned and quickened her pace to catch up with Beth. "Who are those people?" she asked.

Beth turned her head and saw Kristen approaching. She smiled. "They’re regulars here–beach bums, but pretty nice people." When Kristen caught up with her, Beth watched her carefully for a moment, then said, "I’m no expert, but I think Maria is probably not a natural blonde. Erik, on the other hand, is 100 per cent natural. Do you agree?"

Kristen turned toward Beth, stunned by the crudeness of the question. From Beth’s expression, it seemed clear she wanted an answer. "I–I don’t know," Kristen said. "I–I suppose you’re right."

Beth nodded. "Now tell me the truth, Kristen. After you had met Maria, did you, for one second, think that the dark patch of hair between her legs made her any less beautiful? Did you ever think that she should feel embarrassed about the fact that the hair on her head didn’t match the color of the hair below?"

Kristen stopped in her tracks, stunned. Her mouth hung open. Beth stopped and turned to face her. "You–you–how did you know?" Kristen blurted. For a moment she struggled to organize her thoughts. "You knew my natural hair color was light brown before I took my clothes off!"

Beth smiled and nodded.

"How did you know?" Kristen asked, a little frightened. Unconsciously, she clasped her hands before her pubic area.

"Elementary, my dear," Beth said. She paused for effect. "You didn’t color your eyebrows."

Kristen reached up and touched her eyebrows, as if she could feel their color. Beth turned and continued to walk down the beach.

After a moment, Kristen followed after, lost in her own thoughts. She looked up and saw the rhythmic motion of Beth’s naked ass–the swaying of her hips, the rise and fall of each bare buttock, the delightful gluteal crease that formed under each cheek as she stepped forward. Kristen felt a strange sensation low in her stomach with the realization that she was providing a similar spectacle to anyone who might happen to be behind her. She felt a growing tightness in her chest. Breathing seemed difficult. Once again she felt a wave of embarrassment and shame rising up to engulf her.

Beth turned her head and said cheerfully, "You’re going to fit right in here, Kristen. I told you that you would get used to it."

Kristen struggled to find her voice. "Get used to it?" she said. "You must not have noticed that I’ve barely been able to avoid fainting all day! I’m dying of embarrassment!"

Beth turned and smiled. She waited for Kristen to catch up. "You know, Kristen, very few people really die of embarrassment. I can’t think of a single one."

Kristen frowned.

"Let me ask you something," Beth said. "When you dived into the sand to catch that frisbee, were you thinking about the fact you were naked?"

Kristen hung her head down. "No," she answered in a low voice.

"When you stood up, and spun the frisbee on your finger, and flipped it back to Erik, did you think about the fact that these four people–five people, if you count me–could all see your entire naked body?"

Kristen shook her head.

Beth smiled. "I didn’t think so. You and Black Knife Beach are a perfect match."

They were near the lifeguard station now. Perhaps she really was a perfect match for Black Knife Beach, Kristen thought, but she felt a wave of relief when she stepped into the building, out of the sun, out of the wind, and away from the eyes of total strangers.

Her shoes and her towel were right where she had left them. She turned to Beth, who came in right after her.

"If it’s okay with you, Beth, I think I’m going to grab a quick shower and head for home." She took a deep breath. "This has been a big day for me, and I think I’ve done about all I can do today."

Beth smiled and nodded. "You’re probably right. You’ve come a long way, Kristen. I’m proud of you."

"Thanks," Kristen said. "Thanks for everything." She picked up her towel and shoes, and walked back into the locker room.

As she put her shoes on the bench before her locker, Kristen realized that she didn’t need to undress for her shower. "That’s convenient," she thought with amusement. She hung her towel on a hook outside the shower room, and stepped inside to begin her shower.

She had intended a quick shower, just to wash the sand and sweat off her body, but she stayed for a long time under the hot spray. The water seemed to wash the tension out of her muscles. For a long time she breathed the hot steam and felt more and more relaxed.

Finally, she turned off the water and grabbed her towel. The gentle friction of the soft cloth against her skin seemed to add to her warm sense of well-being. All her fears and embarrassment seemed silly now. Beth was right. She knew it. Kristen would fit in on Black Knife Beach.

When she had finished drying herself, Kristen sat on the bench in front of her locker. She smiled as she decided that she wouldn’t put her underwear on again.

She paused. She looked around, puzzled. She looked at the bench, on the floor, and around the corner of the row of lockers. She thought for a moment. She stood up and looked down the other row of lockers. Where had she put her beach bag?

The beach bag contained her locker ticket, with the combination to her locker. She didn’t remember the combination. With a sudden sinking feeling, Kristen remembered putting the beach bag inside the locker, with her clothes.

The door of the locker was closed and locked.

***Decision***

The shoes were essential. Without them, Kristen could never hope to get up the jagged rocky slopes. She had wrapped herself in her towel, just as she did every day after her shower. She would have felt better had she been able to get her clothes from the locker, but this really wasn’t too bad.

Kristen was surprised at how calmly she was taking things. The really embarrassing thing was the stupidity of shutting her locker combination inside the locker. Now, that was a reason to blush.

Her combination wasn’t anywhere in Beth’s files–they would have to contact the Parks and Recreation offices downtown, and the offices would be closed until Monday. The phone in the lifeguard station hadn’t been turned on yet, so they were unable to call for help from friends or family.

Kristen had declined Beth’s generous offer of her own clothes, surprising Beth and herself. "Take them. It won’t bother me at all," Beth had said. "I’m used to being naked." But Kristen couldn’t bring herself to leave Beth stranded without clothes. Besides, she thought, Beth’s clothes probably wouldn’t have fit very well, anyway.

The large white beach towel covered more than any bathing suit she owned. Many people leave a beach or swimming pool wrapped in a towel–there was no reason for anyone to suspect that she had nothing on under the towel.

As she climbed the steep and rugged trail up from the beach, she tried to make sense of the conflicting emotions that were doing battle within her mind. The entire day had been so… well, confusing. It had been either the worst day of her life, or one of the best. She didn’t know what to think.

She knew this for certain: if someone had warned her this morning about mandatory nudity on Black Knife Beach, she never would have come down here. Never. She would have turned her back on her lifelong dream of being a lifeguard. She would have abandoned years of dedication and hard work spent preparing for the job. She would have forsaken it all without hesitation, rather than work at this beach.

And she knew another thing: she was happy that nobody had told her.

She didn’t expect any of this. She wasn’t ready for it. She didn’t want to become a nudist. If she could, she would trade her assignment in a heartbeat for anything that would let her keep her clothes on–the veterans’ rehab center and the senior citizens’ center looked pretty good now.

And yet, she was glad she had come here. She was glad she had met Beth, and walked naked down the beach and met some of the beach regulars. Never had she felt more embarrassment and shame than she had today. But now, it seemed as if an enormous weight had been lifted from her shoulders this day–a weight she hadn’t realized she was carrying. With the weight gone, Kristen felt almost giddy.

Making her way up the trail was more strenuous than the descent had been. Kristen felt the towel loosening as she moved. She stopped for a moment and adjusted it, tucking it more tightly, then resumed the long climb.

What was it Beth had said–nobody really dies of embarrassment? Kristen smiled. She could almost swear that she had seen a bright white light at the end of a long blue tunnel, and the faces of the long-departed, beckoning her to come into the light. Nobody dies of embarrassment, but the near-death experience–that was a different matter.

This day she had confronted something that had filled her with dread. Lightning did not strike her down. The ground did not open up under her feet. The sun, the sea breeze, the sand under her feet, the friendly people–viewed honestly, everything she had experienced on the beach was delightful. All of the day’s misery–every bit of it–had come from within. It was an important discovery: she was her own worst enemy. She had nothing to fear but fear itself.

But the fear lingered. Embarrassment and exhilaration were thoroughly tangled up in Kristen’s mind, challenging each other for supremacy. To Kristen it seemed almost as if they were two faces of a single coin. When she thought about returning on Monday morning, her hands trembled and a strange, queasy tickle grew in her stomach. On Monday, there would be more people on the beach. The entire lifeguard crew would be there. And Kristen knew that, once again, she would have to strip naked.

The towel was coming loose again. The casual after-shower tuck didn’t seem to hold up very well with time and motion. Kristen tightened the towel again and kept climbing.

She couldn’t stop thinking about Monday morning, and the old familiar sensation of shame rose within her. With a trembling hand, she reached up and wiped cold sweat from her forehead. On Monday, she wouldn’t be undressing alone in an empty locker room. The other lifeguards would be there, including several men. Beth had been patient with Kristen’s crippling embarrassment. The rest of the crew might not be so understanding.

She had heard stories about the rowdy behavior in male locker rooms–would the men act like that here? She remembered the lifeguards’ lunchtime stories of pranks and practical jokes from the orientation meeting the day before. What kind of stunts would they try at Black Knife Beach? If they sensed that Kristen was embarrassed about being naked, wouldn’t they make her the special target of their practical jokes?

The more she thought about it, the more her body trembled, and the stronger grew the queasy sensation in her stomach. She tried to convince herself that her fears were groundless–no bolt of lightning had struck–but the old unwelcome emotions overpowered her objections. After Monday would come Tuesday, and Wednesday, and so on. On every one of those days, Kristen would have to come to Black Knife Beach and take off all her clothes. Her cheeks were burning. The first week would be followed by another, and another. The summer seemed to stretch out into an endless vista of shame.

"This is stupid!" Kristen thought, blinking back tears. "Why can’t I control my own emotions?"

Suddenly, a stiff gust of wind blew squarely into Kristen’s face. The wind tousled her hair, and caught a loose edge of the towel wrapped around her body. She clutched the towel to her chest. It was blown open, exposing her body to the cooling wind. It flapped noisily behind her, like a flag on a windy day. Kristen held the towel tightly to keep the wind from carrying it away completely.

The sensation of the wind blowing over her naked body delighted Kristen. It fanned her hot red cheeks. It cooled her tense, knotted muscles. Somehow, it calmed the wave of shame that had been growing within her.

The wind died as suddenly as it had begun. Kristen stood motionless for a long moment, breathing hard. She was about halfway up the steep trail. She looked at the pristine beach below. The lifeguard station was almost directly below. Far down the beach, she could see the four beach regulars. She couldn’t see well enough to know whether they were still tossing their frisbee.

She felt very small and weak, in the grip of powerful forces. Years of dedication, hard work and hope had brought her to Black Knife Beach, and the prospect of spending most of the summer naked. A lifetime of conditioning–Beth would call it brainwashing–beckoned her back to relative security and certainty, where fear and shame would keep her from venturing beyond the familiar.

She stood for a long time, struggling with the emotions that tore at her. She looked up at the steep path she still had to climb.

The wind had loosened the towel a little. Kristen tugged at the place where the towel was tucked in, and pulled the towel from her body. She smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. She draped the towel neatly over one arm, and continued her climb.

The climb seemed easier now. Again, she felt as if a weight had been lifted. She felt energized by the sensations of sun and fresh air on her naked body. Exhilaration had gained the upper hand; the embarrassment that had almost crippled her seemed almost entirely vanquished.

Kristen paused at the foot of the redwood staircase that led up to the beach parking lot. She should probably put the towel on here, she thought. She couldn’t see who, if anyone, was in the lot. It might be very embarrassing to walk up and discover that the lot was no longer deserted. She looked at the towel and smiled broadly. She folded the towel neatly, just as she did after doing laundry. She put it on the bottom step and sat on it, like a seat cushion. She leaned over and took off her shoes and socks.

She stood, picking up the shoes in one hand and the folded towel in the other. Naked, she climbed the long flight of stairs to the parking lot.

***The World Turned Upside Down***

Kristen was relieved to find that the parking lot was still deserted. She was puzzled at the realization that she felt a faint twinge of disappointment, too.

She had a spare key in a little magnetic box hidden on the undercarriage of her car. Her friends often warned her that she was taking a risk. Today she felt the risk had been worthwhile–without the hidden key, she would really be stuck.

She put her towel and shoes on the trunk of the car and knelt down at one of the rear wheel wells. She bent and twisted and stretched her arm, but she wasn’t able to reach the hidden key. She moved over a few inches and tried again, attacking from a slightly different angle. No matter how she strained, she couldn’t do any more than brush the little key box with the tips of her fingers. The asphalt felt rough on her bare knees. She puffed out a short exasperated breath and glanced up at her towel.

She unfolded the towel and spread it out neatly on the asphalt right next to the tire. Crouching, she tried to reposition the towel so that it extended about a foot under the car. She didn’t have a good angle to work from, and the towel got bunched up under the car.

"Rats," Kristen muttered. She stepped onto the towel and dropped to her knees. She bent at the waist until her chin almost touched the ground. From this position, she was able to reach under the car and tug the towel out flat and neat. She straightened her back and smiled with satisfaction.

She turned over and lay down on the towel, with her knees raised and her feet flat on the ground. She took a deep breath, then used her feet and elbows to wriggle herself under the car. Once her head was past the tire, she could see the little metallic key box. After a couple more careful nudges, she was able to stretch one arm up and pull the key box loose. She carefully lowered the box and set it on the ground. Then she slowly inched her body out from under the car.

When she was finally clear of the car, Kristen stood and breathed a sigh of relief. She brushed her hair back with her fingers, shaking loose some dirt she had picked up under the car. She bent over and picked up the key box. With her thumb, she pushed the metal lid open, revealing the spare car key. She laughed with delight. Until she had the key in her hand, she had felt positively naked.

Of course, she really *was* positively naked. Self-consciously, she glanced around the deserted parking lot. Preoccupied with recovering her key, she hadn’t given the slightest thought to the fact that she was totally nude. In her mind’s eye, she replayed all the kneeling, bending and squirming she had done while recovering her key. She shook her head in amazement. "I must have put on quite a show," she whispered, and a blush spread across her cheeks.

Kristen couldn’t count how many times she had blushed today–too many, that was certain. She would have thought that the tiny capillaries that let the blood rush to her cheeks would have given it up by now. This blush felt different from the rest. She felt embarrassed–a little–but she didn’t feel ashamed. Kristen smiled a big broad smile. She didn’t fully understand it, but this blush even felt a little… nice, somehow.

She turned and gazed at the ocean. She inhaled the sea air deeply. Some part of her wanted to dance naked around the empty parking lot. She shook her head and laughed. She didn’t have the nerve to do that. Not yet.

She turned back to her car. Her shoes were sitting on the trunk lid; her towel was still spread on the ground. She picked up the shoes and unlocked the trunk. She tossed the shoes into the trunk. For a moment she considered putting the towel in the trunk, too, and driving home in the nude.

The idea held a certain undeniable charm. Kristen was startled by her own boldness. As a practical matter, she certainly did need to get accustomed to being naked. There was something wild and exciting about the prospect of cruising down the highway with nothing on–with nothing to put on. Her heart raced at the thought.

"No, I just can’t," Kristen said, shaking her head and laughing. She would get arrested for sure. Or she would have a flat tire, or run out of gas. That would not be the kind of positive nude experience that she needed. Ruefully, she picked up the towel. It was filthy–still damp from her shower, it had picked up dust, pebbles, tiny twigs and little spots of oily grime from the parking lot. Kristen winced, and tried to sweep the worst of the mess away with her hand. When she was satisfied that the towel was as clean as she could get it, she wrapped it around her body.

She closed the trunk lid and unlocked the driver’s side door.

It was still very early in the afternoon. Kristen had planned to spend the afternoon looking for an apartment somewhere near the beach. Now, without identification or money, and dressed in nothing but a dirty beach towel, she really didn’t have any option but to head for home. With a disappointed sigh, she got into the car.

She put the key in the ignition, but she didn’t start the engine. Her heart was still racing. For a long time, she sat and thought. It was scarcely past noon, but so much had changed today. She felt she had almost become a completely different person from the girl she had been this morning. The new Kristen looked forward to returning to the beach on Monday. The new Kristen wanted to lock her towel in the trunk. The new Kristen was exciting, and a little frightening. She wasn’t sure how much she liked this new Kristen.

Finally, she fastened her seat belt and started the engine. She noticed the way the shoulder harness fell across her towel. She squirmed a little in the seat, testing whether the shoulder harness might somehow pull the towel apart. "I can’t believe I’m doing this!" she thought, but she continued to move her body against the belt, trying to cause an "accidental" exposure. After a fruitless moment, she gave it up.

She had another idea. She raised herself about an inch off the car seat–the seat belt was still fastened. Patiently, she tugged the back of the towel up, up, up–until her bare flesh was directly against the car seat. It was an interesting sensation. The upholstery fabric felt a little rough. It wasn’t uncomfortable, but clearly the auto designers hadn’t chosen the material with the comfort of naked women in mind. "I should write them an angry letter," Kristen thought, and giggled.

A vague sensation of guilt quickly flitted through her mind. She shook it off. "I’m not hurting anyone," she thought. She put the car in gear and pressed gently on the gas pedal with her bare foot. She drove out the narrow gravel path and back onto the highway.

Driving slowly along the long, winding road back toward home, Kristen considered her next problem: how was she going to break the news to her parents?

"Your parents are the best!" her high school friends often told her. She had to agree. They were kind, generous, supportive and always understanding. They were great parents–the greatest. And sometimes she wished she could trade them for parents a little less perfect. In a way, their perfection was a burden to her–she didn’t want to do anything that might disappoint them.

How could they not be disappointed by the news that their darling daughter was going to spend her entire summer stark naked in front of hundreds of people on a nude beach?

She turned the matter over and over in her mind, looking for some angle, some approach, that might soften the blow. She found nothing. Her heart sank.

The sense of exhilaration she had felt in the beach parking lot faded quickly. The closer she came to home, the deeper grew the gloom that hung over her. When she pulled into the driveway, she turned off the engine and sat for a long moment, struggling to collect her thoughts. She unfastened her seat belt, and hoisting her butt off the seat, she tugged the back of her towel down to cover her naked rear end.

"Kristen, are you alright?" Her reverie was broken by the question from Mr. Johnson, the next-door neighbor. He was a kindly old gentleman whom Kristen regarded as a sort of honorary grandfather. He had come out to water his lawn, but he held the garden hose limp in his hand and he looked at Kristen with deep concern. "You look worried," he said.

Kristen forced a smile. "No, I–I’m fine, Mr. Johnson. I’ve just been… I’ve just been thinking, that’s all." She opened the car door and stepped out of the car.

Mr. Johnson nodded and smiled, but Kristen couldn’t mask her worried expression with a forced smile. "Okay. Well, you take care of yourself, you hear?"

Kristen nodded and started toward the front door.

"Oh," Mr. Johnson called out, "I hear you got the lifeguard job! Congratulations!"

Kristen felt her face turn red. She forced another smile and nodded. "Y–yes. Yes, I did. Thank you." She hurried to the door and stepped inside.

She heard her parents talking softly in the kitchen. Her eyes darted to the stairwell. She wanted to get up to her room, so she could get rid of this dirty towel and put some clothes on. Then maybe she could face her parents.

"Kristen, is that you?" called her mother from the kitchen.

"Yes, I–"

"Well, come on in here, dear," her mother said. "We didn’t see you last night, and your father and I have been on pins and needles all day, waiting to hear about your lifeguard job."

With a deep sigh, Kristen walked barefoot into the kitchen.

As always, the kitchen was filled with the delicious smells of her mother’s cooking. Kristen’s father was seated at the kitchen table, reading a news magazine and absent-mindedly munching on a sandwich. He looked up and smiled when Kristen entered the room.

Her mother stood with her back to the kitchen doorway, preparing food at the counter. "Have a seat, dear, and I’ll make you a sandwich," she said. She turned her head to look over her shoulder, and saw Kristen standing in the doorway. "Oh, my!" she exclaimed. She turned to face Kristen.

"What happened, Kristen?" her mother asked. "Your hair is a mess, and you’re almost covered with dirt." Kristen looked self-consciously at her hands, which were smeared with grease from her attempts to retrieve her spare car key. "Oh, and that towel is filthy," her mother continued. "What happened? Why aren’t you dressed, dear?"

Kristen’s mouth felt dry. "Oh, I was stupid," she answered. "I–I went out to check out my, uh, my lifeguard assignment, and, uh…" She swallowed hard. "And I, uh, I locked my locker combination in my locker with my street clothes." She held up her greasy hands. "I had to use my spare key to get back home."

"Oh, dear!" her mother said. "Are–are you okay?"

Kristen nodded. "I’m fine," she said. "Nothing hurt but my pride." She looked back toward the stairs. "I think I ought to go up and get a quick shower and, uh, get dressed."

Her mother smiled with relief. "Thank goodness you’re alright. You had me worried! Well, let me fix you a sandwich, and you can take your shower later." She turned back to the kitchen counter and quickly made a sandwich for her daughter. "Your father and I want to hear all about your lifeguard assignment. Where are you going to be working?"

Kristen glanced back at the stairs and fidgeted nervously. Her mother put the sandwich on a plate and turned to set it down at Kristen’s place at the table. Both her parents were gazing into her eyes with gentle smiles and expressions of sincere interest.

Kristen tried to evade the question. "It’s a beach," she said. "I–I was afraid I was going to get assigned to some kiddie pool or something, but I got a beach assignment. Very nice. It’s–uh–it’s way, way out in the b-boondocks. It’s really quite a drive." She winced. She was babbling.

"Which beach?" her father asked. "Where is it?"

Kristen was cornered. "It’s, uh…" She swallowed hard. "It’s–it’s Black Knife Beach."

"Oh!" her mother cried. Her parents exchanged a quick glance. Her father’s brow wrinkled with a worried expression, and he slowly raised his hand to his chin. "That used to be…" her mother’s voice trailed away. "Is–is that still a nude beach?"

Tears were starting to burn in Kristen’s eyes. She nodded. "Yes," she mouthed, but she had no voice.

Her father’s voice was gentle and filled with concern. "Why did you choose that beach?" he asked.

Kristen sniffled and tried to blink away her tears. "I didn’t really choose it," she said. "I–I didn’t know it was a nude beach until I went down there. I was so embarrassed!" Her voice was starting to tremble.

Her mother stepped over and put a reassuring hand on Kristen’s shoulder. "There, there, Kristen," she said softly. "Don’t you worry. It’s going to be fine. You don’t have to work there if you don’t want to." Her father nodded his agreement.

Kristen sobbed. "That’s the problem, Mom–Dad. You–you know how hard I’ve worked, how much it’s meant to me to become a lifeguard. If I don’t take this assignment, I’ll never get to be a lifeguard." Tears were flowing freely now. "I didn’t pick Black Knife Beach, but–but I do want to work there." There. It was out now.

Her parents exchanged another significant glance, and both smiled warmly.

Surprised, Kristen tried to wipe her tears away. "You–you’re not upset?"

Her parents smiles grew broader. "Don’t be silly," her mother said. "We couldn’t be more proud of you."

Her father nodded. "We’ve raised you to know your own mind and make your own decisions," he said. "I can see that this has been a difficult decision for you, and we are both so pleased that you’ve had the courage to make the decision for yourself."

Kristen felt a sudden exhilaration–she was almost dizzy. She laughed. "I–I was so worried about what you would think. Oh, thank you!" With a sigh of relief, she started to take her place at the table.

"Oh, Kristen, don’t sit down with that filthy towel on," her mother said. "Let me toss this in the washer." Before Kristen could react, with a single sharp tug her mother pulled the towel from her body.

Kristen’s face turned scarlet. She tried in vain to cover her nakedness with her hands.

"It looks like you’ve gone native already," her father said with a gentle smile.

Her mother, surprised to see that Kristen wasn’t wearing her swimsuit, started to hand the towel back, but stopped. "Oh, how silly of me," she said. "I didn’t even think about the fact that you’ll need to get used to being nude for your job." She carried the towel into the laundry room and tossed it into the washing machine. "If you can’t go naked in your own home, where can you?"

Kristen stood motionless, stunned.

Her mother looked at Kristen and smiled sweetly. "Well, go ahead, dear. Sit down and eat your sandwich. Would you like a nice glass of milk?"

***Full-Blooded***

Kristen glanced back at the stairs leading up to her room. "I–I really need to go put something on," she said.

"Sit down, silly," her father said. "You’re not showing us anything we haven’t seen before."

Kristen reddened. "I can’t sit at the kitchen table with no clothes on," she said. "It–it’s indecent!"

Her mother gasped. Her parents frowned and exchanged a troubled look. "I think we might have overdone it," her father said. Her mother nodded grimly.

"Kristen," her mother said, her voice husky with some emotion that she was clearly straining to master, "you are perfectly decent, whether you have clothes on or not. I can’t tell you how sorry I am that you would think otherwise." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I suppose it’s our fault."

Kristen’s head was spinning. There was something puzzling going on here. She struggled to sort it out, but only became more confused. "You–you’re right, of course," she stammered at last, "Nudity isn’t indecent, but I, uh… I really would feel a lot more comfortable right now if I put something on."

Kristen’s mother took her seat at the kitchen table with a heavy sigh. She fixed Kristen with a steady and solemn gaze. "Well, I’m sure you know what’s best, dear. I just thought that since you’re going to be working as a lifeguard at Black Knife Beach, you’re going to have to get used to being nude sometime. I don’t see how you’re going to get used to it if you keep putting clothes on." Kristen’s father nodded soberly.

Kristen took one more quick glance back at the stairs. With a sigh of resignation, she lowered herself into the kitchen chair.

Her mother smiled sweetly. "There’s no reason for you to wear anything inside the house, I think. Maybe you should have a robe to put on if we have company, but I really don’t think any of our friends would object if you just stayed nude. You would really only need the robe to pay the paper boy or accept a pizza delivery or something."

Kristen’s father scowled and said, "Well, I think you should cover up whenever you have a boyfriend come over. Boys… well, they just tend to read a little too much into the fact that a girl is naked."

"Oh, you should talk!" Kristen’s mother retorted sharply.

"Well, I just happen to know something about how the male mind works, and I…" He shook his head and shrugged. "Naturally, it’s your decision, Kristen. Use your own judgment. I’m just, uh, trying to offer some fatherly advice."

Her mother smiled her approval. "You can go nude in the back yard so long as you stay on this side of the rose bushes. None of the neighbors can see into the yard up that close to the house. Actually, you know–I can ask the Johnsons–I don’t think any of our neighbors will care whether you’re wearing clothes in your own yard." She paused and thought for a moment, then continued, "Yes, stay on this side of the rose bushes for the time being, and I’ll check with the Johnsons. I’m sure there won’t be any problem using the whole back yard."

Kristen sat in stunned silence. Here she was, sitting stark naked at the kitchen table while her fully-clothed parents cheerfully plotted out a clothing-free existence for her. They acted as if it were normal that friends and neighbors would see her naked. She felt as if she were dreaming.

"This will be a big help when you have to get undressed at work, Kristen. You’ll see." Her mother smiled a beatific smile, and a faraway expression came into her eyes. "I wish I had been able to go nude at home when I was your age. The first time I went to Black Knife Beach, I was literally shaking in my boots."

Kristen’s jaw dropped, and a faint whimper rose from somewhere deep inside her. She tried to speak, but she couldn’t find any words to say. Her mother seemed not to notice Kristen’s stunned reaction.

"A couple of my girl friends from school had been there a few times before. I must have driven them crazy asking questions about it. It was a perfectly natural young woman’s curiosity. They got tired of answering my questions, and told me that the only way to find out about the beach was to join them the next time they went. I really wanted to go–I felt so excited just thinking about it–but I was almost sick with embarrassment when I thought about taking my own clothes off. Finally, after a lot of argument, I agreed to go only on the condition that I wouldn’t have to get undressed if I didn’t want to. This was years before they made nudity mandatory.

"We planned to spend the whole day at the beach. I packed a picnic lunch for all three of us. My heart was pounding when we got down to the beach. Everywhere I looked were hundreds of people of all ages, shapes and sizes. Except for me and my friends, everybody was totally nude. I didn’t see a single stitch of clothing on anybody. People were acting just like it was any other beach, walking, running, talking with friends, laughing.

"I felt as if I were the only person who noticed that everyone was naked. I was standing there with my mouth open, and my friends were totally oblivious. We found a good location, and they stretched out the beach blanket. I know I shouldn’t have been surprised, but I was… with people all around us, my friends just took off all their clothes. They didn’t show a hint of embarrassment, even as they took off their underwear. I was flabbergasted."

"Flabbergasted," Kristen choked. "Good word."

Her mother responded with a winsome little smile. "Thanks," she said. "My friends–well, you know them–they’re my friends Anne and Melody. They put their clothes in their beach bags and started smearing on the suntan lotion. They helped each other get the hard-to-reach spots on their backs. They were giggling and having a good time. I was trying to take off my regular beach cover-up–I had my swimsuit on underneath, and I had no intention of taking it off–and I was dying of embarrassment. I couldn’t understand it.

"Finally I got down to my swimsuit and sat down on our blanket. Anne and Melody teased me a little and tried to talk me into taking off my suit, but they gave up after a couple minutes. We settled into a fairly normal, pleasant day at the beach. They were good friends of mine, and the fact that they were so relaxed helped me to relax.

"There were people walking past our blanket all the time, and sometimes people on neighboring blankets would strike up a brief conversation with one of us. The girls introduced me to some of their friends from the beach. Watching their eyes, I could see that everyone noticed my swimsuit, but nobody said anything about it. Since everybody was naked, after a while the nudity didn’t seem so strange–I didn’t really notice it anymore. But I was feeling more and more self-conscious about my swimsuit. Being the only person on the beach with clothes on, I stuck out like a sore thumb.

"’You win,’ I told my friends. I said I was going to take my suit off. They gave me a little round of applause, and I felt embarrassed again. People from the nearby blankets heard, and turned to watch. While I was taking the suit off, I was afraid I was going to faint, but as soon as I had it off, I didn’t feel the least bit embarrassed. I thought I was going to be hit by a bolt of lightning, and it didn’t come."

Kristen gasped and nodded. "I know exactly what you mean," she breathed.

Both her parents beamed. Her mother continued, "Anne and Melody helped me with my suntan lotion. The sun felt wonderful. I felt a little self-conscious for a while, but after about an hour I had virtually forgotten that I was nude. I even walked down the beach and bought some ice cream for the three of us from a guy who had set up a little shop on the beach. I was shaking a little, but… no lightning bolt!"

Kristen smiled feebly.

"The girls went down for a quick dip before lunch, and I stayed behind and started to spread out our picnic lunch," her mother continued. "I had put my own sandwich on a paper plate and set it down on the blanket when this great big foot came down and stomped right in the middle of it."

"I didn’t ‘stomp’ on it!" her father interjected. "It was an accident. I just wasn’t watching where I was walking."

"Wait a second!" Kristen shouted. In her family, the sandwich story was famous–how her parents had met at the beach when her father stepped on her mother’s picnic sandwich. "That was Black Knife Beach? You met on a *nude* beach?"

"Well, your father wasn’t nude," her mother responded. "He was dressed in a t-shirt and blue jeans. And those big old high-topped Keds. He didn’t see where he was going because he was too busy admiring the scenery."

"Daddy!" Kristen exclaimed. "You were a gawker?"

Her father’s face turned beet red. "A gawker? Oh, hell, no!"

Her mother suppressed a laugh. "I wouldn’t say he was a gawker. He was really more of a tourist."

"I was going to take my clothes off as soon as I found a good spot," he objected, still red in the face.

Her mother giggled, and said, "I have never seen anybody more embarrassed than your father was when he realized what he had done. He must have been ten times more embarrassed than I had been when I took my swimsuit off. His face was red, and he was falling all over himself trying to apologize. He was very sweet, really. It actually wasn’t that big a deal. I had packed extra sandwiches. I think he was especially embarrassed because he had not just stepped on someone’s sandwich, he had stepped on a naked woman’s sandwich."

Her father smiled ruefully.

Kristen’s mother continued, "I think he had just about run out of apologies when Anne and Melody returned from their swim. He got wound up again and rattled off another hundred apologies. I kept saying, ‘Forget it, we have plenty,’ and he kept apologizing. Anne and Melody told him it was okay, and he kept apologizing. Finally, mostly to get him to shut up, I said ‘I’ll forgive you on one condition: you sit down and have lunch with us.’"

"Best offer I ever had," Kristen’s father murmured.

"Your father couldn’t believe his luck," her mother said. "He had made an embarrassing mistake, and now he was being invited to have lunch with three nude women. He kept thanking me–it was almost as bad as the endless apologies."

"I’m still thanking you," her father said softly. There was a big playful smile across his face. Kristen looked at her parents’ faces–they seemed to be aglow with a strange inner light. For some reason, they both seemed ten years younger.

"I don’t think Anne and Melody liked the arrangement," her mother continued. "As your father sat down on our beach blanket, Melody said, ‘There’s one more condition: no clothes!’ She jumped on him and pinned his arms down. Anne ‘pantsed’ him. For a few seconds there was a violent struggle and I was afraid someone was going to get hurt, but in the end he didn’t put up much of a fight."

"I thought at first that I might die of embarrassment, and I put up a pretty good fight," her father said. "But just about everybody on the beach was naked, and it was hard to work up a good head of steam to fight for my clothes."

Kristen’s mother continued, "Anne and Melody stuffed your father’s clothes into my beach bag, and told him he couldn’t get dressed again until I gave him permission." She looked fondly at her husband. "I think we both turned a pretty bright shade of red. He nodded and gave me the sweetest little puppy dog look. Surprisingly, we all had a very pleasant lunch. I think even Anne and Melody were happy he had joined us. When we had finished eating, he asked if he could have his clothes back. Anne and Melody shook their heads, but I couldn’t bring myself to say no. He thanked me for his clothes, thanked everyone for a delightful lunch, then put his clothes on and walked away. I felt very sad as I watched him go." She lightly dabbed a tear from the corner of her eye.

"We both became regulars at Black Knife Beach that summer," she continued. "I never felt embarrassed after that first day. Your father always let me put his clothes in my beach bag, and at the end of the day he always asked my permission to get dressed."

Kristen’s father said, "I was seeing your mother for almost three months before the first time I saw her with clothes on. Other guys have fantasies about seeing their dream girl naked. I fantasized about seeing my dream girl wearing a dress."

Her mother laughed. "We kept seeing each other after the summer was over, and he finally realized his dream of seeing me wearing clothes. I’m not sure how much he liked it–when we got married, we had our honeymoon at a nudist resort."

"We were both naked for an entire week," her father added, his smile growing.

"When we came back to our own place," her mother continued, "we both agreed that clothes were out. Anybody who was offended by the fact that we didn’t wear clothes in the house stopped coming around. I can hardly remember any of our friends who were offended. Whenever we could get away, we visited nudist clubs. We made a lot of nudist friends. Our big Caribbean cruise was clothing-optional."

"Naturally, we opted not to wear any," her father added.

"Wait–you mean the cruise nine months before I was born?" Kristen asked.

Both her parents smiled and nodded. Her mother said, "You’re a full-blooded nudist, Kristen. I guess you don’t remember it now, but you used to love running around with all the other little kids at the nudist clubs."

Kristen’s head was swimming. "What happened? I mean–you’re not nudists now."

Her mother suddenly looked embarrassed. "Well, we used to have to fight you to get you to put clothes on. As you grew up, we started to worry about how you would adjust to school and the whole clothes-compulsive world. We stopped going to nudist clubs, started wearing clothes at home, and tried to impress you with the importance of wearing clothes." She let out a long regretful sigh. "If you now think it’s indecent to be naked in your own home, then we seriously overdid it."

***Celebration***

Kristen was in the shower for a long time. She kept finding little smudges of automotive grease all over her body. She scrubbed herself quite severely, until her skin felt raw.

Her nerves were raw, too. She was still shaky from the shocks of her morning at Black Knife Beach. She had hoped for a quiet weekend at home, on familiar turf where she could calm her nerves and sort out the conflicting emotions that raged within her. And now, this.

"You can’t possibly understand an earthquake until you’ve been in one," her high school science teacher used to say. "You can read all the reports, listen to all the survivors and watch all the film clips. But until you have felt the solid earth turn to jelly under your own two feet, you cannot possibly conceive how profoundly an earthquake will change your world view."

Kristen understood now. She had used the ill-considered word "indecent," and–WHOOOOOOOOM!!!!–a huge hidden fissure had opened up under her feet. The familiar turf was gone.

Her own parents were nudists. Unbelievable! Young Kristen herself had run and played naked at nudist clubs. And everybody knew about it–friends, relatives, neighbors. Everyone had been in on the secret, it seemed, except Kristen.

Nothing was making sense. Was she dreaming? If so, she wasn’t able to wake up. And in a disconcerting way, this didn’t really feel like a dream–perhaps the life she remembered had been the dream, and she had just awakened to the real world.

Kristen turned off the water and let out a long, slow sigh that was almost a sob. She opened the glass door and pulled the large fluffy towel into the shower stall. She dried herself slowly and carefully. She was acutely aware of the feel of the towel against her skin.

Everything seemed different now. Colors looked more intense. She noticed the sound of the water trickling down the drain, the soft sound of the towel as it rubbed against her skin. She noticed the mingled scents of the soap and her shampoo. She heard the faint murmur of her mother’s voice on the phone downstairs.

Kristen carefully dried each foot and stepped out of the shower. She hung the wet towel on the towel rack and turned to the vanity. With a hair dryer, she combed out her damp hair. There was something comforting about the dryer’s blast of warm air. She played the hot air briefly over her neat little patch of pubic hair, and blushed suddenly. She was confused–she did this after every shower–it didn’t mean anything. But this time, somehow…

Well, things seemed very different now.

When her hair was dry and neatly brushed, she breathed another deep sigh that shook her entire body. Her outfit was complete.

Kristen desperately wanted to put some clothes on, but it was out of the question. Not after her mother’s bizarre psychodrama about ruining Kristen’s life by raising her to wear clothes. In his own quiet way, her father seemed to share the worry that they had blighted her life. It broke Kristen’s heart to see the way her parents reproached themselves. It was nonsense. "Indecent." The word had been like a knife straight through their hearts. How could she have known?

She had to put their minds at ease, and this was the only way she could see to do that. No clothes, no matter what happened. It had to be her own idea. And she couldn’t let them see her embarrassment. She took a deep breath and opened the bathroom door.

She heard her mother on the phone at the foot of the stairs.

"–didn’t know anything about it… No, nothing… That’s right, she accepted it anyway… That’s what I thought… Well, we’re sure proud of her… Probably not, she seems to be pretty bashful now… Well, maybe… I’m sure it will be okay… Okay, thanks… Yeah, I just wanted to let everybody know before… Right. See you later."

Kristen walked down the stairs as her mother started to dial another number. "Who was that?" she asked.

Her mother glanced up from the phone. "Kristen!" she said, clearly startled. "I thought you said you were going to take a shower and get dressed."

Kristen forced a wan smile. "Well, I was thinking about what you said. I have to get used to being nude sometime." Her body trembling, she shrugged awkwardly. "I guess there’s no better time than right now."

Her mother’s face lit up, but a shadow of doubt instantly clouded her expression. "Are you sure? You look, uh… kind of shaky."

Kristen tried to turn her uneasy smile up a notch. "I’m still a little nervous, I suppose. I’m not used to this. But you’re right. I–I’ll never get used to it if I keep putting clothes on."

Her mother’s face lit up again. "Good," she said. "Good. Now, I don’t want you to feel that you have to do more than you’re comfortable with. Use your own judgment, you know."

"Okay," Kristen answered. "My judgment is, uh, that I should just steer clear of clothes for a while. Uh, if it’s okay with you and Dad."

Her mother beamed. "That’s just fine," she said.

"Oh, so who was that on the phone?" Kristen repeated.

Her mother’s face reddened. "Oh, Kristen, I’m so sorry! I forgot all about that. We arranged a little party for you tonight. You know, to celebrate your getting the lifeguard job."

Kristen struggled to mask her dismay.

"We arranged it days ago, before we knew you were going to Black Knife Beach," her mother continued. "While you were taking your shower, I called around to let everyone know about your assignment, and–you know–the possibility that you might not be dressed. Everybody was pleased as could be. I didn’t think anyone would be offended, but I didn’t want to take a chance."

Kristen’s mouth was dry. "When–when will they be arriving?"

Her mother glanced at her watch. "I suppose the first ones will get here in about an hour." Her face clouded over once again. "I guess you’ll want to get dressed after all. Sorry. This was supposed to be a nice surprise for you, and it hasn’t worked out the way we intended."

Kristen steeled herself. She clamped one hand tightly on the stair rail to try to keep her body from trembling. "W–would it be okay with you if…"–she swallowed hard and tightened her grip on the stair rail–"if I didn’t get dressed?"

Her mother gave her a penetrating look. "Are you really sure you want to do this?" she asked.

Kristen nodded.

Her mother squealed with delight and gave Kristen a big hug. "Oh, sweetie, I’m so proud of you!"

"Hey, keep it down out here!" Kristen’s father stepped in from the kitchen. "What’s all the hubbub?"

Her mother smiled brightly. "Kristen’s decided to stay nude for the party tonight!"

A smile quickly crossed her father’s lips, then he put on a stern and concerned expression. "Are you sure about this? An awful lot has happened to you today. We’re both happy for you, but I’m worried we might be pushing you along too fast."

If they didn’t stop giving her opportunities to chicken out, Kristen worried, she really would chicken out. "If–if I can go naked in front of strangers at the beach," she said, "I should be able to go naked in front of friends and family at home."

"Maybe we can get you a robe to keep nearby, in case…"

"No!" Kristen shouted, more forcefully than she had intended. She blushed. "I–I mean, if I get embarrassed, then I’m just going to have to face it, right?"

Her father’s face glowed with warm affection. His eyes glistened, and his voice trembled a little. "We may have screwed up totally in the way we raised you, Kristen. But you have grown into someone better than we could ever have dared to dream." He stepped forward and gave the naked young woman a fatherly hug. Then her mother stepped forward, and the entire family gathered in a warm group embrace.

Kristen was sent out to relax on the patio behind the house while her parents finished their preparations for the party. She felt a little uneasy, stepping outside the house in the nude. But her mother was right–the only way anyone could see her on the patio would be if they climbed a tree or jumped the fence.

The air was fresh and cool, perfumed with the scent of the many flowers in her mother’s garden. She breathed deeply. The patio was bathed in sunlight, filtered by the trees. The air seemed to be filled with the music of a hundred sweet-voiced birds. It seemed to Kristen that her senses had never been so acute.

She reclined on one of the chaise lounges and closed her eyes.

She didn’t know what to expect this evening. Her parents said they were nudists. Would they undress for the party? Many of their friends were nudists, too. Would they undress, now that the secret was out? Kristen was resigned to the idea that she would be naked, but she felt uneasy at the prospect of being the only naked person at the party. She felt uneasy, too, at the thought of her parents, or her parents’ friends–adults she had known all her life–walking around naked at the party. What do old people look like naked? She slowly realized that she felt more uncomfortable about seeing other people naked than about being seen naked.

So much had changed since this morning. Everything was different now–everything. There was no going back. Such a strange, strange day…

"Wake up, sweetie." Kristen’s mother was jostling her shoulder.

Kristen blinked and rubbed her eyes. "Did–did I fall asleep?" she asked.

"I think so," her mother answered.

A thought flashed through Kristen’s mind: had it all been a dream?

"Come on in the house, sweetie," her mother said. "The guests have started to arrive."

Kristen started to sit up, and instantly realized that she was on the patio, stark naked. If this was a dream, it was a stubborn one. Her mother was wearing a casual outfit, different from what she had been wearing before. She had changed for the party, but she was still dressed.

Kristen followed her mother through the glass patio door and into the kitchen.

The house was crowded already. Several of the guests had brought covered dishes, and the kitchen was full of delicious smells. The scene was chaotic, with ladies setting out food for a sort of informal buffet, and a ragged line of celebrants snaking around the kitchen table, filling up paper plates. Kristen was the only naked person in the room.

Kristen worked her way through the kitchen, shaking hands and accepting congratulations from everyone she passed. It was like a scene from a dream–she was naked, and it was as if no one noticed. A few people told her she looked nice tonight, and she blushed. But they might have said the same thing if she had been wearing clothes. Some of her parents’ friends had brought their children. There were a few people of about Kristen’s age. Some of the boys eyed her naked body pretty intently, and Kristen blushed again. But she realized that these boys eyed her in the same way when she had clothes on.

Slowly she worked her way through the house, greeting everyone she passed. Most of the guests were gathered in the living room. Kristen dutifully worked her way around the room, acting the part of the gracious hostess. Many of the guests, male and female, hugged her. It was an innocent, friendly gesture–her family knew a lot of huggers. She felt a little grateful that she was the only nude person at the party. Skin to skin, those friendly hugs might have been a little awkward.

This was one of her parents’ parties, and her parents’ parties were boring. Once she had greeted everyone, the adults formed in little clumps and talked about their tedious adult concerns. The young people sat sulking in the corners, making a very visible display or their boredom. Kristen would have joined them if she hadn’t been the guest of honor.

Periodically one of the adults would come over and offer a few words of advice or encouragement. "I wondered when those nutty parents of yours were going to let you in on the good stuff," her mother’s friend Melody said.

Some guests came bearing gifts, and for a moment all eyes would be on Kristen as she accepted the gift. A girl her own age brought her a huge pair of gag sunglasses. Someone else brought a child’s tiny sand bucket and shovel. Her mother’s friend Anne gave a more practical gift–a big, broad-brimmed sun hat and a pair of sandals. Kristen tried them on, and blushed when someone joked that she was overdressed.

Mr. Robinson, whose family owned and operated a spa where customers could rent a room with a tanning bed and a hot tub, offered a large bottle of sun screen. "We got you this when we heard that you were going to be working as a lifeguard," he said. "When your mother told me that you were going to be at Black Knife Beach, I realized that wasn’t enough." He pulled out a large display box containing a dozen of the bottles. There was laughter and a smattering of applause. Someone called out, "Try it on," and a voice responded, "She’s already overdressed."

Mr. Robinson quietly invited Kristen to stop by the spa on Sunday. "We’re closed Sundays for our weekly maintenance, and friends come by sometimes. The whole place is nude on Sundays–pool, sauna, exercise room. Feel free to stop by. You might want to spend some time on a tanning bed, to even out your tan."

Kristen’s cheeks reddened. "Thanks," she said. "I–I just might do that."

A middle-aged couple stepped up to Kristen. She knew the man–a wealthy real-estate developer well known around town for his blunt manner and his crude wit. The wife smiled and nodded silently whenever the man talked. Whenever he paused for a breath, she stopped nodding. "Now, Kristen," he said, "I want you to do me a favor. I want you to promise me that you’ll convince your parents to start coming back out to the nudist club. We miss ‘em, and I sure would appreciate it if you’d do that for me. Okay?"

Kristen shrugged awkwardly. "Well, I can tell them you asked," she said.

The man seemed to weigh that answer for a moment. He didn’t seem very satisfied with it, but he forged ahead. "Okay, next item. Right after your mama called us, our son Tommy called. You remember Tommy?"

"Yes, I do," Kristen said, with a smile. Tommy had been a couple years ahead of her at school, and his gentle personality stood in stark contrast to that of his ham-handed father. A lot of boys had been interested in Kristen. Tommy was one of the few who seemed interested in what she thought, not just how she looked.

"Well, he’s out there at that community college now, and he’s living with three frat brothers or something in a big old house that’s maybe a ten minute drive from Black Knife Beach. Okay? Now I wouldn’t mention this, but they’ve got this big vacant room up on the third floor, and it’s just going to waste. Got its own private bathroom up there and everything. Your parents being friends, and you knowing Tommy, I thought maybe you’d be interested."

Kristen smiled. She had wanted to find an apartment near the beach, and this place had come to her. But she didn’t know–sharing a house with four men.

"In my day," the man continued, "everybody assumed that boys and girls living together were shacked up. But times change. I know ‘em all, and they’re all good boys. You’ve got nothing to worry about. They’ve got a room going a-wasting, and you need a place to stay. Interested?"

"It–it’s tempting," Kristen said, warming to the idea.

"It’s more than that," the man responded, his wife nodding dutifully. "It’s rent-free. No sense begging friends for money. We’re not making a penny off the room with it sittin’ empty."

"Rent-free?" Kristen smiled with astonishment. "That–that’s awfully nice of you."

"Aw, nothin’ to it. There’s just one thing. Now, it shouldn’t be a problem, considering the circumstances. You’d have to stay nude in the house."

Kristen blushed. Of course. Tommy’s parents were nudists. Tommy was a nudist. "A–a nudist house?"

"Oh, no, no. Of course, since our boy moved in there, the dress code in that house has become pretty damn casual," he laughed.

Kristen was confused. "You just said I’d have to stay nude in the house."

"Sure," he said. "Pretty the place up a little. You’d go nude in lieu of rent."

***What Dreams May Come***

"Now, don’t tip your head back," Kristen’s mother warned. She handed Kristen a damp washcloth.

The naked young woman sat upright on the edge of the bathtub, sobbing piteously. With one hand she pinched the fleshy part of her nose. She took the washcloth in the other hand, and wiped at the little spots of blood down her torso and on one thigh.

"I wanted to slap him, Mom," Kristen choked. "I was doing so well–I was really proud that I was doing so well–and then that dirty old man made me feel like a whore." Instead of slapping him, she had forced a stony smile and told the man that she would have to think over his offer. A few minutes later, the nosebleed started. She hadn’t had a nosebleed like this for at least a dozen years.

Her mother put a reassuring hand on Kristen’s shoulder. "Just about everyone in town thinks that man is a world-class asshole," she said. Kristen laughed a little through her tears. She had never heard that kind of language from her mother.

The muffled voices of the guests could be heard through the closed bathroom door. Her mother spoke softly. "I don’t think he meant to make you feel bad. He doesn’t mean to upset people, but sometimes I think he’s not capable of understanding how he makes other people feel. It’s like he has a missing chromosome or something. Personally, I don’t like him, but I hate to judge anyone."

Her mother’s soothing voice helped calm Kristen’s nerves. "Well, I don’t like him at all," she muttered.

"You know," her mother continued, "at his house he is the only person allowed to wear clothes. There’s a big closet off the entry foyer where his wife and kids keep all their clothes. His wife, his kids, and any guests all have to undress completely before they’re allowed to step through the door into the main part of the house. His own clothes are in closets and dressers in the main part of the house, and he usually stays dressed. His wife seems to be perfectly happy with this arrangement–I don’t understand it–and his kids have never known anything different. I don’t think the man has any idea why some people find the whole arrangement kind of disturbing."

"How can they let someone like that join a nudist club?" Kristen asked.

"There are all kinds of people in the world," her mother responded, "and there are all kinds of people in nudist clubs. You’re still young, Kristen. As you get older, you’re going to see more strange and wonderful things than you could ever imagine. Always remember, no matter how strange or offensive a person seems on the outside, on the inside there is always a real, live human being. You have to respect the human being on the inside."

Kristen sniffled. She rubbed a finger under both nostrils. Her nosebleed seemed to have stopped. "Okay," she said, "but I still don’t like that guy."

Her mother smiled. "Like I said, I don’t like him either. But let me tell you one thing that might help you understand him just a little bit better. You’re not to repeat this to anyone, okay?"

Kristen nodded.

"He’s worried that his son is turning gay. I don’t know whether it’s true or not. I think maybe he’s just reading too much into the fact that Tommy and his housemates are pretty casual about nudity. If it is true, I doubt that there’s anything that could be done about it. But the father’s worried about it, and he knows that Tommy used to like you, and I think that’s why he came up with that whole bizarre scheme. I imagine he thinks that seeing you every day would straighten Tommy out."

Kristen considered this new information for a long time. She had really liked Tommy–could he really be the son of that oafish man? She felt sad and confused by the thought that Tommy might be gay. Was that the secret reason that he had seemed interested in Kristen as a person, not just a pretty body? The idea that only a gay man could appreciate Kristen as a human being was a gloomy prospect.

She started to feel a bit more sympathetic toward Tommy’s father. The man was stupid and inconsiderate, but he didn’t really seem evil. Her mother’s annoying habit of looking for the good in everyone made it frustratingly difficult to work up a good satisfying hatred for anyone.

Finally, she stood up. "Okay," she said, nodding. "I’m alright now." Her entire body was trembling gently.

Her mother offered her a robe. "After all that, I suppose you’ll probably want to cover up now," she said.

Kristen shook her head. "No, Mom, I’m fine." A wry smile played across her lips. "I’ve been to the mountain top, and I’ve seen the promised land." She opened the bathroom door.

After the nosebleed incident, the party took on a more subdued tone. The guests seemed to recognize that Kristen was not as cool and calm as she appeared to be, and everyone tried to avoid making her feel embarrassed. A few gag gifts were simply left on the dining room table, rather than being presented personally in the presence of the entire company.

Tommy’s father came back with his nodding wife in tow again. His face was beet red, and there were beads of sweat on his forehead. "I–I think I might have embarrassed you a little bit earlier," he said, "and if I did, I want to apologize with all my heart. I never meant to do anything to make you unhappy."

"It–it’s okay," Kristen answered. "I–I think I’ve just got a case of nerves."

"Well," he said, "I just want to apologize again for any offense I may have given. And, uh, I don’t think you were really interested, but just in case you change your mind, I want you to know that the offer on the room still stands." Awkwardly, he shook her hand. "Just in case you change your mind." His wife stood at his side, her head still bobbing up and down.

Kristen blushed and nodded. Now she felt sorry for the man. Maybe she had inherited some of her mother’s charitable nature.

It was past midnight when the last of the guests straggled out the door. Kristen breathed a sigh of relief. "You said this was going to be a small party," she said to her parents. "I counted more than sixty people."

Her father smiled proudly. "You have a lot of friends, Kristen. Don’t forget that. Some of those people have known you as long as we have, and I think they’re almost as proud of you as we are."

Kristen picked through the gag gifts that had been left behind on the dining room table. There was a welcome mat that read "Abandon All Clothes Ye Who Enter Here." It would be perfect for the doorstep of Tommy’s father’s house. There was a body stocking printed with the image of a nude female body, so that even when she was wearing it, she would look naked.

Kristen yawned. She had gotten up very early for her visit to Black Knife Beach–it seemed like a hundred years ago; could it really be the same day? Fatigue suddenly took its toll. She was sleepy and physically exhausted. She bid her parents good night and climbed the stairs to her room.

After making her bed each morning, Kristen always laid out her night clothes for the following night. Now she saw the clothes she had set out this morning, before her drive out to the beach. She couldn’t help but laugh. "What a difference a day makes," she thought.

That morning, her mental image of nudists had come almost entirely from dirty jokes or those dumb cartoons where somebody is always trying to peek over the fence at a nudist camp. She had known that real nudists existed, but they were as remote from her experience as the stereotypical cartoon cannibals cooking up a missionary stew.

Today she had met nudists at the beach. She had learned that she had grown up surrounded by nudists. Her own parents were nudists. And now she had no doubt–she was a nudist, too.

She picked the night clothes up off the bed and put them back into her dresser drawer. She smiled sadly as she realized that she would probably never wear them again. As she pushed the drawer shut, she whispered, "I am a nudist."

She was struck once again by one of the conveniences of nudist life: she didn’t need to take anything off to get ready for bed, and she didn’t need to put anything on. She pulled back the covers and climbed into bed.

She had never slept in the nude before–well, not any time that she could remember, anyway. She liked the sensation of the sheets against her skin. She remembered the feel of the sun and the wind at the beach and on the backyard patio. Wearing clothes, she had been denied so many pleasures. The demon that had plagued her today with shame and humiliation seemed to be sleeping now. Kristen smiled contentedly. "I am a nudist," she repeated. "A full-blooded nudist. What a difference a day makes." Exhausted, she quickly fell asleep.

Perhaps the demon really was sleeping. Perhaps the demon was simply waiting for her to fall asleep. Her sleep was fitful, troubled by a number of strange disconnected dreams.

She was naked, climbing and climbing a mountainside. The mountain stretched endlessly above her. She looked down, and there was no earth below–the mountainside stretched into the darkness of a bottomless pit. She kept climbing, and the jagged rocks scratched and cut her naked skin.

Another dream: she was back in her high school. She was walking the crowded hallway from one class to another. She was dressed normally, but everyone else–students, faculty, the janitor–everyone was naked. The girls and teachers were shocked at the sight of her clothing; the boys leered lustfully.

The dream changed suddenly, and Kristen stood fully clothed before a classroom full of nude students, all female. They all seemed to be terribly embarrassed about their nudity. Kristen herself seemed to be wearing some sort of school uniform, not her usual school clothes. There was a teacher in the room, also fully dressed. The teacher spoke sternly, and told the humiliated nude students, "Only Kristen gets to keep her clothes because only she is a proper young lady." The naked girls all glowered at her with a mixture of hatred and envy.

Another dream: she was at the beach, surrounded by grotesque creatures who seemed to be a cross between pigs and orangutans. Kristen instinctively knew that these animals were the dreaded gawkers. They didn’t wear clothes, but they were all covered with thick black fur. They advanced slowly and clutched at her naked flesh.

Another dream: she was a student at a small college. She was at a crowded college function of some sort. Everything about the place seemed confused and hazy. There was obviously a great commotion going on, but she couldn’t tell what it was all about. The dean of the college stood up and announced to the large crowd that, after consultation with Kristen’s father, she would remain nude for her entire four years at school. Suddenly she was naked, and a spotlight shone on her.

Another dream: she was falling, falling, falling. Suddenly hundreds of hands reached out and caught her and set her down gently on the ground. She looked around, and her rescuers all had blank faces. Slowly a face formed on one of the rescuers–it was Beth. She smiled and said, "You’re going to fit right in here, Kristen. I told you that you would get used to it."

Another dream: she stood at the front door of a strange house. The door stood wide open, but she couldn’t see anything inside. A welcome mat read "Abandon All Clothes Ye Who Enter Here," and all the people from the party crowded around her, noisily urging her to enter the house. With a pounding heart, she stepped through the door. Darkness closed over her, and she finally slipped into a desperately needed deep slumber.

***Pinkish***

Exhaustion had taken a toll. When Kristen finally opened her eyes on Sunday morning and looked at the bedside alarm clock, she was surprised to see how late it was.

"I really need to get up," she thought sleepily, but instead she snuggled more deeply into the covers and closed her eyes again. The bed was so cozy and comfortable that it seemed a terrible shame to have to get up. Only slowly did it dawn upon her that she was nude under the covers.

With that realization came the recollection of the wild events of the previous day. A tickling sensation rose in her stomach, and her heartbeat accelerated. Could it really be true? Had she really stood naked in the living room, in the presence of dozens of people she had known all her life?

The memory was so vivid, it couldn’t have been a dream. But the events were so bizarre, how could she believe that it had all really happened?

One thing was certain: she was naked now, and she wasn’t dreaming.

Kristen smiled. She focused her attention on the feel of the sheets against her bare skin. Some people like to sleep on satin sheets, she knew. She couldn’t imagine that anything could feel better than the downy texture of these simple sheets. What were they made of–cotton, linen, polyester? She didn’t know. She didn’t care. Whatever the fabric, it was perfect.

She reveled for a few moments in this sense of luxury, then sighed. Reluctantly she tossed aside the covers and got out of bed.

Kristen had wondered how she would handle this moment. The habit of many years called for her to cover up, and quickly. She was surprised to realize that she felt no desire to get dressed. The habit of many years seemed to vanish like a wisp of smoke.

Everything had changed so quickly. She felt as if she had lived her entire life inside a sturdy cage, and yesterday had suddenly discovered that the cage was an optical illusion, its stout iron bars nothing but shadows. She had always been free, but had never known it.

Was it possible that her parents’ joke was true–that she really was a full-blooded nudist? Had she inherited this? That was nonsense, of course. But it was difficult to understand how she could have changed so completely in just one day. The Kristen of Saturday morning would never recognize the Kristen of Sunday morning.

A nagging voice in the back of her mind insisted that her change had been too easy–that her newfound freedom, not the cage, was the illusion. She didn’t feel embarrassed about being naked now, but doubts were starting to take shape in her mind. Perhaps she was crazy. Maybe a blood clot or something had short-circuited the part of her brain that controls modesty. It might take nothing more than a few synapses that weren’t firing, or a few that were firing too rapidly. Maybe the previous night’s party–or her state of dress at the party–was nothing more than a vivid hallucination.

She didn’t really believe that she was crazy, or that she had suffered brain damage, but the more she listened to the nagging voice of doubt, the more she felt uneasy at the thought of going downstairs naked. How would her parents react? If everything was truly as she remembered from the previous day, they should welcome her nudity. But what if it was a hallucination, or some sort of bizarre misunderstanding? What then?

Kristen felt angry with herself as she felt a hot little knot of shame growing in the pit of her stomach. "Damn!" she whispered, through clenched teeth. "I thought I got over this yesterday."

Her muscles were sore, as if she had been through a particularly challenging workout at the gym. Perhaps it was from all the climbing she had done at the beach the day before. But every muscle ached, not just her legs. She sensed that this pain was the residue of the embarrassed tension that had wracked her body yesterday.

She felt the hot sensation of shame growing in her gut. "I have to nip this in the bud," she thought. With an effort of will, she opened the bedroom door and stepped out into the hallway. Slowly she made her way down the stairs. She smiled when she saw the gifts piled on the dining room table, just as she remembered them. That much, at least, had been no hallucination.

Her parents were sitting side by side on the living room couch, each engrossed in a section of the Sunday paper. As she crept down the stairs, her father looked up first.

"Good morning, sleepyhead!" he called cheerfully.

"Oh, you’re finally up," her mother chimed in. "I’m sorry you missed breakfast. You seemed so tired, we just let you sleep."

"Thanks," Kristen said, smiling and nodding. "I *was* awfully tired. Too much excitement for one day, I suppose." She felt her tension dissipate. They weren’t shocked that she was naked. She wasn’t crazy.

"Oh, my gosh!" her mother exclaimed. "You’re so *pink*!" She put down the paper and stood up. "Does it sting?"

Kristen was taken aback. "No, I–I feel fine. What–what is it?"

"Well, you seem kind of pinkish where your swimsuit would usually cover you. You might have been out in the sun too long yesterday. You have to be careful, you know. You don’t feel a sunburn until it’s too late." She eyed Kristen’s body intently. "Turn around, slowly. Let me see if you’ve burned."

Kristen felt her face turn "kind of pinkish," but she dutifully turned around so her mother could inspect her naked body for signs of sunburn.

Her mother poked at a spot near the small of Kristen’s back. "Does that hurt?" she asked.

"Ow!" Kristen responded. "It only hurts because you’re poking too hard." Her mother probed more gently at a few other spots on her body.

"Good," she said finally. "It doesn’t look like you started to burn. But you’re going to have to be careful. In the places where you have a tan, the tan itself provides some protection against sunburn. But now you’re showing a lot of skin that hasn’t been exposed to the sun before, including some pretty sensitive areas like your nipples and your pubes."

Kristen turned a bright scarlet and turned her face away from her mother.

"Now, listen to me, Kristen," her mother continued. "This is the voice of experience. When you go down to the beach and put on your sunscreen, you can’t afford to get all modest. You’ve got to put it everywhere. You should probably put a little extra on your nipples, because they’re extra sensitive. And that little patch of hair down there isn’t going to stop you from burning. You’ve got to rub the lotion in good. Make sure you cover the lips down there."

"Mother, please!" Kristen said.

"Well, it’s the truth," her mother responded. "I know from personal experience that you do not want to get burned down there, okay?" Now she blushed a little herself.

Kristen nodded sullenly, her face bright red.

"Okay," her mother continued. "You have to cover the cheeks of your butt, but keep in mind that you’ve got to get the sunscreen down in the crack of your butt, too. And you’re not going to be able to reach every part of your back by yourself. I want you to promise me that you’ll ask someone to help you put the lotion on your back."

Kristen nodded again. "Okay," she murmured.

"Good," her mother said, nodding, "and then you can help her with her sunscreen… or him, I suppose."

"Say," Kristen’s father said, "you should give Kristen the recipe for that sunburn cream you concocted. It really works wonders."

Her mother smiled and shook her head. "Oh, I’m sure they have a pretty well-stocked first aid cabinet at the lifeguard service. The lifeguards at Black Knife Beach probably know more about sunburns and sunscreens than any hundred mothers." She turned back to Kristen. "So, Kristen, you missed breakfast, and lunch won’t be ready for a while. Would you like me to fix you something to eat? It won’t be any trouble at all."

"No thanks," Kristen replied. "I’m not very hungry yet." She rubbed her bare stomach. "My stomach feels a little… queasy for some reason."

Her mother looked steadily into Kristen’s eyes. "Are you feeling kind of achy all over?" she asked.

Kristen nodded. "A little. I think–I–I think it’s probably from all that climbing on the trail at the beach."

Her mother gave her a knowing smile. "You’re really trying very hard, aren’t you?"

Kristen returned a puzzled gaze. "I–I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean…"

Her mother took Kristen’s hand in her own and patted it gently. "Why don’t you make yourself comfortable and read the paper. I know you like the comics. I’ll bring you something to settle your stomach."

While her mother trotted into the kitchen, Kristen picked up the comics section of the paper, relieved that the detailed discussion of her anatomy was over.

She sat at the opposite end of the couch from her father. Her father looked at her, nodded and smiled, and silently turned his attention back to the paper. Kristen unfolded the comics section and started reading. Shortly her mother returned from the kitchen with a glass of milk and a couple slices of hot buttered toast for Kristen. Kristen accepted them with thanks, and her mother resumed her seat in the center of the couch.

Kristen munched serenely on a slice of toast and breathed a contented sigh. This was what she needed–an island of calm where she could sort out her tangled feelings about everything that was happening. It was a quiet Sunday morning, just like any other Sunday morning, except for the fact that she was naked. She listened to the soothing whir of the clothes dryer off in the laundry room. She turned a page in the newspaper. The fact that she was naked now seemed like such a trivial detail.

After a moment, Kristen lowered the paper and turned to her parents. "Mom, Dad… I–I was wondering about something…"

Her parents both gave her their full attention. "What is it, sweetie?" her mother asked.

"Well," Kristen continued, "after what you told me yesterday, I was wondering why you’re both still dressed. I thought maybe you would want to go nude around the house, too."

Both her parents blushed. "Well," her father answered, "even nudists wear clothes sometimes. We, uh, talked about it last night, after you went to bed. And we realized that we’ve been wearing clothes at home as long as you have. It–it’s going to take us a while to get used to the idea of going nude again."

Her mother nodded, saying, "It’s more than that. We–well, we’re not as young as we used to be, and I think we both bulge or sag in places where we really shouldn’t."

Kristen rolled her eyes. "Oh, yeah. You’re both pretty old and wrinkled up. Not as old and wrinkled up as some of the people at last night’s party, but… somehow I got the impression that nudism wasn’t supposed to be all about youth and beauty. So what’s up?"

With a pained expression, her father said, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He smiled. "Don’t worry, Kristen. Sometime this summer, your mother and I are going to come down to see you at your new job. We’re both looking forward to it."

***Smuggler***

Kristen tried to beg off. "Tell her, uh… tell her that I’d rather not get dressed today," she said. It wasn’t really a lie.

Her mother, on the phone, passed that news on to Mrs. Robinson, who had called to follow up on her husband’s invitation at the party the night before. After a moment, Kristen’s mother put her hand over the telephone mouthpiece. "She says they can drop by to pick you up on the way in," she told Kristen. "They have dark windows in the back of the minivan, so you won’t need to worry about clothes."

Kristen frowned and let out a frustrated sigh. She didn’t want to go, but she didn’t want to be rude. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson were good friends of her parents, and they were unfailingly generous and kind. "Okay," she said, reluctantly. "Okay."

She liked the elder Robinsons, but the Robinson kids had always made Kristen feel vaguely uneasy. Their eyes were the palest shade of blue she had ever seen, and the tiny black pupils looking out from those pale eyes made them seem oddly stricken, somehow. They were fiercely freckled. In gym class she had seen that the freckles covered the older girl’s entire body. She had assumed that the same pattern held for the other two kids, as well. Today, she supposed, she would find out whether that assumption was true.

She had never been to the Robinson family’s spa. She didn’t need to go there–the school had excellent exercise facilities. She didn’t want to go there–much of what she knew about the place seemed vaguely sordid.

One high school friend had excitedly told Kristen how she had used the tanning booths naked. "Look," the girl had said, pulling out the elastic waistband of her skirt and panties, right there in the school corridor, "no tan lines. It’s so cool, you really ought to try it." Kristen had turned crimson at her friend’s immodest behavior.

But the naked tanning booths weren’t the worst thing. They weren’t unique to the Robinsons’ place. There were several tanning salons in the area, and they all catered to a crowd that seemed to insist on an all-over tan. (Kristen had never understood this–why was it important to have no tan lines, anyway? No one would ever see them.)

No, the thing that was unique about the Robinsons’ place was this: each tanning bed was in a little room with a hot tub big enough to hold three or four people. There was also a padded bench for massages or… other things. People were using the tanning booths naked, and they weren’t necessarily alone.

Another high school friend had been mortified when she had tried to sneak her boyfriend into one of these rooms with her. Mrs. Robinson had appeared from nowhere and blocked the boy from entering the room. "No, no, no," she had scolded, wagging her finger. "No hanky-panky here. Not until you’re older."

But there was no doubt that plenty of hanky-panky took place in those little rooms. The advertising for the spa suggested that married couples could schedule a "romantic interlude" in one of the private rooms. Another ad had suggested a "relaxing encounter with friends and family." She could only imagine what went on behind closed doors. To Kristen, the spa had never seemed an entirely proper place for a nice young lady to go.

"Oh, well," she thought, with a sigh of resignation. She was sitting on the living room couch reading the Sunday paper, and she was completely naked. Maybe she herself wasn’t exactly the nice young lady she had always supposed she was.

Kristen took a quick shower before lunch. This time she didn’t fret over the question of whether to dress–it didn’t even occur to her.

She ate lunch hurriedly, as if she were impatient for the Robinsons’ arrival. She didn’t feel very eager, and the Robinsons weren’t due until 3 o’clock anyway, but she grew restless and fidgety after the meal. She paced from room to room, seeking in vain for something to divert her attention for more than a few minutes.

"Kristen, you seem kind of jumpy," her mother said. "Why don’t you go out on the patio and try to relax? Maybe you can grab a nap, like you did yesterday, hmm?"

Kristen nodded. She always found the quiet seclusion of the patio very soothing.

"Oh, and you don’t have to worry about the neighbors," her mother said. "I spoke to the Johnsons this morning. I think they may have felt a little hurt that I forgot to invite them to the party last night. Anyway, they said you can go nude anywhere you want. They even said that if you get bored in our backyard, you’re welcome to go over and visit with them."

Kristen blushed. She didn’t understand this–she had been naked all day, and later she was going to ride off with some family friends to spend some time naked at their place of business. She was nervous, but not embarrassed. But somehow her mother could say a few simple words, and make Kristen turn red. "That’s, uh… nice of them. But–but I think I’ll just stay in our backyard for now."

"Okay, sweetie," her mother said. She put a hand on Kristen’s shoulder and leaned over as if she were going to whisper a deep dark secret. "Try to relax, okay?"

Stepping out onto the patio was like stepping into another world. The fragrant air was filled with birdsong. A breeze sighed softly through the trees. Kristen smiled, and felt that she had never fully appreciated what an island of serenity this place had always been for her.

She didn’t really want to take a nap. She settled into one of the lawn chairs and breathed in the perfume of her mother’s amazing flower garden. She watched the gentle honeybees droning busily from flower to flower. She saw beautiful songbirds flitting from branch to branch in the trees. A gray squirrel dashed across the yard, pausing for just a moment to gaze quizzically at the naked young woman watching from the patio.

Kristen could scarcely keep from laughing in pure delight. "This must be what the Garden of Eden was like," she thought. For this one brief moment, she couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to wear clothes.

The moment passed quickly enough–the sun had not yet come around to warm the patio, and the air felt a little chilly. Kristen rubbed her upper arms briskly and shivered a bit. She wasn’t actually cold, but the sunlight on the grass looked warm and inviting.

She stood up and walked timidly into the yard. When she reached the rose bushes, she stopped and scanned the horizon in all directions. Only the Johnson house had a direct view into the yard.

Kristen leaned forward a bit and stared at the Johnson house. She licked her lips nervously. Only two windows at the back of the house had a view into the yard. It was unlikely that anyone would be at those windows right now. Even if someone was there, the Johnsons had said they didn’t care if Kristen went nude in the yard. Nevertheless, Kristen’s pulse was pounding as she walked past the rose bushes into the large open part of the yard.

Every few steps, she shot a glance over her shoulder at the two windows at the back of the Johnson house. There was no one in the windows. There was no one there. There was no one there. Slowly she relaxed. She didn’t have to walk far before she stood in delightful warm sunlight.

The grass was cool and soft under her bare feet. The air smelled so clean and sweet she almost felt she could bottle it and sell it at a hundred dollars an ounce as a life-restoring elixir. She made a long, slow circuit around the yard. Periodically she glanced up at the Johnsons’ windows, but she never saw anyone there.

Finally, she paused and looked for a long time at the empty windows. She shook her head and laughed at her own foolishness. How much time and worry had she wasted on baseless fears? She thought about her terror yesterday in the beach locker room, and her bitter dread as she fretted about breaking the news to her parents. She had confronted terror after terror during the past two days, and every one of those terrors had turned into a will-o-the-wisp. She wondered: how many other phantom boundaries hemmed in her life? How much living was she missing out on because of baseless fears?

Kristen noticed her mother standing in the patio door. "Are you ready?" her mother called. "They’re here."

Kristen nodded and came into the house. She paused at the laundry room and wrapped herself in a clean towel. She also remembered to grab a bottle of sunscreen, since she would probably be using the tanning beds. "All ready," she said cheerfully. "Nothing to fear but fear itself," she mused silently, and smiled.

Mr. Robinson stood at the front door. He grinned when he saw Kristen. At first Kristen thought he wore a towel around his waist, but as she got closer she realized it wasn’t a towel, but a light velour wrap, closed at the top with a couple of metal snaps. His skin seemed a little leathery, she thought. His physique reminded her of the blond guy at the beach–thin, wiry, and surprisingly muscular. Kristen followed him as he went to the van’s sliding rear door and pulled it open.

Mrs. Robinson, sitting in the front passenger seat, wore a similar wrap, snapped together over her right breast. She smiled and nodded as Kristen passed.

The bucket seat just inside the open door was empty. Beside the empty seat sat the son, Mark, who had been a year ahead of Kristen in high school. He gave her a weak smile, then quickly looked away. He wore a pair of loose boxer-style swim trunks. So far as she could tell, Kristen’s theory that all the Robinson kids were freckled all over their bodies was correct.

In the seat behind Mark sat Mary, who had been in Kristen’s gym class. She wore a large white t-shirt that reached down to the middle of her thighs. Mary, too, gave Kristen a weak smile, but she maintained a steady gaze, and her smile grew steadily stronger and broader. "Hi, Kristen," she said at last. "Glad to have you with us."

Kristen smiled and nodded. "Thanks for letting me come along," she replied.

Beside Mary, in the seat behind Kristen’s, sat 9-year-old Molly. She had her arms crossed, and her face was twisted into a petulant scowl. She wore a light-blue leotard, and there was a puffy ballet skirt all bunched up in her lap.

Mrs. Robinson twisted around in her seat to speak to Kristen. "Molly won’t be able to join us today," she said, "and we won’t be able to stay too long at the spa. Molly has a special rehearsal this afternoon, and tonight there’s a recital for her dance class. The dance studio is right on the way, so it won’t take any time to drop her off. We’ll have to leave early enough so we can get ready for the show tonight."

Molly huffed loudly, but said nothing.

Kristen smiled and took her seat. She fastened the seat belt as Mr. Robinson slid the door closed.

"You can take your towel off if you want to," Mark said very quietly. His eyes were fixed on his own hands, which were fidgeting restlessly.

Kristen blushed. "Uh, no thanks," she replied. "I’ll wait."

The spa didn’t look the way Kristen had expected. As soon as she stepped through the door she could see that. The place was surprisingly large and well-equipped. The exercise room was filled with shiny modern equipment. The entire place was neat, clean and bright.

"Hold on just a second," Mr. Robinson said after everyone was inside. "We always hang this curtain over the glass door on Sundays. Don’t want to scandalize the neighborhood, you know." He grabbed a folded piece of cloth from behind the reception counter and quickly and expertly strung it across the door. When he was satisfied, he turned and smiled. "Okay," he said, "make yourself at home."

All the Robinsons stripped instantly, and piled their clothes on a chair behind the reception desk. Mark had seemed very awkward and self-conscious about Kristen’s presence when they were in the van, but now he pulled off his shorts without a trace of embarrassment.

"Kristen, give me your towel." Mrs. Robinson stood behind the reception counter. She stretched her arm across the counter for Kristen’s towel.

Kristen suddenly felt uncomfortable. Naked, Mrs. Robinson’s body seemed bloated and puffy. Her buttocks and her thighs were pocked with cellulite–what the girls at school sometimes called "cottage cheese thighs." Her large breasts hung low, and her little round gut drooped under the influence of gravity, too. The lower part of her belly was furrowed with deep, ugly wrinkles unlike anything Kristen had seen before.

"Is this what old people look like naked?" Kristen wondered. Mrs. Robinson wasn’t all that old–probably in her mid-forties. Reluctantly, Kristen undid her towel and handed it over to Mrs. Robinson, who turned and put it in the chair with the other clothes.

Kristen was puzzled: why in the world was Mrs. Robinson a nudist? Surely she knew what she looked like, but she didn’t seem the least bit self-conscious about her body.

Kristen noticed a display carton of sunscreen on the counter, just like the box Mr. Robinson had given her as a joke the night before. "Oh, Mr. Robinson," she said, "I’ll have to remember to give you back that box of sunscreen when I get back home."

Mr. Robinson smiled and shook his head. "No, no, that’s for you. We made a bit of a joke out of it, but it’s really for you. If it’s too much for you to use, you can always share it with the other lifeguards."

"Thanks," Kristen said. "It’s awfully generous of you."

"Oh, it’s nothing," Mr. Robinson said. "If you tell them who gave it to you, it might even be good publicity for the place." An amused smile grew across his face. "Heck, if you can get them all to use it, maybe we can wrangle a big endorsement contract with the manufacturer. If the Black Knife Beach lifeguards aren’t qualified to endorse sunscreen, I don’t know who is."

Kristen smiled, and blushed a little. Next to the box of sunscreen was a stack of brochures for a nudist club. Curious, she picked one up. "Hmm, what’s this?" she asked absently.

"You know," Mr. Robinson said, "this is a great place to recruit people into nudism. Not many of our customers think of themselves as nudists. But we believe just about everybody uses the tanning beds and the private hot tubs nude. A lot of people come in with the spouse, and after they’ve been here a couple times, some of them come in with friends. A few visits, and folks start feeling pretty open-minded. We like to see them pick up a brochure and come on over to our side." He smiled a beatific smile.

"Why don’t you kids show Kristen around?" Mrs. Robinson said. "Then you can help her get started in one of the tanning rooms. Don’t worry about getting the door. I’ll stick around here, and if anyone comes I’ll let them in."

Mark and Mary nodded and motioned for Kristen to follow them. They led her on a tour of the facilities. They showed her some of the more impressive pieces of machinery in the exercise room. They showed her the steam room and the dry sauna, the impressively large swimming pool with diving platforms at several levels, and a whirlpool bath that looked as if it could hold fifty people. Kristen shook her head in amazement. Finally they led her back toward the reception area, and into a short hallway lined with private tanning rooms.

"Help yourself," Mary said as they entered one of the private rooms. She motioned toward the tanning bed. She handed Kristen an oddly shaped plastic object. "You put that on your eyes," she said. "Just close your eyes and rest it on your eyelids. It keeps the light from damaging your retinas, and it doesn’t leave a big white patch like a regular pair of sunglasses. Oh, and don’t forget to put your sunscreen on. Tanning beds are pretty safe, I think, but you can get a burn if you’re not careful."

Kristen nodded. She sat down at the edge of the tanning bed and opened her bottle of sunscreen.

"We have to change the filters and test the motor here, so if you’ve got any questions, just ask," Mark said.

Kristen started to rub sun lotion on her arms. "Actually, I do have a question," she said. "But I don’t know whether I should ask…"

"Shoot!" Mark said. Mary smiled and nodded.

"Well," Kristen said, feeling very self-conscious, "my parents say they used to be nudists, but I was raised wearing clothes. I can’t tell you how embarrassed I felt yesterday when I found out I would be working on a nude beach. What’s it like to grow up as a nudist? I mean–what’s it like to never feel embarrassed about your body?"

Mark shrugged. "I dunno," he said. "Feels pretty normal to me."

Mary nodded. "We don’t have anything to compare it to," she said. "What I don’t understand is how people can grow up feeling all weird about their bodies. Let me ask you something–you know how in some cultures women can’t show their faces? They have to wear a veil or something?"

Kristen nodded.

"Okay," Mary said. "Now, I saw a photo somewhere–maybe it was in National Geographic or something–a photo of a woman who lifted the hem of her skirt in order to hide her face from the photographer. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath. You could see everything from her navel down. She wasn’t worried about that, but she didn’t want anyone to see her face. Now, here’s my question: does that make any sense to you? Do you understand that kind of behavior?"

Kristen shook her head. "No," she replied. "I mean–you have to respect other people’s cultures, but that’s pretty strange."

Mary smiled and nodded. "I thought so too. We feel like we’ve grown up in the middle of a culture just as strange as that one. There are all sorts of irrational taboos, and all the people around us accept them without question." She shrugged. "So that’s what it’s like to grow up as a nudist."

Kristen sat for a moment, quietly considering this new perspective.

"Let me help you get your back," Mary said, suddenly. She squirted some of the sunscreen into one hand, then she rubbed her hands together briskly to warm the lotion. She stepped behind Kristen and swiftly and expertly covered her bare back with sunscreen. Startled by the entire sequence of events, Kristen’s body jerked at the Mary’s unexpected touch.

Kristen blushed. She looked over her shoulder at Mary. "Th–thanks," she said. "I–I’m just not used to this."

"You’re welcome," Mary said. "Any time."

"So, Kristen," Mark said. "You wanted to know what it’s like to grow up as a nudist. I’ve always wondered what it’s like to grow up as a clothes-compulsive person. What’s it like to always be afraid that somebody might catch a peek of something?"

Kristen shook her head. "I don’t know," she said. "I’m just like you–I don’t know anything different. I always thought that was the normal way to be."

There was the tinkling of a bell. Kristen heard Mrs. Robinson open the entrance room door and greet a large and noisy group of newcomers, and she flinched nervously at the sound.

"What’s wrong with you?" Mark asked. "I’d say you had ants in your pants, if you were wearing pants."

Mary smiled suddenly and looked at her brother. "I think I know what it’s like to grow up clothes-compulsive," she said. Mark and Kristen both looked at her curiously.

"Did you notice? When Kristen heard those people coming in, she slammed her legs together and sort of hunched over. Her hands shot up to cover her chest." She looked into the puzzled eyes of Mark and Kristen. "I think Kristen feels like a smuggler. Society has decided that it’s illegal to possess a human body–well, certain parts of a human body, anyway. Everybody has those illegal parts, but they all cover up and pretend that they don’t. Kristen flinches like someone caught in the vile act of possessing boobs."

***Young Again***

Kristen blinked and rubbed her eyes. She looked blearily at the buzzing alarm clock. Four o’clock. The dead of night–way too early to be getting up. She hit the button to turn the alarm off and groggily sat up in the bed.

She tried to collect her thoughts. She had gone to bed early just so she could get up at this hour. Why did she want to get up in the middle of the night?

It was hard to keep her eyes open. She had slept fitfully, troubled by disturbing dreams. She remembered only one of the dreams: She was flying, soaring high above the city, swooping down over familiar places, popping into and out of the clouds. She was laughing, giddy with a sense of freedom and power. Then, at the top of a particularly exhilarating arc, she suddenly realized that she couldn’t fly. Of course she couldn’t fly. With that realization, she instantly plummeted toward the ground.

She had awakened from that dream in a cold sweat, and found it difficult to get back to sleep afterwards. The night’s other dreams were murkier. She couldn’t remember any details. In a way that was difficult to pin down, the dreams all blurred together in her mind, as if they were all the same dream, only seen from several different angles.

She looked at the clock again. Why did she need to get up at four o’clock? Slowly, things started to come together. Today was Monday. She was supposed to go to the beach today. She had to be there by six o’clock. Two hours. She remembered the long twisting road to the beach. *Only* two hours. She really didn’t have much time to spare. With a groan, she climbed out of bed.

She left the light off. For now, she could see well enough in the dark. She opened the bedroom door and trudged wearily down the hall to the bathroom.

She closed her eyes, and flipped on the bathroom light switch. She winced. Too bright. Even through closed eyelids, the room seemed uncomfortably bright. She leaned against the vanity for a moment, opening her eyes a little from time to time, trying to grow accustomed to the light.

She felt frustrated, and disgusted with herself–it was Monday morning already. She had wasted the weekend. She had needed some quiet time to try to think things through and get into the proper frame of mind for this morning, but there was always something happening–her parents’ party, her trip with the Robinsons–and the entire weekend had slipped away. No time for quiet contemplation. Now she didn’t know what kind of frame of mind she was in.

She opened her eyes and squinted at her face in the mirror above the sink. Her eyelids were drooping. That was it–she was in a sleepy frame of mind. Very sleepy. "Another hour of sleep would feel so good right now," she thought. But she had to be at the beach by six o’clock. No time to spare.

She set the shower temperature considerably colder than she was accustomed to, hoping that it would help her to wake up. It worked. The high-pitched shriek she made when the icy water hit her body might have helped wake her parents, too.

Kristen decided to grit her teeth and tough it out under the cold shower. Tiny goose bumps were snapping to attention all over her body. Her nipples quickly grew taut and erect. The thermal shock seemed to work wonders at clearing the cobwebs from her drowsy mind, too.

This was the day. This was it. She had looked forward to this day; she had dreaded it. Now it was here, and she didn’t know how she felt. Wheels were in motion. She was going to drive out to Black Knife Beach. There was no doubt about it. She was going to walk down the steep trail. She was going to wear the "uniform." She was going to do what she had to do. The decisions had been made. The machinery was turning. There was nothing to feel about it. She was really just on for the ride.

She washed herself very quickly. She didn’t want to waste time under this frigid shower. She gasped from the cold when she ducked her hair into the cold spray. She washed and rinsed her hair hurriedly. When she was finished, she grabbed a towel and dried herself briskly, trying to use the friction of the towel to restore circulation to her frigid flesh.

The hot air from the hair dryer never felt better. She played it briefly over every part of her shivering body. She sighed contentedly as the hair dryer blew away the sting of the cold. Now she was awake.

In the corner of her eye, she noticed her reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. Turning off the hair dryer, she stepped closer to the mirror and studied the reflection. The pinkish glow her mother had noticed the morning before was still visible, but it had dulled a bit.

She had often stood here and made a frank appraisal of her own naked body. Often she had tried to judge whether her thighs looked fat, whether her knees were too bony, whether her toes were ugly. Often she had turned and studied her profile, trying to judge whether her breasts were too small, whether her butt was too big, or whether her stomach was still lean and flat.

Today, this routine inspection felt different. This was no longer a private ritual between Kristen and the bathroom mirror. Today, every flaw and blemish she saw here would be on full display to everyone at the beach. She couldn’t disguise her deficiencies with a judicious choice of wardrobe. Today, and for the rest of the summer, this was it. Her summer wardrobe would consist primarily of her birthday suit.

She studied her reflection with a critical eye. Tiny freckles and moles that she had never expected anyone to see–things that she had never even noticed before–now seemed large and ugly. There was a small scar on her right knee from a childhood injury. She had never given it a moment’s thought when she wore a skirt, or shorts, or a swimsuit. But now it seemed hideous. She studied the light brown hair between her legs. Her eyes darted anxiously between the platinum blonde hair on her head to the darker hair below. It was too late to do anything about it now.

She picked up a brush from the vanity. Awkwardly, she tried to tease her pubic hair, to make it seem a bit more fluffy. She turned slowly, examining her body from every angle she could. Finally, satisfied that she had done all she could to make herself presentable, she turned out the bathroom light, opened the door, and walked down the dark hall back to her bedroom.

She closed the door before she turned on the bedroom light. She had set out her clothes for today before going to bed last night–a pair of tan shorts and a white tank top. She had set out her underwear, too. Kristen studied the clothes neatly arranged on the top of the dresser. Did she really need to wear underwear today? It would be very obvious if she didn’t wear a bra. Maybe that would be a problem when she went apartment hunting after work today. Maybe not. She held up the shorts. The material was lightweight. The light-colored material might show more than she intended for anyone to see. For a moment she considered switching to a darker-colored pair of shorts, then she shook her head and laughed.

"I may be a full-blooded nudist," she thought with a wry smile, "but I must be about a fifty percent exhibitionist." Just two days ago the thought of wearing a bikini instead of underwear had left her almost crippled with embarrassment. Now she was trying to find a way to go entirely without underwear. "Slow and easy, Kristen," she whispered to herself. "Slow and easy." She pulled on the panties and reached for the bra.

As she fastened the bra, she realized that this was the first time she had worn clothes–real clothes, not just a towel–since Saturday morning, when she had undressed in the locker room at the beach. Almost two days without clothes. She thought it must have made her body more sensitive–she was acutely aware of the feel of the material against her skin. She had never really felt her clothes before. It was a strange sensation.

She put on the shorts and the tank top. With her fingers, she fixed the place where the tank top had mussed her hair. Her shoes were still in the trunk of her car. She opened a drawer and pulled out a clean pair of socks, which she stuffed into a pocket of her shorts.

She checked her outfit in the dresser mirror, turning from side to side to get a more complete picture. She gave a little tug to one leg of the shorts, to straighten out a wrinkle. When she was satisfied, she noticed a dull sense of nervous apprehension starting to grow in the pit of her stomach.

"Oh, jeez," she thought. "I’ve been naked for two days. Now I get embarrassed when I put clothes on." With a sigh, she turned out the light and opened the bedroom door.

She walked down the stairs slowly, trying not to make any noise. At the foot of the stairs, she noticed there was a light on in the kitchen. Someone was up. Kristen tiptoed silently into the kitchen. Her mother sat at the table, dressed in a bathrobe and slippers.

"Mom!" Kristen said in a whisper. "Did I wake you up?"

"No," her mother whispered back. "I’ve been up for a while. I wanted to be sure you got a good breakfast."

Kristen smiled. "You’re always looking out for me," she said.

Her mother rose and stepped over to the stove. "It’s my job," she whispered. "I’m your mother. It’s going to be a long day at work. You need your nutrition." She cracked an egg over a hot skillet.

Kristen sat at the table and helped herself to a glass of orange juice while her mother prepared the rest of her breakfast.

"Oh, Kristen," her mother said with a strange smile, "I have something I want to show you."

Kristen looked up, curious. "What is it?" she said.

Her mother pulled back one lapel of her bathrobe, revealing her naked breast. It was considerably larger than Kristen’s, and it looked surprisingly firm. "Your father and I slept in the nude last night, for the first time in–well, I don’t know how many years."

Kristen sat in stunned silence.

Her mother pulled the lapel closed again. She put both hands on the back of one of the chairs at the table, and leaned over, bringing her face closer to Kristen’s. She smiled broadly. "I feel young again," she whispered, "and I owe it all to you."

***Helpful Hands***

Right now, Kristen wished she were a coffee drinker. There was a faint light growing in the eastern sky, but the road was dark and empty, and her eyelids felt very heavy.

The invigorating effect of the morning’s cold shower had faded quickly once she got onto the road. She had rolled down her window, hoping that the brisk morning air would help her to stay awake. It had helped a little, but now she felt chilly. She wished she had dressed in something more substantial than the tank top and shorts she was wearing. Of course, soon she would be wearing nothing at all. She shivered a little at the thought. The day would warm up quickly enough once the sun was up, but now it was just plain cold.

The drive seemed longer this morning than it had on Saturday. She couldn’t handle this long commute every morning. Because of the early start today, she hoped to have much of the afternoon free to look for a nearby place to live. She shook her head groggily, trying to clear the fog from her mind. She had to find a place, and soon.

The route was circuitous and confusing. She had almost concluded that she had already passed the beach when she finally saw the Black Knife Beach sign. With a sigh of relief, she turned onto the short gravel road that connected to the beach’s parking lot.

She parked near the stairs at the top of the steep trail down to the beach. When she cut off the engine, she paused to take several deep breaths. She pinched her cheeks, and lightly slapped them with both hands. She pumped her arms vigorously, trying to stimulate her sluggish circulation. Unless she could shake off this drowsiness, it was going to be a very long day. She picked up the large paper bag on the seat beside her. She had packed a small lunch, a couple clean towels and a bottle of suntan lotion.

She shivered as she stepped out of the car. The asphalt surface of the parking lot felt surprisingly cold under her bare feet. She stepped quickly to the rear of the car and opened the trunk. In the darkness, it took her a moment to find her shoes amid the clutter. She pulled her clean socks from the pocket of her shorts, and perched awkwardly on the car’s rear bumper. She brushed the dirt from the sole of each foot before pulling on the sock and putting on the shoe. Her chill seemed to dissipate quickly once she had her shoes on.

When she stood at the top of the stairs and looked down to the beach below, her heart quailed. It was so dark. The trail had been challenging in daylight; now it seemed impassable. On the beach far below, she could see light spilling from the open doorway of the lifeguard station. Someone was there already.

Kristen studied the sky, and the growing glow in the east. It didn’t seem like enough light, but someone had already been able to make it down. Nervously, she started down the steps. When she reached the narrow gravel path at the foot of the staircase, she was pleasantly surprised to discover that she could see well enough to make her way down the trail. Distant objects were indistinct and dim, but the path immediately ahead was visible enough, and the sky continued to brighten while she made the descent.

She had forgotten just how physically demanding the trail was. She was in robust good health, but halfway down the slope, her heart was pounding and she was breathing heavily. This was strenuous exercise. By the end of the summer, she thought wryly, she would be either in the best condition of her life, or dead.

When she reached the base of the cliff, Kristen paused for a moment to catch her breath. In this pale light, the beach looked extraordinarily beautiful, in an eerie sort of way. It was almost as if the sea and the white sand glimmered with a ghostly light all their own. She looked down the length of the beach. So far as she could tell, there wasn’t a soul anywhere on the beach. She looked up at the massive back cliff looming behind her, then back at the strangely luminescent beach. She smiled. No one was seeing this–no one but her.

She approached the lifeguard station on a fairly indirect path. She was reveling in the magical light on the beach, and wasn’t particularly eager to get inside. Besides, it was still dark and quiet, and she didn’t want to startle whomever was inside. She walked on a long arc across the sand, keeping her distance from the building, until she reached a point where she had a clear view through the open doorway.

She saw Beth seated at the desk just inside the door, apparently busy with some sort of paperwork. She could see that Beth was topless, but the position of the desk prevented her from seeing whether Beth was bottomless, as well. She couldn’t know for certain, but Kristen reasoned that under the circumstances it was very probable that Beth was completely nude. To her surprise, Kristen felt her cheeks growing hot.

A nervous flutter began to grew in the pit of her stomach. The sight of Beth working naked in the little office brought reality home more vividly than any of the surreal events of the weekend. She felt her heart pounding rapidly. It was Monday morning at Black Knife Beach. She knew what that meant.

Kristen walked slowly toward the open door. About a dozen yards from the doorway, she coughed, to avoid startling Beth when she walked through the door.

Beth looked up from her work with a puzzled expression.

"What’s the deal, Beth?" Kristen said as she stepped up to the door. "Do you live down here, or what?"

Beth smiled brightly. "Kristen, you made it!" she said, rising to greet her. Kristen’s speculation was confirmed–Beth, of course, was totally nude.

"You sound surprised," Kristen said. "Did you think I wasn’t going to make it?"

"Well…" Beth pondered for a moment. "Let’s just say I had a great deal of confidence in you. I’m really glad you’re here."

Kristen stepped into the room and squinted in the artificial light. She tried to stifle a yawn. "Thanks for your confidence, Beth. You know, I *had* to come back today." She yawned again. "I–I couldn’t let you down."

"Are you awake?" Beth asked, grinning.

Kristen shook her head to clear the cobwebs. "Oh, I’ll be okay. I’m not used to getting up this early. It’s quite a drive out here. And I didn’t sleep very well last night."

Beth gave Kristen a serious look. "So, tell me, Kristen," she said soberly, "how was your weekend? Any trauma from your parents?"

Kristen laughed and rolled her eyes. "You wouldn’t believe me if I told you," she said. "Sometime I’ll have to tell you all about it. For now, it’s enough to say that my parents have been very supportive–more than supportive, actually." She glanced around the office and through the door into the locker room. "So, am I the first one here?" she asked.

Beth nodded. "First one. You’re almost half an hour early. I came down to make sure the place was open when everyone started to arrive, and I wanted to finish up some of this paperwork."

"Did you get my locker combination yet?" Kristen asked.

Beth shook her head. "No," she said, "but you’ll appreciate this." She picked up the telephone and held the receiver out to Kristen.

Kristen looked at Beth with a puzzled expression. "What is it?" she asked.

"A dial tone," Beth answered. "The phones have been connected. When the offices downtown open at nine o’clock, we’ll be able to call and get your combination." She put the receiver back on the hook. "In the meantime," she said, "there’s one locker back there with a broken lock. You can put your stuff in there, if you want. Nobody’s going to bother it."

"Okay," Kristen said, stifling another yawn.

"If it will make you feel any better," Beth said, "we usually don’t start this early. The first couple days are kind of unusual, because we have to do a lot of work getting things ready for the season. We like to get an early start because some of it is hot work, and we want to avoid the worst of the afternoon heat."

"When do we get off this afternoon?" Kristen asked.

"We’ll be done for the day at two o’clock today and tomorrow," Beth replied. "Starting Wednesday, we’ll start our shift at 8 o’clock, and you’ll be able to get back to a more normal sleep schedule. But you won’t have any trouble sleeping tonight. You’re going to be plenty tired by the end of the day."

Kristen nodded. "Well, right now I’m just sleepy. I’ll be fine once the sun is up and I have something to do."

"We’ll start the day today right at six o’clock with a crew meeting," Beth said. "We’ll plan out today’s work, make introductions, and so on." She looked narrowly into Kristen’s eyes. "Everybody has to be in uniform for that. You know what that means, right?"

"Oh, yes," Kristen said, with a rueful smile. "I know what that means. Naked."

"Would you like me to close the door so you can have a little privacy?" Beth asked.

Kristen hesitated for a moment, then shook her head. "No," she said, "I’ve grown up a little this weekend."

Beth smiled. Kristen turned and walked back to the locker room.

The broken locker wasn’t difficult to find. Kristen sat down on the bench before the locker and removed her tennis shoes. On Saturday, the shoes had been brilliantly white and spotless. Now she felt a little embarrassed by their appearance, scuffed and grimy, probably from the rough cliffside trail. She peeled off her socks and put them inside the shoes, then put the shoes on the floor of the broken locker.

As she pulled her tank top off over her head, the uneasy tickling sensation in the pit of her stomach started to grow. By now the sensation was a familiar one, and not entirely unpleasant. She hung the top inside the locker.

She glanced through the doorway into the little office. No one else had arrived yet.

She quickly unfastened her bra and slipped it off. The tickle in her gut grew stronger. On Saturday, she remembered, the air on her bare breasts had made her feel cold. Now it felt refreshing.

With another quick glance through the open locker room door, she unfastened the snap on her shorts. She had to pause for a moment as the sensation low in her stomach grew stronger and swept over her entire body. For several seconds, she found it difficult to breathe. She hooked her thumbs inside her panties, and swiftly lowered shorts and panties together. She folded each item neatly and put it into the locker.

She opened the brown paper bag she had brought with her, and withdrew her bottle of suntan lotion. Glancing periodically through the open door, she applied the sunscreen carefully. She rubbed it onto her arms, and onto the backs of her hands. She rubbed it onto her stomach, and onto her breasts. She applied a little extra to the sensitive skin around her nipples, which stiffened as she rubbed the lotion on. She rubbed sunscreen onto her calves and her feet. She was even careful to get lotion between her toes. She stood so she could spread lotion to all parts of her thighs. From her thighs, she worked the lotion up over her hips and her buttocks.

She blushed, recalling her mother’s advice about the importance of thoroughness in applying the sunscreen. Once again she looked through the open doorway, then she stepped around the corner to the end of the row of lockers. Out of the direct line of sight through the door, she carefully applied the lotion to the furrow between her buttocks, and to the delicate area between her legs, reddening all the time.

When she was satisfied that she had covered every inch of flesh that she could reach, Kristen stepped up to the locker room doorway. "Beth," she said, "could you help me put some sunscreen on my back?"

Beth looked up from her paperwork and smiled. "Sure, no problem," she said. "It’ll be just one minute." She turned her attention back to the papers before her, and started to write something.

At that instant, a tall, sandy-haired man with an imposing physique stepped through the office door, dressed in loose tan trousers and a white polo shirt. Reflexively, Kristen cringed. One hand moved to cover her pubic region, and the other flew up to hide her breasts.

"Hi, Beth," the man said brightly. He noticed Kristen in the corner of his eye. He turned his head to the locker room door, smiled, and nodded to Kristen. "Hello," he said pleasantly.

"Hi, Don," Beth said, rising to greet him. "Good to see you again. Say, I have my hands full here," she said, indicating the papers spread across the desk. "Could you give Kristen a hand with her sunscreen?"

"Oh, sure," Don replied, with a big smile. "No trouble at all. I’ll help her, and she can help me."

***Crew***

"Pleased to meet you, Kristen. My name’s Don," the man said, extending his hand.

Kristen felt almost as embarrassed about the way she had tried to cover herself as she did about being naked. With an effort of will, she lowered her arms to her sides. "Uh, hi," she said, with a little nod. Awkwardly, she reached out and shook Don’s hand.

She blushed intensely. To be honest, meeting this man would have caused her to blush under any circumstances. She stood transfixed by the steady gaze of his piercing blue eyes. She expected him to look over her naked body, but his eyes stayed locked on hers. She was accustomed to the furtive glances of adolescent boys. This was different.

Don seemed to be in his mid-twenties. He was a big man, about 6’4" tall and 210 pounds, all muscle. Kristen admired the sleek strong lines of his torso. His white polo shirt wasn’t particularly tight, but he filled it out admirably, she mused. She allowed her eyes to wander over his body, studying his masculine form with frank admiration, losing herself for a moment in a sensation she had never felt so strongly before. She wondered idly what he looked like naked, and trembled a bit when she realized that she would soon find out.

She turned her eyes up again to his ruggedly handsome face. He smiled warmly, showing a row of even white teeth. His eyes were still locked on hers.

Kristen felt mortified–he had seen it! He had seen her checking out his body. Her eyes stung as tears of shame began to form. Rapidly she blinked them away. Don seemed to have noticed nothing; he was still shaking Kristen’s hand, still smiling amiably. "A–a pleasure to meet you, Don," she choked, her throat try.

"Is this your sunscreen?" Don asked pleasantly, picking up the bottle.

For a moment, Kristen was confused by the question. She looked blankly at the bottle in Don’s hand, and suddenly recollected where she was. "Oh, the–the sunscreen," she stammered. "That–that’s mine, yes."

Don opened the bottle. "Do you want me just to get your back, or would you like the full service?" he asked.

Kristen’s face grew hotter still. She studied his face–was he joking? She couldn’t tell. There was nothing in his expression or the tone of his voice to suggest that he was not serious, or that there was anything the least bit unusual about the question. "J–just the back, please," she said hoarsely.

Don made a circular motion with his finger. "Turn around," he said.

Kristen nodded. With her heart pounding, she turned her bare back to him.

With workmanlike calm, Don poured some of the lotion into the palm of his hand. He placed his palm on Kristen’s tailbone, with his fingers pointed down. His fingertips rested softly on the upper part of her buttocks. Kristen stiffened. The sunscreen felt cold. She could feel some of the cold fluid starting to trickle down from her tailbone. Don pressed his fingers tight against her flesh, stopping the drip. One finger rested firmly between the cheeks of Kristen’s ass. Her body stiffened even more. Had he done that on purpose?

Slowly, with steady pressure, Don moved his hand up, spreading the cold lotion up Kristen’s spine. She shivered, not entirely from the cold. His palm stayed firmly pressed against her back, but his trailing fingers moved softly back and forth across her spine. His hand moved slowly and steadily up. At the base of her neck, he turned his hand so that his fingers ran across her spine. He gently rubbed the lotion onto the nape of her neck, up to her hairline.

Kristen’s breathing was fast and shallow. Now Don moved his hand back down her spine, making a series of firm sweeping motions, trying to spread the lotion outward across her back. He paused and looked down at the palm of his hand. "This stuff’s a little runny," he said blandly. "Didn’t mean to drip."

"It–it’s okay," Kristen said meekly.

Don poured some more of the lotion into his hand. "Why don’t you lean over here and put your hands on the bench? That will give me a flatter surface to work with, and should make this a little easier."

Kristen nodded. She turned toward the bench and bent over, resting her weight on the heels of her hands against the edge of the bench. Don had already started to spread the cold lotion across her back before she realized how unseemly a position she was in. Had Don done this on purpose? Was he deliberately trying to embarrass her? She twisted her head around to study his face.

Don seemed serenely unaware of Kristen’s emotional turmoil. He spread the lotion over her back as calmly as a careful worker painting a barn door. After a moment he smiled and patted Kristen on the small of her back. "Okay, I think that’s pretty good," he said.

Relieved, Kristen straightened up. She gave Don a weak smile. "Thanks," she said.

"Any time," Don replied. He swiftly pulled his shirt off over his head. Kristen was startled by the suddenness of the movement, but she seemed to see it in slow motion. She marveled at the way the muscles in his back and shoulders moved.

Don kicked off his canvas loafers. In the blink of an eye, he loosened his belt, unbuttoned and unzipped his trousers, and slipped them down to his knees. Kristen’s heart raced. He was wearing no underwear. It took only a instant for him to step out of the trousers. Now he was as naked as she was.

He pulled a small bottle of sunscreen from the pocket of the trousers, then glanced at the larger bottle that was sitting on the bench. He turned to face Kristen without a hint of self-consciousness. "Kristen," he said, "would you mind if I used some of your sunscreen? I’ve heard this stuff is supposed to be pretty good."

"Help yourself," Kristen said. She smiled as she remembered Mr. Robinson’s joking remark about the Black Knife Beach lifeguards signing an endorsement contract for suntan lotion.

Kristen watched as Don spread the lotion over his own body. He started by dabbing some of the lotion onto his forehead, then spread it over his face and down his neck. He carefully applied lotion to his ears, and to the back of his neck. He worked swiftly and expertly down his body, covering his shoulders, arms, chest. She watched in fascination as he stroked his hands across his tight abdominal muscles.

She felt she should turn away, but she couldn’t. She watched in fascination as he wiped the lotion onto his genitals. He seemed to suffer not a trace of embarrassment, working swiftly and efficiently while Kristen watched. As he bent to spread the lotion down his thighs, he looked up and spoke. "My brand is pretty good," he said, cocking his head toward his bottle of sunscreen, "but it feels kind of greasy. This stuff is supposed to feel a lot more natural, and work just as well."

Kristen lowered her eyes to the floor. "I, uh, I have a case of this," she said. "The guy who gave it to me said I should share it with the other lifeguards. Do you want me to bring you a bottle?"

Don smiled brightly and straightened up. "That’s awfully nice of you," he said. "Sure, I’d like to try it." He poured a little more of the liquid into his hand, and reached around to spread it over his rear. Then he held the bottle out to Kristen. "Okay," he said. "Ready."

Kristen accepted the bottle with a trembling hand.

"Would you like me to sit or stand?" Don asked. "Or bend over?"

Kristen felt her face redden again. She tried to consider the question in a purely practical manner. "Standing will be best, I think," she said. Don turned his naked back toward her.

Kristen poured some of the lotion into one hand, then rubbed her hands together briskly as she had seen Mary do the day before. She used both hands to spread the lotion over the broad expanse of Don’s back. Her heart beat faster as she slid her hands over the firm strong muscles. She felt the shape of each separate muscle distinctly, even if she couldn’t see it. She felt the separate bones in his spine. She felt the heat of his body under her hands. And she felt the strange tickling sensation rising in her stomach–a sensation that had become familiar during the past two days.

She fought to keep her mind on the matter at hand. She poured a little more of the sunscreen onto her hand, warmed it as she had before, and set to work spreading it across Don’s back.

"I’m next," an unfamiliar male voice called out. Kristen turned to see another man entering the locker room.

"George!" Don said, cheerfully.

"Breaking in the new girl, eh?" George responded.

Don laughed and turned his head to look at Kristen, who had frozen with her hands still pressed against the small of his back. "Kristen is pretty good, George. I think you’re going to like her."

"Oh, I like her already," George said, smiling. "Your word is good enough for me." George dropped a duffel bag on the floor and turned to open his locker. He looked a few years younger than Don. He opened his locker and started to unbutton his shirt. His hair was dark brown, and fairly long. He wasn’t as tall or muscular as Don, but Kristen saw much to admire in his lean, fit physique. She watched as he took off his shirt.

"Hey, back to work!" Don said sharply. Kristen looked up red-faced to see that he was looking at her over his shoulder, and smiling. She turned her attention back to the problem of spreading sunscreen over Don’s back. When she was finished, she felt tempted to give Don a little pat on the ass. She resisted the temptation.

"All done," she said, timidly.

Don turned to face her. "Thanks," he said with a bright smile. "You do good work." He turned to open his locker.

Kristen looked over at George. He was already completely undressed. He was busy now with something inside his locker. She had nothing to do immediately, and she felt self-conscious and awkward.

A woman stepped through the door. "George! Don! Great to see you," she said.

"Alicia!" the men called out, in unison. Alicia seemed to be in her early twenties. She was wearing jogging shoes and a baggy gray sweat suit. Her golden blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She looked quizzically at Kristen.

"Alicia, this is Kristen," Don said. "She’s new here."

"I thought so," Alicia said. She smiled and reached out to shake Kristen’s hand. "Nice to meet you, Kristen. I’m Alicia. If anyone has told you anything about me, I want to say right here and now that it’s all a pack of lies."

Kristen laughed and shook Alicia’s hand. "Nice to meet you," she said.

Alicia said, "Now, if these two guys give you any kind of trouble…" She paused, then shrugged. "Well, then I guess you’re on your own," she said.

"I–I’ll keep that in mind," Kristen said, with a puzzled smile.

"Just kidding," Alicia said. "Excuse me, my locker’s over there," she said, pointing past Kristen. Kristen pressed herself tightly against the row of lockers to give Alicia room to pass. She gasped at the feel of the cold metal of the lockers against her bare skin.

Alicia opened the door of her locker and unzipped the top of her sweat suit. Kristen could see that she was bare underneath. Alicia sat on the bench and took off her running shoes and a pair of high-topped white socks. She tossed them all unceremoniously into her open locker. She stood and loosened the drawstring at the top of her sweat pants. The loose pants simply dropped around Alicia’s ankles, and she stepped out of them. She kicked the pants into the locker. Kristen noted that Alicia was a natural blonde.

"Oh, I’m sorry. Could you excuse me?" Alicia said. "I left my beach bag out in the office." Again Kristen pressed herself against the cold metal lockers to let Alicia squeeze by. Wearing only the open jacket of her sweat suit, Alicia seemed to Kristen to be more naked than naked. The clothing didn’t cover anything essential; it seemed only to call attention to what Alicia wasn’t wearing.

Alicia returned in a moment, carrying her beach bag, and Kristen pressed herself against the cold metal lockers again to let her pass.

"It’s a little crowded in here," Kristen said. "I’m going to get out of everyone’s way." She stepped toward the doorway.

Alicia and Don murmured indistinct acknowledgements. "You’re still going to do my back, right?" George asked.

Kristen nodded. "Let me know when you’re ready." She stepped through the door into the office.

Beth looked up from her paperwork and smiled. "It looks like you’re doing okay," she said. "Sorry I couldn’t come back and help you with your sunscreen, but everybody just pitches in around here."

"It’s okay," Kristen said. "It just takes a little while to get used to it."

A voluptuous auburn-haired woman in faded blue jeans and a baggy yellow t-shirt came through the office door. "Lizzy!" she cried to Beth.

Beth laughed. "Katie!" she responded.

The woman laughed. "Okay, you win, Beth."

"Trina," Beth said, "I’d like you to meet Kristen. This is her first year as a lifeguard."

"Ohmigod!" Trina said, reaching out to shake Kristen’s hand. "They put you on Black Knife Beach your very first year?"

Kristen nodded meekly.

"That’s a pretty big assignment for your first year," Trina said. "Some people cut and run rather than working down here. I know I thought about it. Listen, I don’t know how you feel right now, but listen to the voice of experience, okay?"

Kristen nodded.

"This is the best beach in the world," Trina said. "After you’ve been here for a while, you’ll be spoiled. You’ll never want to leave."

Kristen shot a quick glance at Beth. "Th–that’s what I hear," she said.

"Well," Trina said, "I’d better get in there and get into uniform." She glanced playfully at Beth. "The boss is extremely strict, and the penalties for being out of uniform are severe." She laughed and walked into the locker room.

Kristen walked over to Beth’s desk. She said, "What did she mean–"

"Beth!" a man’s voice called. "Hey, and somebody new! Excellent."

"Richard!" Beth said. "Meet Kristen."

Kristen turned and shook hands with a man about thirty years old. He was shirtless, dressed in black slacks and cheap canvas shoes, without socks. He was about 5’10" tall, and clearly in good shape, but after meeting Don, Kristen found Richard’s physique unremarkable.

"Kristen," he said. "I’ve always liked that name. And now I’m going to like it even more. Glad to meet you, Kristen." He looked over through the open door of the locker room. "I’d like to stay and chat, but time’s getting short. I have to get into uniform." Without waiting for her to say a word, he walked back to the locker room.

Kristen looked at Beth. "Isn’t he a little old to be a lifeguard?" she whispered.

Beth shook her head. "No, the oldest lifeguard employed by the city is over forty. Richard’s still in great shape, and he’s got a lot of experience. You can learn a lot from him."

Suddenly Beth looked out the door into the darkness. She tapped theatrically on her wristwatch. "Cutting it pretty close again, aren’t you, Janet?" she called into the darkness.

Kristen turned and looked through the doorway. She could see a shadowy form approaching. A woman’s voice called, "I need my beauty rest, Beth. At least I don’t have all the overhead of the others."

The woman came into the light and stepped through the doorway. She had shining shoulder-length black hair, and stunning green eyes. She had a beach bag slung over one shoulder. She was wearing nothing but a pair of leather sandals.

"Let me…" Janet stopped speaking and looked at Kristen with a strange expression. After a moment, she looked at Beth and continued, "Let me dump my beach bag in the locker and get my cap, and I’m all set."

Feeling puzzled, Kristen watched the naked woman walk into the locker room.

"Well," Beth said, "the gang’s all here."

***Out of Uniform***

Kristen felt awkward and uncertain. The little office was crowded, and no matter where she stood, she always seemed to be in someone’s way. The room was noisy with the hubbub of several simultaneous conversations. Everyone was renewing old friendships and catching up on the latest news, and Kristen was at a distinct disadvantage–the only person she really knew was Beth, who was busily chatting with her friends.

Kristen’s eyes darted from face to face, trying to associate names with faces. She had heard everyone’s name, but it might help, she thought, if everyone were wearing a name tag–or had their name tattooed on their chest. She listened and tried to make sense of the disjointed conversations all around her.

"So, George," Richard said, "did you ever get rid of that clunker of yours?"

George laughed. "Hey, I’m ready to give it up whenever you’re ready to buy me a new one, Richard."

Everyone seemed completely relaxed and comfortable, in stark contrast to Kristen’s own tense apprehension, which made her feel even more isolated.

She didn’t know where to look. She was fascinated by the naked bodies all around her. She was particularly intrigued by the bodies of the men–she wanted to study the intricate interplay of the sharply-defined muscles as their bodies moved. She was curious, too, about the bodies of the women–the size and color of the aureoles around their nipples, the curve of their stomachs above their pubic region, the way they had trimmed their pubic hair. Reflexive shame compelled her to look away, but there was nowhere to turn. She was surrounded by naked people.

"I ran into Erik and his crew on Saturday," Beth said.

"Erik?" The girl with the pony tail–Alicia–responded. "Is Maria still with Paul?"

"Yep," Beth said.

Alicia shook her head sadly. "I don’t know what she sees in that guy."

"I don’t think she’s ever looked in a mirror," Don said. "I don’t think she realizes she could replace that jerk in a New York minute." Alicia nodded.

In spite of the introductions, Kristen knew virtually nothing about any of these people. She didn’t need a name tag to remember Don’s name. He was deep in conversation, paying no attention to her. Only a few minutes before, he had laid his hands on her body, and she had put her hands upon him. But they couldn’t have exchanged much more than a few dozen words. She couldn’t pretend that she knew the man.

Glumly, she remembered several times when she accompanied girls from her high school and hung out at the mall. They were depressing memories–her friends seemed to have an easy rapport with everyone they met. Kristen always felt like the odd wheel. She felt much the same way now.

"So, we’re pretty mad at the cable company, and we’re looking into getting one of those satellite dishes," Janet said to Trina. From the corner of her eye, Janet studied Kristen’s face and furrowed her brow.

"Oh, can I come up? I’ve always wanted to see one of those," Trina said.

Although she felt isolated, Kristen was surprised to realize that she felt considerably more embarrassed about seeing the others nude than she did about them seeing her. She had practically forgotten that she was naked, but every now and then someone in the crowded room would move, and she would feel raw flesh brush against her buttocks, providing a vivid reminder that she, too, was completely bare.

"I’m sort of a contrarian," Richard said. "If the herd goes this way, I’m going that way. It’s worked out pretty well for me." He moved his hands to indicate the herd going one way, and himself going the other.

George nodded and made a diving motion with one hand. "Voooop! Right off the cliff, that’s me," he said, laughing.

For the most part, Kristen felt that she was handling herself remarkably well. She had dreaded this moment all weekend long, imagining the lecherous leers of the male lifeguards. Now she felt oddly disappointed that they were giving her so little attention. These men seemed to see her as just one of the guys. It was disconcerting.

"Granted," Don said, "it’s a good shoe. But I don’t see how they can charge that much money for it. You’re paying so much extra for nothing but hype."

Kristen was slowly becoming aware of something more disconcerting than the apparent indifference of the men. She noticed that Janet was staring at her at every opportunity. There was an intensity to the green-eyed woman’s gaze that made Kristen very uncomfortable. Kristen was accustomed to men’s eyes following her every move. She felt a little queasy when the thought crossed her mind that a lustful lesbian had an eye on her.

"Is your sister going on the warpath again this year, Richard?" Alicia asked.

Richard rolled his eyes. "Probably so," he said in an exasperated tone of voice.

"Man!" George said, shaking his head. "Why don’t you just evict her?"

"She’s my kid sister, George," Richard replied tensely. "She’s actually a very nice person. She just has this one particular burr up her butt."

Kristen noticed Beth checking her wristwatch. Kristen quickly glanced around the room and noted that Beth was the only person wearing a watch. Except for the lifeguard caps, it was the only thing anyone in the room was wearing.

Kristen started to feel vaguely uneasy. She was the only person without a cap; hers was still locked in her locker, and she couldn’t get at it until she got the combination later. Beth had told her that the cap was the uniform at Black Knife Beach. Kristen glanced nervously into the locker room, where the door of her locker was closed and locked. What was it Trina had said–something about severe penalties for being out of uniform?

"Bzzzzt!" Beth cried suddenly. "Okay, everybody, it’s six o’clock! Ding! Ding! Ding! Rise and shine! Time to get to work!"

Kristen was jounced about as everyone moved forward to gather around Beth. Don, standing right next to Beth, crouched down so that the shorter people behind him could see. As everyone took up their position, Kristen was dismayed to notice Janet standing right beside her. Janet’s eyes wandered slowly over Kristen’s body, and stopped on her face.

"Welcome back, everyone," Beth said. "It’s good to see all your smiling faces again."

"Faces?" Don said. Most of the people in the room chuckled appreciatively.

"I’d like to start things off with everybody’s very favorite thing–paperwork!" Beth said. There was a general groan. Beth held up a small stack of white cards. "Here are your time cards. You have to write in your employee number, and you have to write in your time every day. Let me make this perfectly clear, people: if you don’t fill in your time, you don’t get paid. Period. I’m not going to fill them in for you anymore."

There were a few discontented murmurs. Beth shook her head. "Come on, folks. Since the timeclock is broken, you get to write your own time in. You know that I’m not a real stickler about this stuff, so long as you get the work done. You don’t know how lucky you are."

Kristen looked at the little punch clock hanging near the door. "Uh, Beth?" she said. "Is the timeclock really broken? It looks like it’s just not plugged in."

There were a few annoyed grumbles from the other lifeguards. Beth looked at Kristen and smiled. She noisily cleared her throat, and spoke a little louder than before. "As I said, the… timeclock… is… broken, and has been for five years." She raised the stack of timecards over her head again. "The only thing I care about is that we’re getting the job done, and doing it right. But you guys have got to help me out here. Just fill out the timecards, okay?" There were a few grumbles, but the lifeguards all nodded.

"Okay," Beth said. "Just think of it as your own little sacrifice to Papyrus, the God of Bureaucracy. Next item. Educational update. Let’s see," she said, shuffling through a stack of colorful brochures, "how to listen to and interpret weather reports, a bulletin about sea lice, the instruction manual for the walkie-talkies, something nice about how to use a ladder safely. Really good stuff." She held up the stack of brochures. "We’re all supposed to review this stuff together. Now, it’s my understanding that all you folks know how to read–am I right about that? If so, you know where to find this stuff. Please take the time to look it over, okay?" She plopped the stack of brochures back down on her desk.

Janet leaned forward a bit and stared into Kristen’s eyes. She wiggled her eyebrows and smiled, as if trying to get Kristen’s attention. Kristen blushed and turned her face away, pretending to study a map hanging on the office wall.

"Next item," Beth said. "We’ve got a laurel wreath for Richard."

"A laurel wreath already?" someone said.

"This is a leftover from last year," Beth said, studying a little white card. "It’s for Richard’s heroic rescue of the lady from the boat." Most of the lifeguards laughed, and everyone applauded as Beth handed the little card to Richard.

"Don’t I get another one?" Richard asked, laughing. "I mean, I had to revive her after she saw she was surrounded by naked savages." Everyone laughed.

"I think this one is supposed to cover that, too," Beth said, chuckling. "Anyway, folks, Richard gets the first laurel wreath of the year, and, boy, did he earn it!" The lifeguards laughed and applauded again.

Richard took off his cap and tucked it under one arm. His hands were busy with the little white card. Kristen craned her neck to see that the award was a little enamel pin with a gilded image of a laurel wreath on its face. Richard detached the pin from the card, and pinned it onto the side of his cap. When he put the cap back onto his head, there was another brief round of applause. Richard tipped his cap to acknowledge the applause.

Janet leaned over toward Kristen. "Hey, blondie!" she whispered.

Blushing, Kristen turned her face away again. "Hush," she whispered. "I–I’m trying to listen."

"Okay," Beth said. "Next item. We are pretty short-staffed again this year, and we have to cover the weekends. We did pretty well last year, and we’re going to use the same kind of rotation this year. I want you all to give me your preferred schedule, and I’ll get something final worked out by the end of the day." There were a few grumbles, but most of the lifeguards nodded.

"However," Beth continued, "we’re all going to have to work straight sevens for the first two weeks, until we can get our rookie up to speed."

There were loud groans from many of the lifeguards. Kristen smiled apologetically and hung her head.

"Grow up, people," Beth said. "It’s just two weeks. Sorry if it screws up your social life, but that’s life."

"Hey, it doesn’t mess up my social life," George said. "I don’t have any dirty clothes to take to the laundromat anyway." Most of the lifeguards laughed.

"George, you need to get out more," Richard said, laughing. Kristen breathed a sigh of relief that the anger directed at her seemed to be quickly dissipated.

"Speaking of our rookie," Beth said, looking squarely into Kristen’s eyes and smiling mischievously, "you have probably noticed that she is out of uniform. She isn’t wearing her cap."

All eyes turned toward Kristen, who looked at Beth with a dismayed expression. She was suddenly intensely aware of her own nakedness, and she felt the stirrings of a reawakening sense of shame.

"The rules are pretty clear, I’m afraid," Beth continued. "A lifeguard out of uniform earns a demerit. Ten demerits, and you’re fired."

Kristen gasped. "But–but it was an accident!" she said.

Beth nodded. "I personally think the penalty is pretty harsh," she said, "especially considering that there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for why she isn’t wearing her cap. But unfortunately, I’m not allowed to just act as if this never happened. So here’s what I propose: no demerit. Nothing goes in the personnel file. And in exchange, she agrees to pay a forfeit."

The other lifeguards nodded approvingly.

"A–a forfeit?" Kristen asked.

"Yes," Beth said, smiling sweetly. "I have something in mind that I would like you to do. If you’ll agree to do it, you won’t get the demerit. Your record stays clean."

Kristen felt betrayed. "What is it?" she asked. "What do I have to do?"

"No, I’m not going to tell you that. But I promise you, it’s nothing bad. I think you’ll actually enjoy it," Beth said.

Tears were forming in Kristen’s eyes. She struggled to maintain her composure. The other lifeguards stood around her and several soft voices offered advice: "Don’t be afraid. It’s okay. Take the deal. Beth’s all right. You can trust her."

"Come on. I’ve already asked you to do several things that you didn’t want to do, haven’t I? Are you sorry that you did any of them?"

Kristen shook her head. "No," she said, barely controlling her trembling voice.

"Okay," Beth said. "Show me you trust me. Take the forfeit."

Kristen fought back a sob. Her knees wobbled.

"Come on, Kristen," Beth said.

"Kristen?" Janet cried. She lunged over and threw her arms around the startled Kristen in a tight bear hug. "Omigod, Kristen! It *is* you!"

***Remember?***

With an astonished shriek, Kristen recoiled from Janet’s embrace. Her face was twisted into a mask of shock and revulsion. The other lifeguards stood aghast, startled and seemingly frozen in their tracks.

Janet wore a pained expression. "You–you don’t remember me, do you?" she asked.

"I… don’t… *know*… you!" Kristen choked, shrinking from the green-eyed woman.

"Sure you do, Kristen," Janet said plaintively. "Sure you do! You and your folks used to come out to our place all the time. I–I guess I didn’t realize how long it’s been. We were great friends, Kristen. Don’t you remember? I’m Janet–uh, uh, Jannie. Remember Jannie?"

"Jannie? I–I don’t…" Kristen took another step back, but she studied Janet’s face carefully.

"You, uh, you always liked our little merry-go-round, remember?" Janet said, her voice starting to tremble. "We had a little wooden merry-go-round, and it was painted green on the inside, and bright orange around the edges. Remember? You little kids would sit on the inside, and we bigger kids would push it, and try to get it going really fast. Don’t you remember?"

Kristen was ashen-faced. "I–I’m not sure," she whispered.

"I–I still remember the way you used to laugh," Janet continued. "One time you got off the merry-go-round, and you kept falling down because you were so dizzy, remember? You kept falling down, but you never stopped laughing. You were the sweetest little kid, Kristen. I just loved you to pieces. I really missed you when your folks stopped coming around."

"A merry-go-round," Kristen breathed, shaking her head almost imperceptibly. There was a faraway look in her eyes.

Janet searched Kristen’s eyes for some sign of recognition, but she saw only puzzlement. Janet’s chin quivered as she asked, "Do–do you remember the Maypole? You always seemed to like that. We had a Maypole out in the playground. It was–it was a metal pole about twenty or twenty-five feet high, remember? There were chains fastened to this gizmo on the top, and there was a handle on the other end of each chain that you could grab onto. If a bunch of kids ran around fast, and kicked up their heels–well, you used to say you were flying, remember?"

"Oh, my gosh!" Kristen gasped. She reached out with one hand to steady herself against a file cabinet. Wide-eyed, she studied Janet’s face once again.

"You–you remember? Oh, you *do* remember! Oh, thank goodness!" Janet said, with a sob of relief. A delighted smile spread across Janet’s face, pushing her cheeks up and creating little crinkles around her eyes.

"Oh, my gosh," Kristen repeated, her jaw gaping. Her hands shot up to cover her mouth. "Oh, my gosh. Oh, Jannie, *there* you are! I–I had forgotten everything. I had forgotten all about you. I didn’t recognize you until you smiled." Her vision was blurring with tears. "You–you smiled, and there you were! Oh, Jannie!" With a sob, Kristen rushed forward and flung her arms around Janet.

The other lifeguards stood in awkward silence. Alicia toyed idly with the end of her ponytail, and stared at the ceiling. Richard seemed to be inspecting his fingers for dirt under the nails. He shot a nasty glance at George, who stared wide-eyed at the two naked women sobbing and embracing just a few feet in front of him. George’s cheeks reddened, and he started to study his own fingernails. Trina had bowed her head and closed her eyes, almost as if in prayer.

Don leaned over and whispered to Beth, "Did you ever have the feeling you were in the middle of a really badly written TV show?"

Beth whispered back, "What do you mean?"

Don shook his head and chuckled. "You know, real life doesn’t work this way," he whispered.

Beth smiled. "Oh, I don’t know, Don," she said softly. She shrugged her shoulders. "Who’s to say how real life works?"

"I’m sorry, everybody," Janet said, wiping tears from her eyes. "I knew there was something awfully familiar about Kristen, but I just couldn’t place her until Beth mentioned her name. You all know my folks run a nudist club. Well, Kristen and her parents used to come around almost every weekend. Then–I suppose it’s been fourteen or fifteen years–they just stopped coming." She looked at Kristen with misty eyes. "I–I never knew what happened to them."

Beth’s eyebrows were arched in surprise. "Kristen’s a nudist? Boy, she sure had me fooled on Saturday."

Kristen blushed. "I’m sorry, Beth. I–I wasn’t trying to fool anybody," she said.

Beth nodded and smiled. "I know you weren’t," she said, gently.

"When I got home on Saturday, my parents told me they had met right here, on this beach," Kristen said. "I was so surprised, I–I didn’t know what to think. They said they used to be nudists, and that they used to take me with them to nudist colonies. And I–I didn’t remember any of that. I tried to remember, and I couldn’t. I don’t know, maybe I remembered some things, but thought they were dreams I’d had a long time ago, or something. I–I just couldn’t remember."

Kristen looked at Janet and smiled. "But Jannie–uh, sorry, Janet–brought it all back. I remember now. We used to have so much fun! I–I think I remember everything." Kristen paused and sighed. "I even think I remember why we stopped going to the nudist colonies."

"Actually," Janet said, "we don’t usually call them nudist colonies, Kristen. That’s one of those terms used by people who don’t know anything about nudism."

"Sorry," Kristen said, blushing. "I–I guess I’m not really a very good nudist. Although I guess I have the bloodline." She smiled shyly.

Beth smiled. "And you dress the part, too," she said, chuckling. "Once you get rid of those tan lines, nobody will be able to tell that you’re really just faking it. Unless you start talking about ‘nudist colonies’ again."

Kristen was suddenly intensely aware that everyone in the room was looking at her body, studying her tan lines. "I–I guess I’m going to need nudist training," she joked, feeling embarrassed.

Beth laughed. "That’s right! A strict and rigorous program of nudist training! Welcome to Nudism Boot Camp!" Most of the lifeguards laughed.

Janet put her hand on Kristen’s shoulder. "Kristen," she said, "you said you remembered why you and your folks stopped coming around to our place. Why?"

Kristen lowered her head sadly. "I–I guess it was really all my fault," she said. "You were right, I really loved the Maypole. I guess it seems kind of silly now, but–I don’t know how to explain it–to me, it was like flying."

Janet nodded. "I remember," she said.

"One day," Kristen said, "my parents took me to a public park. I was walking between my Mom and my Dad. My Mom held onto one hand, and my Dad held onto the other." Kristen’s face turned bright red. "And, uh… and there were a lot of kids, running and swinging around–flying around–on a Maypole. I was so excited. I let out a little squeal and pulled loose from my parents. I raced ahead of them and stopped near the Maypole, far enough back that I wouldn’t get knocked down by anyone’s feet as they flew by. I stopped there… I stopped there, and I started taking my clothes off."

Janet smiled. "Oh, my," she said.

Kristen’s voice started to tremble as she relived the long-forgotten event. "I–I didn’t know any better. You know, those Maypoles–you don’t see them in many playgrounds. I had only seen the one at your place, and–well, I always took my clothes off to fly. But, uh…" She paused to dab at a tear forming in the corner of her eye. "Well, my parents caught up to me, and we just turned around and went straight back home. I knew that something terrible had happened, but I didn’t know what it was."

"Poor kid," Janet said.

"I suppose I was three or four years old," Kristen said. "I don’t think my parents ever said that we wouldn’t come back and see you again. If I asked about you, they just sort of put me off. But I don’t think we ever went back to your place after that day." Kristen’s face was clouded with gloom. "It was all my fault," she said.

"It’s okay, Kristen," Janet said, with a sad smile. "Here I am. I’m still Jannie, and you’re still the sweetest kid."

Kristen smiled.

"This is going to be the best summer of your life, Kristen," Janet said. "You’re among friends. Okay? Let me tell you, the Black Knife Beach lifeguards are going to be the best bunch of friends you could ever hope to have."

Kristen looked around the room. All the lifeguards were looking at her and smiling. Richard nodded and gave her a thumbs-up.

"And I’ll promise you something," Janet continued. "Before this summer is over, I promise you: you are going to *fly* again!"

***Changes***

"Okay, folks," Beth said. "I hate to spoil the party, but I guess that’s why they pay me the big bucks, right? We have a lot of work to get done, so let’s get back to business."

Kristen and Janet both muttered apologies, and the assembled lifeguards quickly turned their attention to Beth.

"And as I recall, the last order of business was the fact that our rookie here, Kristen, is out of uniform," Beth said. "We were all waiting for her to decide whether to pay the forfeit or take a demerit."

Kristen’s face turned pale and her knees almost buckled. In the confusion and excitement of meeting Jannie again, she had forgotten all about this. "Oh, no," she whimpered. Her mouth was dry. "A forfeit? I–I’ve heard some of my friends talk about forfeits. But it’s always in something like a strip poker game. They–they play for forfeits after somebody has already lost all their clothes."

Beth gave Kristen a strange little smile, and nodded. "Sure, I suppose this is something along the same lines. And since everybody here has already lost all their clothes, we go directly to the forfeits."

Kristen winced. "Can’t you tell me what it is? I mean–my friends have told me about some of the penalties, and some of them are, uh, awfully nasty," she said.

Beth sighed. "I won’t tell you what it is, Kristen. This forfeit comes from me–from Beth. Okay? You have to decide: do you trust me?" Beth fixed Kristen with a steady–and strangely sympathetic–gaze. "So, what’s the decision?"

Once again, the other lifeguards whispered words of encouragement to Kristen: "It’s alright. Don’t worry. You’ll be fine." Kristen looked at Janet, who gave a reassuring smile and nodded.

"Okay, that’s enough from the peanut gallery," Beth said sharply. "Kristen has to make up her own mind." Once again she looked directly into Kristen’s eyes. "Well?" she asked.

Kristen’s face was a mask of anguish. "How–how can I promise to do something if I don’t even know what it is?" she moaned.

Beth studied Kristen’s frightened eyes for a few seconds. "Jeez," she sighed wearily. "Okay. Forget it. I’m not going to ask you to do anything for me if it’s going to be this traumatic."

Kristen was startled by the intensity of the disappointment and desolation on Beth’s face. Beth had seemed to be on top of every situation, and the sudden look of discouragement and resignation on her face now was unexpected and almost frightening. The other lifeguards noticed it, too, and turned concerned eyes toward Beth, who seemed to slump a little.

"Wait, Beth," Kristen said. "Wait!"

Beth looked at Kristen, but her eyes seemed dull and tired.

"I–I want to pay the forfeit," Kristen said. She forced a smile, but there was a pained and frightened look in her eyes.

Beth frowned and shook her head. "Don’t worry, Kristen. I’m not going to give you a demerit," she said, her voice flat and lifeless. "It’s a stupid rule, anyway. I know why you don’t have your hat on. It was an innocent mistake, so forget it. The whole thing never happened."

For half a second, Kristen felt elated by the news that she would not get a demerit, but that emotion was quickly overwhelmed by a guilty awareness that she had been the cause of Beth’s obvious unhappiness. She stepped forward and put her hand on Beth’s arm. "No, Beth, you don’t understand," she said. "I *want* to pay the forfeit. I trust you–I trust you, Beth. And I want to pay the forfeit."

"How can you trust me, Kristen?" Beth asked. "You barely know me. We only met on Saturday."

Kristen tightened her grip on Beth’s arm. "I know you better than you think, Beth," she said. "I do trust you. I *have* to trust you. We’re lifeguards, right? Both of us? I trust you with my life!"

Beth looked into Kristen’s eyes. She could see that Kristen was still frightened, but she wore a brave smile. Beth smiled and gently patted Kristen on the shoulder. "It’s okay, Kristen. It’s okay. Trust is important. But don’t worry about that forfeit. It was just a silly little thing, anyway."

"You *have* to let me do it," Kristen said. She was shocked by the words from her own mouth–she should be rejoicing that Beth was letting her off the hook. Instead, she was practically demanding that Beth make her do something embarrassing and demeaning. "I’m sorry that I was so hesitant to answer, but this is all new to me. But–but I never said I wouldn’t do it. So you have to let me pay the forfeit." Kristen flinched a little as these last words escaped her mouth.

The other lifeguards nodded and made murmured comments: "She’s right, Beth. She never said she wouldn’t do it."

Beth rested her hand on Kristen’s shoulder. "You really mean it, Kristen?" she asked. "You don’t know what I’m going to ask."

Kristen nodded.

"I don’t want you to change your mind if you don’t like it," Beth said.

Kristen shook her head. "I trust you with my life," she whispered.

"Okay," Beth said, smiling warmly. "Here’s what you have to do."

Kristen winced, prepared for the worst.

"You have to play for our team in this year’s first beach volleyball game," Beth said. "After the first game, it’s completely up to you. But you have to play that first game."

Kristen was so relieved she laughed out loud. "Oh, that’s not bad at all!" she said. "It ought to be fun!"

Beth laughed, too, and shook her head. "Well, you sure didn’t feel that way on Saturday. Remember? Skins vs. skins?"

Kristen searched her memory, trying to remember how she had felt on Saturday about playing volleyball in the nude. "I guess a lot of things have changed since Saturday," she said brightly.

***A Genetic Thing***

Kristen wiped her forearm across her brow, but sweat continued to drip into her eyes. Wearily she trudged along behind Beth, carrying a heavy plastic bucket full of cleaning equipment and supplies.

"Well, I guess I can’t call you a slave driver, Beth," Kristen said. "You’re out here working as hard as anybody. But show a little mercy to us mere mortals, can’t you, Beth?"

Beth stopped walking and turned to face Kristen. Her body was dripping with sweat, and she was breathing hard. She nodded. "Okay, I think you’re right," she said. She was carrying two of the heavy buckets, and she set them down on the sand. "Whew! I guess I’m not as young as I used to be," she said, kneading her sore shoulders. She turned to face the water, and dropped to her knees. "Let’s take a little five-minute break," she said, slowly lowering herself into a seated position with her feet tucked under her body.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Kristen said, setting her bucket down on the sand. "I don’t think I’ve ever worked so hard in my life."

"A lifeguard needs stamina, Kristen," Beth croaked, still breathing hard. She coughed. "Oh, I think old age done caught up with little Beth," she said.

Kristen plopped down onto the sand beside Beth and pulled her knees up against her chest. She rested her chin on her knees. "So, how old are you, Beth?" she asked.

Beth shot a glance over at Kristen. "Uh, Kristen, I think it’s great that you’re not feeling self-conscious about being nude, but…" she said.

"Oh, I really like it," Kristen said. "Do you think it might really be hereditary? My parents told me I was a full-blooded nudist. I never expected to get used to it so quickly."

"Well," Beth replied, "whether it’s hereditary or not, this is a change for you. And there are still some things you need to think about when you’re not wearing any clothes."

"Like what?" Kristen asked.

"For one thing," Beth said, "you need to be careful about how you sit. The, uh, the sand gets into *everything*."

"Oh!" Kristen cried, leaping to her feet. Her hands moved to brush the sand from her most delicate flesh, but stopped. Her face reddened, and she was once again intensely conscious of the fact that she was outdoors, completely naked.

"It’s not much of a problem if you’ve got a towel or a blanket to sit on," Beth said. "If not, you might want to do like I do, and keep your feet under your butt." Beth slapped her hip to show Kristen what she meant. "See? Or you could do this," she continued, standing to demonstrate. She crouched, then leaned to one side and put out her hand to support herself. She folded one leg under her body and let her weight settle onto her hip. "This works, too, and once you get settled you can stretch your legs out. The important thing is that it keeps your butt and your pubes off the ground."

Kristen studied Beth’s posture. "Uh, doesn’t that leave you awfully exposed to everybody on the beach?" she asked.

Beth shrugged. "I don’t know," she said. "I suppose so. But you can’t worry about people seeing your dainty bits. Over the course of the summer, everybody’s going to see everything. Get used to it. But I’m talking about strictly practical stuff here, Kristen. You have to be aware that you’re naked so you don’t get sand into places where you don’t want it–that’s being practical."

"I–I suppose you’re right," Kristen said, carefully seating herself beside Beth, this time with her weight resting on her hip.

"I had to go through this whole learning experience myself," Beth said. "I know what you’re going through."

"You never answered my question, Beth," Kristen said. "How old are you?"

Beth gave Kristen a funny look. "In my day, we didn’t ask our elders questions like that, young lady," she said in a wizened voice. "Young punks today got no respect!" She smiled brightly and laughed. "I’m twenty-four. Almost twenty-five. Just like you, I got a job as a lifeguard the first year I was eligible. This will be my seventh year."

"Have you been at Black Knife Beach the whole time?" Kristen asked.

"No," Beth answered, "last year was my first year here. I was as unhappy about being assigned here as you were on Saturday. But I had taken a promotion to senior lifeguard–supervisor, I guess you’d call it–and I wasn’t able to pick my assignments any more."

"How did you feel when you found out?" Kristen asked.

Beth laughed. "Probably about the same way you felt on Saturday. I thought about quitting. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I had about two weeks advance notice, so I had time to get used to the idea. Of course, that also meant two weeks to worry, and conjure up all sorts of nightmare scenarios."

"What did you do to get used to it?" Kristen said.

"Well," Beth answered, "I wanted to try going naked at home, but my roommates nixed that idea. So I started coming down here whenever I had a chance. The beach wasn’t officially open, so there weren’t any crowds. I just gritted my teeth and took my clothes off. And it really wasn’t bad. I forced myself to walk around, and I met a few of the beach regulars. For the first few days, I was coming down here out of a sense of duty–you know, trying to get mentally prepared for the job. But after those first days, I kept coming down because I liked it." Beth smiled. "It didn’t take much to turn little Beth into a nudist," she said. "Maybe we both inherited the same gene, Kristen."

A gentle breeze swept in from the ocean. "Oh, yuck!" Kristen said. She suddenly started sweeping her hands up and down her body, making agitated swatting motions.

"What is it?" Beth said, concerned.

"Yuck!" Kristen said, shuddering. "I feel like I have spider webs stuck all over me." Her hands frantically tried to sweep the phantom webs from her body.

Beth laughed. "You are such a wimp!" she said. "You’ve been going spastic every five minutes since we finished sweeping out the towers."

"Don’t call me a wimp," Kristen said. "You didn’t see that spider. I don’t like spiders anyway, and that tower was lousy with spider webs. And I have to go in stark naked and clean them out? Yuck–I still feel them sticking to me." She shuddered again, and scratched at her naked flesh. "I feel like I’ve got millions of baby spiders crawling all over me."

"I saw the spider," Beth said, "and I still say you’re a wimp."

Kristen stood and continued sweeping her hands over her body. "Jeez, I’m probably going to be covered with spider bites," she moaned.

Beth laughed again. "There was only one spider, and you got him before he got you. Why don’t you go take a dip and see if you can wash the webs off?"

"That’s a good idea," Kristen said, stepping toward the water.

"Be careful, Kristen," Beth said.

"Don’t worry, Beth," Kristen said, smiling. "I can swim."

"I know you can swim," Beth said. "But you’re tired." She motioned to the heavy buckets they had been carrying. "And I’m tired, too. It would be very bad form to lose a lifeguard or two before the beach even opens."

"Okay," Kristen said, "I’ll be careful, Mommy." She raced down into the water, and waded out until she stood about waist deep. Then she slowly lowered herself until the water came up to her neck.

Kristen had always thought of her swimsuits as lightweight, and comfortable, so she was astonished by how much different the water felt without her suit. She had been in the ocean before, and in dozens of swimming pools, but she had never been naked in anything larger than a bathtub. A small wave moved in toward the shore, and Kristen’s body bobbed about a little. She felt the water surging around her. This was not like any bathtub.

She wanted to swim, to dive, to feel the water all around her. But Beth was right–they were both tired, considerably weakened by the exhausting work they had been doing all day. A lifeguard must always be mindful of her own limitations. She had all summer to swim naked.

Kristen had been relieved when Beth had called her a wimp. She had felt uneasy about her relationship with Beth ever since she had hesitated to accept Beth’s forfeit. The good-natured insult seemed to suggest that there were no hard feelings.

Kristen rubbed all over her body to wash off the sticky filaments of the spider web, and, blushing, she took a moment to gently loosen any stray grains of sand that might be stuck in her most sensitive places.

When Kristen emerged from the water, Beth was already standing, ready to get back to work. "Let’s get these buckets back up to the station," Beth said, "then I want you to go find your friend Janet and tell her I sent you to help with the signs."

"Okay," Kristen sighed. With a grunt, she picked up her bucket. Beth groaned wearily as she picked up the two buckets she had been carrying. The two naked women plodded slowly across the sand toward the lifeguard station.

When they had set down their burdens at the lifeguard station, Beth and Kristen both raced to the water fountain. Kristen let Beth drink first. Beth took a couple quick swallows, then let Kristen drink. The cool water felt like the elixir of life as it trickled down Kristen’s parched throat. She was greedy for more, but after a couple swallows, she allowed Beth to drink again. They took turns like this until the water had fully revived them both.

Kristen coated herself liberally with sunscreen once again. Beth helped spread the lotion over Kristen’s back.

"You’ll need to put your shoes on," Beth said. "You can put your clothes on if you want. You and Janet will have to climb the trail to put up some of the signs."

"Okay," Kristen sighed, pulling her shoes from her locker. "You really need to think seriously about putting in that elevator," she said, as she pulled her socks on.

"You’ll thank me someday, Kristen," Beth laughed. She flexed one arm to show off her biceps. "When all this exercise gives you superhuman strength and endurance, like me, then you’ll be grateful."

"I wish I could have the superhuman strength now, and get the exercise later," Kristen said. She tied her shoes and stood up. "Do you know where Janet is?" she asked.

"I’m right here," Janet said, entering the locker room. "What’s up?"

"Oh, perfect timing," Beth said. "Janet, I’ve asked Kristen to help you put up the signs."

"Oh, cool!" Janet said, smiling brightly. "Let me grab my sandals and get a drink of water, and we can get started."

As Kristen followed Janet through the door, Beth raised her eyebrows. "No clothes, Kristen?" she asked, with a smile.

"Nope," Kristen said cheerfully. "Don’t need ‘em."

"Janet, your friend here got used to being naked so fast she thinks she must have inherited a nudist gene from her parents," Beth said, laughing. "I’m starting to wonder, myself."

"Hey," Janet said, "that gene must come from Adam and Eve. I saw it all the time out at my parents’ club. I think everybody is born with the nudist gene–it just doesn’t kick in until you take your clothes off."

***Signs***

"This end’s done," Janet said.

Kristen cranked the socket wrench a couple times to snug up the second bolt on her end of the four-foot redwood signboard. She tugged firmly on the sign to test that it was securely fastened to the wooden upright. "Solid as a rock on this end," she said with satisfaction.

"That’s good," Janet said. She pulled something from the plastic tool bucket and offered it to Kristen. "Here are some little wooden plugs–you get four, and I get four. Stick them into the bolt holes, front and back. They make the sign look a little nicer, and they help keep the metal hardware from getting wet and rusting."

Kristen pressed one of the wooden plugs into place. "Oh, I see!" she said. "The end of the plug makes it look like the sign’s joined together with wooden pegs instead of metal bolts," she said, pushing another plug into a bolt hole with the heel of her hand. "I’ve always liked the fact that the Parks and Recreation Department uses these redwood signs. They stand out, and they really look nice."

Kristen forced the final plug into its hole, and stepped back to admire her handiwork. She studied the sign, and frowned. She tilted her head back as her eyes followed the trail up the cliffside that towered before her. She looked back down at the sign. "Janet," she asked, "are–are you *sure* it’s okay for us to go up like this?"

Janet worked the last of the wooden plugs into place on her end of the sign, and looked up. She followed Kristen’s worried gaze to the sign, which read "NUDITY PROHIBITED OFF BEACH." Janet laughed and shook her head. "Don’t worry, Kristen," she said. "The sign’s really more of a friendly reminder than a warning–after a day here, some people tend to forget that clothes are still the norm out in the so-called real world. The parking lot is Parks Department property, and the trees screen it from the highway. At Black Knife, it’s all clothing-optional."

Kristen nervously looked up at the rugged cliff again. "Okay," she said, "if you’re sure."

"Well," Janet said, "we’d better be getting up there. What do you want–the bucket or the water?"

"I’ll carry the water," Kristen said. She picked up the large bota bag–a wineskin, really–that Janet had filled with water back at the lifeguard station, and slung its strap over her shoulder. "I’m so sick of carrying those buckets," she said. "I feel like my shoulder’s about to come out of its socket."

"Well, it’s a handy way to carry a random mish-mosh of stuff," Janet said, putting her socket wrench into the plastic bucket and grabbing the bucket’s handle. "And this one’s really not that heavy. Go ahead and get one end of the other sign," she said.

Kristen stepped over to the long signboard lying in the sand. This sign looked much like the one they had just put up. It was larger–about eight feet long–and it read, "NUDITY MANDATORY ON BEACH." Janet had looped a short piece of rope through the bolt holes on each end of the sign, rigging up a pair of makeshift handles. Kristen picked up one end of the sign and laughed. "You know," she said, "if this sign had been up when I came out here on Saturday, I never would have come down here."

Janet laughed. "Too horrible to contemplate. You would probably be wearing clothes this very minute," she said. "See? Ignorance is bliss." She picked up the other end of the sign. "Ready, Kristen?" she asked. Kristen nodded. "Okay–forward, march!" Janet said, and the two women started climbing the long trail up to the parking lot, with Janet leading the way.

The steep trail was challenging under the best of circumstances. Laden as they were, with the long signboard between them, Kristen and Janet climbed in awkward fits and starts. The sign seemed to slap against Kristen’s thigh at every step. She felt she was more fortunate than Janet–with the water bag slung over her shoulder, at least she had one hand free to help maintain her balance.

As they struggled up the trail, Kristen studied rhythmic motions–the way the signboard swung from the rope handles, the way the bucket Janet carried rocked gently from its wire handle. She watched the way Janet’s naked body moved. The smooth rolling rhythm of the feminine gait was gone–well, not gone entirely, but drowned out by the struggle to maintain her balance and make her way over the uneven terrain. She watched the motion of Janet’s buttocks, and was intrigued by the way Janet flexed the muscles in her back as she moved. There was a fascinating interplay of forces at work here.

After a short time, Janet’s body was slick with sweat. Kristen looked down at her own body. Rivulets of perspiration rolled down over her breasts and stomach. Her pubic hair glistened with tiny dew-like beads of moisture. For a moment–a very brief moment–she again felt self-conscious, uneasy at the realization that she was fully exposed to all eyes.

When they reached the foot of one of the redwood staircases that connected parts of the trail, Janet lowered the bucket and the sign to the ground. "Let’s take a break," she said, panting. She sat wearily on one of the steps. "Let me have some of that water," she said.

Kristen put down her end of the sign and handed the water bag to Janet. Janet squirted some water into her mouth, swallowed, and sighed. "I wish there was an easier way to do this," she said.

Kristen accepted the water bag from Janet, and took a drink. "Why don’t they just put a little shed up at the edge of the parking lot, and keep some of this stuff up there?" Kristen asked.

"I guess they used to," Janet said. "But during the off-season, vandals always broke into the shed and stole stuff. I suppose that sign would be a real prize on some frat boy’s wall. I guess it’s too much trouble for them to haul it up from the beach, but not too much trouble for us to haul it up and down every year."

Kristen looked at the sign for a minute, deep in thought. "Do you have any more of that rope?" she asked.

"Plenty," Janet said. "What you want to do–hang yourself?"

Kristen laughed. "It’s certainly not a glamour job, is it?" she said.

"Are you kidding?" Janet said, smiling. "Two hot naked chicks–how can it *not* be glamorous?"

"You’re right about the hot part," Kristen said, wiping sweat from her brow. "It must be 90 degrees out here. But we’re not really naked, are we? We’re both wearing shoes."

Janet laughed. "I’ve heard there’s nothing more glamorous than a woman wearing nothing but shoes. Oh–but I think they have to be stiletto heels," she said.

Kristen snickered. "Are they wearing high-heeled shoes on *Baywatch* now?" she asked.

"It wouldn’t surprise me," Janet said. "Maybe Pam Anderson can get heel implants."

Kristen guffawed. "The world’s first totally bionic woman," she said.

Janet pulled a coil of thin rope from the plastic bucket. "So, if you don’t want to hang yourself, what do you want the rope for?" she asked.

Kristen tried to subdue her mirth. "I was thinking," she said, "if we could rig a couple strands of rope between the two ends of the sign, we could hang the bucket in the middle. Tie it in place, so it doesn’t slip back and forth as we go up the hill. It would balance the load better between us, and you would have a free hand to help you keep your balance."

Janet furrowed her brow for a moment, then nodded. "It’s worth a try, at least." She pulled a small utility knife from the bucket, and the two women set to work rigging up Kristen’s impromptu design.

"The bucket’s not going to swing too much, is it?" Janet asked.

"I don’t think so," Kristen answered. "I’ve been watching the way the bucket moves, and it’s never come close to tipping over. It might swing a little more this way, but I think we’re safe." She threaded the rope through one of the top holes on the sign and tied a knot, as Janet stood by and watched.

"I think this is a pretty glamorous job, Kristen," Janet said. "I’ll bet you that if the guys who watch *Baywatch* could see the two of us now, they would switch over to the Black Knife Beach channel in a heartbeat."

Kristen laughed. "I guess you’re right," she said. "I’d tune in myself, if they had a Don-cam."

"Kristen!" Janet said, "I’m surprised at you! You seemed so sweet and innocent!"

Kristen blushed. "I’m still sweet and innocent," she said. "But I’m a growing girl. And I’m starting to notice some things that I hadn’t noticed before. Did you see his shoulders?"

Janet smiled and nodded gently. "Yes, I’ve seen his shoulders," she said.

Kristen looked at her fingers. "I helped him put sunscreen on his back this morning. Those muscles are so hard! And I could feel his body heat. Very hot."

"Don definitely has the looks," Janet said. "He’s actually had a few assignments as a male model. What did you think of the other two guys?"

"The other two guys?" Kristen said. "Oh–I didn’t really pay much attention to the old guy, uh, Richard."

"The old guy?" Janet said. "He’s just thirty years old."

"Well, that’s pretty old," Kristen said. "George is a nice-looking guy, but nothing like Don. And is it just me, or is there something kind of pathetic about George?"

Janet was laughing. "You’re amazing, Kristen," she said. "Your razor-sharp insight has penetrated right to the very surface of the matter. It’s like X-ray vision in reverse."

"Oh, give me a break," Kristen chuckled. "It’s not like I said I was going to *marry* Don, or anything like that. I’ve barely met these guys. I don’t know anything about them but what’s on the surface."

"Okay," Janet said. "Here’s a little clue about what’s under the surface. Richard is the best lifeguard you’re ever likely to meet. He’s in great shape–for the things that matter, he’s in a lot better shape than Don or anybody else here–and he’s smart. Very smart. It’s like he has a sixth sense or something–he can spot trouble before it happens, and he’s great at showing up in the right place at the right time. Pay close attention to Richard, and you’re going to learn a lot."

Kristen nodded. "Okay," she said.

"Another interesting fact about Richard is that he’s rich," Janet continued. "He made a fortune seven or eight years ago from some computer software thing he wrote. He owns a lot of real estate around here, too. He doesn’t have to work another day in his life, but he keeps coming back to Black Knife Beach because he likes it."

Kristen threaded a strand of rope through the bucket handle, and tied a loose knot around the handle.

"Now, George doesn’t seem to care at all about material things," Janet said. "He doesn’t have much, and he doesn’t seem to want anything he doesn’t have."

"Well, that’s smart," Kristen said.

"You don’t realize what a rare quality that is until you run into someone who actually has it. Still waters run deep, you know?" Janet said. "I think George is a kind of philosopher, and there’s a lot more going on inside his head than you would think. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard him make some strange remark that seemed to come from out of the blue, and maybe even seemed a little stupid. And then a couple hours later, I would ‘get it,’ and realize that he had explained some complicated thing or solved some major problem in just a few words."

"This should do it," Kristen said, knotting the rope to one of the holes in the signboard. She looked up at Janet. "Why don’t you pick up that end, and we’ll see whether anything needs adjusting."

"Okay," Janet said, bending to pick up her end of the sign. Kristen lifted the opposite end of the sign. The bucket hung suspended just a few inches below the center of the sign. "Whoa!" Janet said. "You’ve got talent, girl!"

"Well," Kristen laughed, "I’m glad you’re able to see past my dazzling surface beauty."

"Okay, I deserved that," Janet said, shaking her head.

"And speaking of seeing past dazzling surface beauty," Kristen said, "what does Don do when he’s not working as a lifeguard?"

"He’s trying to break into show biz," Janet said. "He wants to be a screen writer. Like a lot of people, he’s worked all sorts of jobs while trying to get his big break. I mentioned that he’s worked as a male model. And he’s been a waiter, a cab driver, a personal trainer–you name it."

"A screen writer, eh?" Kristen said.

"A would-be screen writer," Janet answered. "There is a difference." She looked up the stairs to the next leg of the trail. "Ready to head on up, Kristen?" she asked.

Kristen slung the bota bag over her shoulder. "Ready when you are," she said, and the two women resumed their climb.

After a few minutes, Janet looked back at Kristen. "This is working a lot better," she said. "I think we’re making better progress now. Great idea, Kristen."

"Thanks," Kristen replied. "Uh, looks like we’re going to have company." She saw two men dressed in black moving quickly along the trail higher up on the cliff. The men would pass them on the trail within a couple minutes.

"Oh, I see them," Janet said cheerfully. "Ugh. I sure wouldn’t want to be dressed in black on a hot day like today."

"Maybe that’s why they’re in such a hurry to get down to the beach," Kristen said.

"I bet they wish they were liberated, like us," Janet said.

Kristen fought the sense of uneasiness that was rising in the pit of her stomach. An encounter with clothed hikers on the trail was a new experience. She steeled her nerves. She had been through a lot of new experiences in the past few days, and she had come through them all just fine. She was with Janet. She was wearing her lifeguard cap. She was on the job. This first encounter would be fun.

They met the two men as they approached the foot of another wooden staircase. The men, dressed alike in black t-shirts and chinos, trotted down the steps, and stopped suddenly when they saw the two naked lifeguards. Janet and Kristen stepped to the side to let the men pass on the narrow path.

"Oh, ho!" said the older man, a stocky character of about thirty with a two-day stubble and beery breath. He made an exaggerated bow, and said, "Hello, ladies. My, you’re certainly looking lovely today."

The second man looked about 19 or 20 years old. He was skinny, with yellow teeth, and his face was pocked with acne scars. He eyed the two nude women hungrily, and chortled stupidly. "Lookin’ good," he said.

"Thanks," Janet said, her voice tense. Kristen, confused, stood stiff and silent.

The older man looked at Kristen and let out a low whistle. "You must be new here," he said. Kristen nodded. "Look," the man said, pointing at Kristen. "She’s got a bunny tail." Kristen’s face reddened.

The younger man ran his eyes over Kristen’s body and snickered. "I like bunnies," he said.

"We’d love to stay and talk with you ladies, but we’ve gotta run," the older man said. "Hope to see a lot more of you later." He continued his walk down the trail, with the younger man following.

"Hey, Tone, there ain’t a lot more *to* see," the younger man said, with a dirty snicker.

Kristen stood in stunned silence. Janet watched with a furrowed brow as the two men walked down the trail. After a moment, she leaned toward Kristen and asked "Do you recognize either of those guys?"

Kristen shook her head and looked at Janet. "Who–who are they?" she asked.

Janet bit her lower lip and slowly shook her head. "I don’t know," she said. "I’m not sure. When we get back down there, I want to talk to Beth." She stood for a long moment, watching the men making their way down the trail.

"Janet, what did he mean when he said I’ve got a bunny tail?" Kristen asked.

Janet looked at Kristen and gave her a reassuring smile. "It means you’ve got tan lines. It’s a way of telling a long-time nudist from a fresh convert." She looked up the stairs. "Come on, Kristen," she said. "Let’s go get this sign up."

***Pantomime***

"See that house?" Janet asked.

Kristen breathed a sigh of relief–Janet was finally talking. It was the first time she had spoken for some time, except for a few terse commands while they were fastening their signboard under the big sign at the edge of the parking lot. Since their encounter with the two men on the trail, Janet had grown tense and uncommunicative. Kristen had felt embarrassed by the way the men had eyed her naked body and commented about her tan lines, but after a moment or two she had shrugged it off. Janet, however, had seemed to grow ever more nervous and distracted as she and Kristen had climbed toward the parking lot.

Even while they were putting up the sign, Janet had paused several times to peer over the edge of the cliff and watch the two men still making their way down toward the beach. Kristen was relieved to see the clouds suddenly lift from Janet’s expression.

"What house?" Kristen asked.

"See the gap in the trees down there at the far end of the parking lot?" Janet said, pointing. "See the house right on the other side?"

Kristen looked where Janet was pointing. Through a narrow opening in the curtain of trees, she saw glass and sandstone, obviously part of an impressively large house of modern design. "I see it. Looks pretty fancy," she said appreciatively.

Janet smiled. "Well, you’re welcome to come visit anytime," she said.

"That’s *your* house?" Kristen said. "Holy cow!"

"Yeah, we’ve got a bunch of people sharing the house every summer," Janet said. "It’s actually owned by some friends of my parents. They’re away on business during the summer, so they rent it out to us. I really appreciate them letting me stay there, because it means I get to stay bare all summer."

Kristen blushed. "Bare all summer?" she asked.

"Oh, I admit it," Janet said, laughing, "I’m spoiled. When I was growing up, I always loved the summertime, because that meant no school, and that meant no clothes. We always lived out at the club during the summer, and naturally that was always clothes-free. I never had to wear clothes at all during the summer until after I got into college. Then I had a regular job, and I had to get dressed every day for work. I hated that. The owners of that house suggested that I come out here and try for a lifeguard job, and I jumped on that idea so fast your head would spin."

"But you’re not really naked all the time, are you?" Kristen said. "I mean, you have to get dressed to go shopping, or to visit your friends, right?"

Janet shook her head. "No," she said. "Luckily for me, my roommates aren’t as fanatical about staying bare as I am, so they pick up the groceries and stuff. And any of my friends who want to visit come see me out here. I don’t wear a stitch from June to September."

Kristen’s heart raced at the thought. "That’s amazing," she said. "But–but don’t you feel a little bit like a prisoner, trapped out here?"

"Not really," Janet said. "I’m free to go wherever I want, whenever I want, so long as I’m willing to put on clothes. I just choose not to put on clothes. There’s no place I want to go that badly. I’m just sort of a homebody, I guess."

Kristen looked again at the big house partly obscured by the trees. "You’re not by any chance in the market for another roommate, are you?" she asked hopefully.

"No," Janet said, her face looking a little pained, "Sorry, Kristen. We’re full up. Are you looking for a place to stay?"

Disappointed, Kristen nodded. "I can keep commuting from my parents’ house, but I’m afraid I’ll go crazy if I have to make that long drive every day. I’ve checked out the classified ads in the paper, and every place seems to be so expensive."

Janet stooped to pick up the loose pieces of rope they had dropped on the ground while putting up the sign. "Yes," she said, "housing in this part of town can be pretty pricey. You probably need to find some place you can share with a bunch of people. Well, unless you’re like George–I think he’d be content with any old hole in the wall."

Kristen picked up the bota bag and slung it over her shoulder. Janet coiled each piece of rope and dropped it into the plastic bucket.

"You might want to ask the other lifeguards if they know anyone who’s looking for a roommate," Janet said, rising and picking up the bucket. "In the meantime, if you need a place to stay while you’re looking, you’re welcome to come on over and crash on our couch. Of course, before you decide to do that, I think you should know something."

Kristen rolled her eyes. "I know," she said. "That I have to stay naked in the house, right?"

Janet laughed. "No, of course not," she said. "Where’d you get that idea?"

Kristen blushed and shrugged. "I just–"

"I suppose if you *do* wear clothes, you’ll stick out like a sore thumb," Janet said. "But it’s entirely up to you. No, I meant that my roommates can get a little rowdy sometimes, and it might be a little noisy when you’re trying to get a good night’s sleep."

Kristen smiled and nodded. "Thanks for the offer. I think I’ll probably take you up on it. I don’t think anything could keep me from sleeping tonight."

"Ready to head back down?" Janet asked, moving toward the top of the steps that led down to the trail.

Kristen nodded and the two women started down the steps. "Tell me, Janet," Kristen said, "are any of your roommates–"

"Hold it!" Janet said sharply, suddenly stopping in her tracks.

Kristen looked quizzically at Janet. "What is it?" she asked.

Janet put a finger to her lips to hush Kristen, and pointed down to the beach. "Watch," she said tensely.

From this high vantage point, the entire beach stretched like a great panorama before them. There were perhaps a dozen beachgoers scattered along the beach, relaxing or playing. She and Beth had warned a few of them against going in the water, because the lifeguards were occupied today with other tasks. One person was wading at the edge of the surf, but everyone else seemed to be staying cautiously away from the water.

The two men they had passed on the trail had finally reached the last leg of the path down to the beach. They were moving slowly now, probably worn out by the long climb down.

Kristen could see Beth and George working just outside the lifeguard station, assembling a redwood picnic table. Alicia was almost directly below, walking toward the nearer lifeguard tower, apparently carrying something heavy. Trina, similarly laden, had just reached the nearer tower, and was setting her burden down in the sand. Don had propped a ladder against the side of the concrete block restroom building, and was climbing it, carrying a large black bucket. Richard was busily working away at something down at the farther lifeguard tower. Kristen strained to see just what Richard was doing, but before she could figure it out, Richard dropped whatever he had been doing, and started walking back toward this end of the beach.

The two men had reached the foot of the trail, and paused for a moment, apparently to catch their breath. Then they started walking across the white sand beach, to where Alicia was walking past.

Trina had paused to rest near the lifeguard tower, bent at the waist with her hands resting on her knees, like an idle outfielder at a baseball game. She looked up, straightened up, and started walking toward Alicia.

Beth and George were both looking toward Alicia and the two men approaching her. They were holding a long redwood plank, one on each end. They quickly looked at each other, and tossed the plank aside.

Don was now on the roof of the restroom building. Richard trotted past the building, and made some sort of hand signal. Don jumped from the roof to the sand below. When he recovered his footing, he fell into step behind Richard.

Beth and George were walking quickly toward Alicia, who had stopped walking and turned to face the two men approaching from the foot of the trail.

"What’s going on?" Kristen whispered.

"Shhh! Look!" Janet said.

Trina reached Alicia just as the two men did. Beth and George arrived just a couple seconds later, and Richard and Don stepped up a couple seconds after that. Kristen strained to hear or see any clue about what was happening. There were no raised voices, no gesticulations from anyone, but this was clearly some sort of tense confrontation, and Kristen didn’t understand it. Kristen glanced at Janet, who was biting her lip, intently staring at the scene playing out below.

Richard and Don slowly sidled over to stand directly behind the two men. The men didn’t seem to notice–they seemed to be focussed entirely on Alicia and Beth. The two men were completely surrounded by naked lifeguards. There was still no hint of raised voices.

After a moment, one of the men made a courtly bow and seemed to kiss Alicia’s hand. He reached for Beth’s hand, as well, but stopped. The two men turned, and collided with Richard and Don. The two lifeguards seemed apologetic, and stepped aside. The two men walked back to the foot of the trail and started climbing. The cluster of lifeguards on the beach stood for a few minutes and watched the men climb.

"Wh–what was that all about?" Kristen asked.

Janet was quiet for a long moment. "I’m not completely sure," she said at last. "Maybe they just didn’t know about the dress code."

Kristen scowled. "What’s the big secret?" she asked angrily.

Janet gave Kristen a reassuring smile and patted her hand. "Come on, Kristen," she said. "Let’s get back down there. I think Beth will be able to tell us what’s really going on."

Kristen snorted with disgust, but followed Janet down the steps and onto the gravel trail.

They walked in sullen silence for several minutes. Janet tried to break the silence. "Say, Kristen," she said, "before I so rudely interrupted you up there, you were asking something about my roommates. What did you want to know?"

"Who cares?" Kristen said dully. "It couldn’t have been anything important."

"Oh, come on, Kristen," Janet said. "Don’t pout. I really don’t know what this is all about. I think I know who one of those guys is, but I’m not sure. Okay? I don’t want to fill your head with my guesses and then find out that I’m wrong. Let’s not jump to any conclusions until we get down there and get the actual facts, okay?"

Kristen frowned and sighed. "Okay, you win," she said, nodding.

"So what did you want to know about my roommates?" Janet asked, smiling.

"Oh, that," Kristen said. "I was–oh, I remember–I was wondering if any of your roommates are guys?"

"No," Janet said, "just a bunch of women. I lived in a place with some guys once, and I don’t want to do it again."

"Oh? Why?" Kristen asked.

Janet laughed. "Men are pigs, Kristen. You spend half your time cleaning up after them. Disgusting. And they all seem to read way too much into the fact that you don’t like to wear clothes. Me, I like to be comfortable when I’m at home. And unfortunately, that seems to trigger some primitive reflex in their big dumb brain stems."

"Oh," Kristen said, blushing.

"Take my advice," Janet continued. "You can meet some great guy, get married, settle down and raise a bunch of kids. But when you’re just looking for a roommate, forget all about guys."

"Uh huh," Kristen said. "Well, you see, a friend of my family offered to let me stay rent-free at the house where his son and several other guys are living."

"Rent-free?" Janet said.

"It–it’s a pretty complicated situation, actually," Kristen said. "I really like this boy, you see, and–well, there’s some stuff I can’t tell you about. I–I turned down the offer, but after looking at how expensive rent is around here, uh, I’ve been thinking about it again."

Janet stopped and turned to face Kristen. "Do you want my honest advice, Kristen?" she asked.

Kristen nodded. "Sure," she said.

"Okay," Janet said. "Now, I don’t know anything about this friend of the family, right? I don’t know anything about this boy you like, and I don’t know anything about the secret stuff you can’t tell me about, right?"

"Uh, right," Kristen said, a little puzzled.

"But I can read your mind, Kristen," Janet said. "All I need to do is listen to the tone of your voice, to the way you hesitate when you’re talking. I don’t know what’s going on here, but I think it would be a very bad idea for you to take this offer. And I think *you* know it, too."

Kristen nodded. "I–I think you’re right," she said.

"You’re welcome to sleep on my couch until we can find you a good place to stay," Janet said.

Kristen smiled. "I appreciate that," she said.

Janet glanced down at the two men slowly working their way up the trail. She set down the plastic tool bucket she was carrying. "You know, Kristen," she said, "this bucket is turning out to be a little heavier than I thought it was going to be. Can you help me out by carrying this socket wrench?"

"Oh, sure," Kristen said, accepting the wrench.

"Keep a good grip on it," Janet said. "Don’t lose it."

"I won’t," Kristen said.

Janet studied the contents of the bucket for a moment and frowned. She pulled out a screwdriver, and picked up the bucket. "Let’s go," she said, and the two women resumed their walk down toward the beach.

"I told you that Richard owns property around here," Janet said. "Maybe he knows some women who need a roommate."

"Oh, that would be great," Kristen said.

As they continued their descent, and the two men dressed in black continued their climb, Kristen felt a nervous apprehension rising in the pit of her stomach. Her face reddened as she became acutely conscious of her own nakedness, and Janet’s, as well. She felt even more uneasy when she noticed Janet’s grip tightening on the screwdriver in her hand.

"Are you left-handed or right-handed, Kristen?" Janet said softly.

"Uh, right-handed," Kristen answered. "Why?"

"Well, why don’t you carry that wrench in your right hand?" Janet said tensely. "Then you won’t lose it."

"Oh, my gosh," Kristen said, transferring the wrench to her right hand. "Do–do you think these guys are dangerous?"

"I don’t know," Janet said. "I hope not. Keep your eyes peeled. Be polite."

Kristen swallowed hard, and moved a couple paces closer to Janet. "Okay," she whispered.

This time they passed the two men on a long stretch of the gravel path. Both men were red-faced, sweating and breathing hard. But as they met the two women, the older man stopped and smiled. The younger man gaped at the women with frank, slack-jawed lust.

"Lovely to see you again, ladies," the older man croaked, gasping for each breath.

"Thank you," Janet said as she walked past, her hand tight on the grip of her screwdriver.

Kristen trembled as she walked by the two men. She could feel their eyes on her body as she passed.

The older man whistled a few notes of an old song Kristen remembered from childhood–"Here Comes Peter Cottontail"–then dissolved into a coughing fit. The younger man started to laugh, although it wasn’t clear whether he was laughing at his companion’s whistling, or his coughing. Within a few seconds, the younger man was coughing, too.

Kristen felt an enormous wave of relief once they were past the men, but Janet stayed tense and alert for several minutes. Gradually, she relaxed as well. She dropped her screwdriver into her plastic bucket. "Why don’t you go ahead and toss that wrench in here, too, Kristen?" Janet said. Kristen was happy to oblige.

All the lifeguards were gathered at the foot of the trail.

"Are you two both alright?" Beth called out in a concerned voice.

"We’re fine," Janet said, hurrying the last few steps down the trail. "We’re both fine. Everybody okay down here?"

"Oh, I’m so glad," Beth said. "Yes, everybody’s okay."

"Was that who I think it was?" Janet asked Beth.

Beth cocked her head toward Richard, who nodded soberly.

"Tony!" Janet said. "Oh, crap."

"Yep," Beth said grimly. "It seems we haven’t seen the last of the gawker problem at Black Knife Beach."

***Burning Bridge***

Kristen parked the car and slumped wearily in the driver’s seat. Almost done.

Every bone in her body ached; every muscle throbbed from fatigue. Her feet were hot and sore. Her toes seemed painfully cramped in her tennis shoes.

It had been a very long, hard day. This disheartening procession of houses and apartments hadn’t helped matters. Every place that seemed livable was unaffordable; every place that was affordable seemed unlivable. The disappointment and frustration had done more to erode her stamina than the day’s long hours and hard labor.

She leaned forward in the seat and tugged at the back of her t-shirt, where perspiration made the shirt stick to her back. Irritably, she adjusted the waistband of her shorts again. She had been wearing these clothes for a little more than five hours now, and she felt almost frantic to get back to Janet’s house so she could get them off.

These were the same clothes–the green t-shirt and shorts, the white cotton undies–that she had worn down to the beach on Saturday. The clothes had seemed perfectly comfortable then; now they seemed to bind, or pinch, or chafe in some way every time she moved. Saturday had been a day from that bygone era when Kristen had felt it was perfectly normal to wear clothes all the time. When she had called today to let her parents know that she would be staying at Janet’s house while she looked for an apartment, her mother had offered to bring out a few fresh changes of clothes. Kristen had giggled at the suggestion, then her mother had giggled too–tickled by the silly ideas of bygone times.

Kristen leaned forward and rested her chin on the steering wheel. She looked up glumly at the big Victorian house at the top of the hill. This was her last stop today. She didn’t want to go up there. She wanted to turn around, and drive away, and pretend that she had never been told about this place. But she couldn’t do that. She sighed. She was honor-bound to put in an appearance.

She opened the door and stepped out of the car. She knew she was burning her bridges here. She would have felt a lot better about this if she had already managed to find an apartment. As she climbed the steps up to the house, she felt a nervous fluttery sensation growing in the pit of her stomach.

It was a beautiful house, she realized. There were a few places where the trim could use some paint, but the building seemed very well maintained. As she stepped up onto the porch, she admired the heavy oaken door, which had been varnished and waxed and polished to such a high gloss that she could vaguely see her own shadowy reflection in its gleaming surface.

She took a deep breath, and knocked on the door.

"I’ll get it," she heard a man’s voice say. "Just a second."

The door opened slowly. Kristen broke into a broad smile, in spite of herself, when she saw Tommy’s face. Tommy looked at her blankly, and suddenly blushed. "Kristen!" he said, obviously surprised. "I…" He slammed the door in her face.

Kristen’s jaw dropped in shock.

"Sorry!" Tommy’s voice called, through the door. "I–I’ll be just a second, Kristen."

"Kristen?" said a different male voice. She heard a considerable din from inside the house–the sound of someone racing up or down stairs, a sound like someone bumping into a chair. There was a confused babble of several male voices. Someone let out a loud whoop. "Shut up! Jeez!" another voice said tensely.

Kristen noticed a small movement of a curtain at one of the windows looking out onto the porch. A single eye peered out at her through a gap in the curtains. The eye disappeared as soon as she noticed it. There were more sounds of footsteps and banging of furniture from inside the house. She heard a feverish voice say, "Your old man is the *greatest*, Tom." She felt her cheeks redden. "Shut up!" another voice said. She recognized that voice as Tommy’s.

The door opened again. Tommy stood before her, smiling meekly, his face flushed and his hair in wild disarray. He wore a white t-shirt and black Bermuda shorts. There were three other men, similarly dressed, standing a few feet behind him, craning their necks to get a look at Kristen.

"Sorry about that," Tommy said. "Had to put something on. I–I thought you were the pizza delivery girl."

"What–you were naked?" Kristen asked. She hadn’t had time to register what Tommy had been wearing the first time he had opened the door.

Tommy’s face reddened even more. "She–she says we’re her favorite customers," he said softly.

"I imagine you would be," Kristen said, laughing.

"Well," Tommy said, "come on in. It’s great to see you again. It’s been a long time."

Kristen studied Tommy’s face and smiled warmly. "It’s good to see you, too," she said as she stepped through the door.

Tommy took a step back and bumped into one of the other men, who had crowded closer behind him. "Jeez," he said irritably, "don’t you creeps have anything better to do?" Kristen giggled.

"Hey," said one of the men, "we just wanted to meet our new roommate. Hi, Kristen." The other two men nodded, and one of them gave Kristen a sheepish little wave.

Kristen felt her cheeks grow hot as she noticed the way the men’s eyes moved up and down her body. She gave a weak smile and nodded in acknowledgement of their greeting.

"Okay," Tommy said with a sigh. "Kristen, this is Bob, and Joe, and Bill."

Kristen forced a brave smile and reached out to shake each man’s hand. "Nice to meet you, Bob," she said. Bob’s face turned bright red, and he let out a strange, gutteral laugh as he took Kristen’s hand.

"Hi, Joe," Kristen said, reaching for the second man’s hand. Joe shrank from her, then stiffly reached out to shake her hand.

"You–you are *some* dish!" Joe said hoarsely.

Kristen almost laughed. Instead, she shook Joe’s hand and said, "Nice of you to say so." She turned toward Bill, who lowered his gaze to the floor and reached out to shake her hand. "Nice to meet you, too, Bill," Kristen said.

Kristen’s embarrassment was giving way to amusement. As eagerly as the three men had pressed forward to get a look at her, as wolfishly as their eyes had devoured her, they all seemed almost afraid of her. She slowly realized that each of them also seemed to be struggling to conceal a growing bulge in the front of his pants. She quickly flicked her glance over to the front of Tommy’s shorts. He had his hands clasped together at the front of his pants, but it wasn’t enough–there was no way to miss the evidence that, in one way, at least, Tommy was very happy to see her.

"Here, Kristen," Tommy said. "I’ll show you your room." He put a hand gently on her elbow, and started to lead her toward the stairs.

"I–I really don’t…" Kristen protested.

"I really think you’re going to like it," Tommy said. "It used to be a completely separate apartment, so it’s all kind of self-contained."

Kristen shrugged, and followed Tommy up the steps. The other three men followed, a few steps behind.

At the top of the steps, Tommy opened a door and revealed another flight of stairs leading up to the third floor. "Now, you’ll get the whole third floor," he said. "Your door’s down here, see? I think this gives you a little more privacy than just having a room off the hallway. The, uh, the lock doesn’t work very well, but we can have that fixed." He made a motion toward the stairs with his hand. "Why don’t you go on up?" he said.

With a sad smile, Kristen started climbing the stairs to the third floor. Tommy stepped into the stairwell behind her, and closed the door. The other three men called out "Hey! No fair!" Someone booed. Kristen giggled.

At the top of the steps was a very large room. Two of the walls sloped inward slightly, following the slope of the gabled roof, but there was plenty of usable space, and the room was nicely furnished.

"See?" Tommy said, climbing up behind Kristen. "It used to be a sort of efficiency apartment. You’ve got your living room area over here, and that little alcove could be set up as a sort of mini-kitchen. And you’ve got your own private bathroom, so you don’t have to stand in line downstairs."

"Would you mind if I just wash my hands real quick?" Kristen asked. "Your friends all have sweaty palms," she said, smiling. "Who knows where those fingers have been?"

Tommy smiled and shrugged. Kristen stepped into the little bathroom and quickly washed her hands.

Tommy walked over to the bed and sat down on a corner of the mattress. "This is your bed, of course," he said, patting a spot beside him on the bed.

Kristen dried her hands and stepped out of the bathroom. "So what’s the deal here?" she said. "You stay naked for the pizza delivery girl, but you have to get dressed when I show up?"

Tommy blushed and lowered his head. "I–I was always taught that it’s not polite to point," he said meekly.

Kristen smiled. "Nice thick carpet up here," she said.

"Uh, yeah," Tommy said. "It–it’s new. We just had it put in last year."

Kristen sat down on the floor near Tommy’s feet. She looked up into his eyes and smiled. "I heard a rumor about you," she said. "I’m really glad to know it isn’t true."

"A rumor?" Tommy said, puzzled. "What rumor?"

Kristen stretched out on the floor beside the bed. "I heard a rumor that your father was a little bit worried about you," she said. "He thought maybe you were–you know."

Tommy’s face turned red, and he seemed to slump a little. "Is he telling stories like that to everybody in town?" he said, dully.

"How’d you ever turn out so nice, Tommy?" Kristen said. "You’re a really good guy. And, so help me, I don’t see where you get it from."

Tommy slid off the edge of the bed and sat cross-legged beside Kristen lying on the floor. "My dad’s in a tough business," he said. "He has to act tough all the time. Sometimes I think maybe he’s forgotten how to be nice. But deep down, he’s a good person. He really is."

Kristen rolled onto her side and propped her head up on one hand. "You know," she said, "back in school, you seemed to be the only guy who ever saw me. I mean–*really* saw me. All the other boys were checking out my body. You seemed to be the only guy who would actually listen to what I had to say."

Tommy laughed and put his hands over his eyes. "I hate to break the news to you, Kristen," he said, "but–but I was checking out your body, too."

Kristen tipped her head back and laughed. "Oh, I hope so!" she said.

"Don’t you think you’d be more comfortable lying on your bed?" Tommy asked.

Kristen looked into Tommy’s eyes and smiled sadly. "I can’t stay here, Tommy," she said. "Sorry. I just came by to say hello–I really wanted to see you again–and to let you know that I can’t stay here."

Tommy sat tight-lipped and nodded glumly. "Okay," he said.

Kristen sat up and scooted a little closer to Tommy. "I really like you, Tommy," she said. "I’m going to be down at the beach all summer. You know where to find me. I hope you’ll come down to see me sometime, okay?"

Tommy nodded.

"I’ll be easy to spot," Kristen said softly. She leaned over and put her lips next to Tommy’s ear. "I’ll be naked," she whispered.

Kristen had leaped to her feet and trotted halfway down the steps before Tommy had recovered himself enough to get up to follow her. She encountered Tommy’s three roommates, still gathered on the second floor landing. "So long, Billy Joe, Bobby Joe, Betty Joe," she said with a cheery smile. "I’ll see you all at the beach."

She hurried down the stairs and out the front door of the house. She took the steps down to the street two at a time. As she was going down, she passed a young woman carrying a pizza, on the way up. "I’m sorry," Kristen said, with a giddy laugh. "I’m not sure they’re ready for you."

When she reached her car, she turned and looked back up at the house. All four men stood on the porch, looking stunned. Kristen smiled and waved to them, and after a few seconds, they all waved back. Kristen breathed a sigh of relief and got into the car.

By the time she got back to Janet’s place, the fatigue of Kristen’s long day was firmly back in control. At Janet’s insistence, she ate a small bowl of potato salad, but she kept nodding off at the kitchen table.

Kristen grabbed a quick shower, and dropped her clothes in the bathroom’s laundry hamper. Janet led Kristen to the couch, and brought her a pillow and a sheet.

It wasn’t entirely clear whether Janet had exaggerated how noisy her roommates were, or whether Kristen was just too tired to care. She had no trouble at all falling into a deep, deep sleep.

Her sleep was interrupted by a single dream:

She was alone on the trail up from the beach, and she saw the two gawkers approaching. She was empty-handed and frightened. She looked about desperately for something to use as a weapon, and picked up one of the sharp-edged black rocks that littered the sides of the trail.

As the two men came closer, Kristen gripped the rock tighter and tighter. She looked down and saw that she had cut her own hand. The pain shocked her so much she dropped the rock. She looked up from her cut hand, and jumped with fright to see Tony and the other man standing right in front of her.

Tony smiled, and Kristen could smell the alcohol on his breath. "You’re looking very, very lovely today," Tony said.

"What a dish," the other man chortled.

"What a beautiful bunny tail," Tony said. He reached out for Kristen’s cut hand, bowed theatrically, and kissed the back of her hand. As he straightened up, Kristen realized it was not Tony, but Tommy’s father. She looked at the other person, who was no longer Tony’s companion from the trail, but Tommy’s mother, her head bobbing steadily.

"I’d love to take that bunny tail home with me," the man said, with a dirty leer. "Pretty the place up a little."

Kristen looked intensely into the man’s eyes. There was something there she had never noticed before. The man seemed unsettled by the intensity of her gaze.

"Why are you afraid of me?" Kristen asked.

The man roared with laughter, startling even his wife, who stopped bobbing her head. "Ho! Me, afraid of you! That’s rich! I’m not afraid of you, baby! You’re afraid of me!"

Kristen smiled. "You don’t have to be afraid of me," she said. She looked down at the hand that had been cut. There was no sign of the injury now. She reached out slowly and pressed the hand against the man’s chest. "You don’t have to be afraid of me," she repeated.

"I’m not afraid of you," the man replied. It was not Tommy’s father, but Tommy. The nodding woman was gone. "I’m not afraid of you at all," Tommy said, smiling warmly.

Kristen slept soundly through the rest of the night.

***Challenge***

"Why so glum, chum?" Janet asked, taking a seat next to Kristen.

Kristen sat slumped over the redwood picnic table just outside the lifeguard station, with her chin resting on her folded arms, her eyes staring blankly at the table top. As Janet lowered herself onto the bench, Kristen sat up slowly and turned toward her. "I’m sorry, what?" she asked, dully.

"What’s wrong, Kristen?" Janet said. "You’ve been a million miles away all day. Didn’t you sleep very well last night?"

"Oh, I’ve never slept better," Kristen said, with a weak smile. "You must have the world’s most comfortable couch."

"It probably won’t seem as comfortable tonight," Janet said. She handed Kristen a brown paper bag, and opened her own lunch bag. "Last night I think you were so tired you could have slept on a bed of nails."

"I really appreciate your letting me sleep on your couch," Kristen said, opening her lunch bag and peering inside. "But I think I’m just going to go straight home this afternoon. I was looking at the newspaper a little earlier, and–well, I’m just wasting my time looking for an apartment down here."

"Oh, you’re not giving up already, are you?" Janet asked.

"‘Where the bee sucks, there suck I. In a cowslip’s bell I lie,’" muttered George, who sat on the other side of Kristen, eating an orange.

"What?" said Janet and Kristen, together.

"It’s Shakespeare," George said. "‘There I couch when owls do cry. On the bat’s back I do fly after summer merrily.’"

"What does it mean?" Kristen asked, giving George a puzzled look.

George shrugged. "I dunno. Probably nothing. It just sort of popped into my head right now," he said, with a mischievous smile. "Oh, here’s another: ‘There’s a divinity which shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.’"

"Uh oh," said Richard, approaching the picnic table with his lunch bag in his hand. "I don’t know what you ladies have done, but things must be pretty desperate to have George quoting Shakespeare at you," he said, chuckling. He sat down opposite Kristen at the picnic table. The other lifeguards were coming out of the lifeguard station one by one, lunches in hand, and taking seats around the table.

"Maybe you can help, Richard," Janet said. "Kristen’s giving up on finding a place to stay after just one day. You own property around here. Do you have any ideas?"

Richard frowned. "The real estate market near the beach is always tight this time of year," he said, sighing. "Janet, I think you’ve found the only people who leave just when the season’s starting."

Kristen bit her lip and sighed. She looked at Janet. "See?" she said. "Some people just have a really long commute to their jobs. They manage somehow." She shrugged. "It will just take a little while to get used to it, that’s all."

Richard patted Kristen’s hand. "Hey, don’t give up too soon, kid," he said. "I’ll think about it, and make a few phone calls tonight. Okay? I don’t want you to get your hopes up too much. It’s tough this time of year, but not necessarily impossible."

"Thanks, Richard," Kristen said with a shy smile. "Don’t go to too much trouble, okay? I–I’m thinking I’ve probably got some pretty unrealistic expectations now."

"Unrealistic how?" Richard asked, taking a bite from a large sandwich.

Kristen blushed and put a hand over her eyes. "Ever since Janet told me she gets to go naked all summer, I’ve been really jealous," she said, with an embarrassed laugh. "It’s weird, because just a few days ago the idea would have horrified me."

Beth, who had taken a seat beside Richard, laughed. "See, Kristen?" she said. "I told you you’d like it here."

Richard chuckled. "Well, because Black Knife is here, we tend to get some fairly open-minded people in this area. You’ve probably got a moderately decent chance of finding roommates and landlords who tolerate nudity around here. That is, if you can find a place at all. Listen, I’ll do my best, okay?" He patted Kristen’s hand again.

"Okay, thanks," Kristen said with a wan smile. She absent-mindedly closed her lunch bag without taking out any of the food inside, and once again stared vacantly at the top of the table.

Janet gave Kristen a worried look. She glanced around the table, exchanging glances with the other lifeguards, who had all noticed Kristen’s distracted state.

"What’s the matter, Kristen?" Janet asked. "Aren’t you hungry?"

Kristen looked up and smiled. "Oh, I’m starved," she said.

Janet frowned. "Then why don’t you eat something?" she said, tapping on Kristen’s lunch bag.

Kristen looked at the brown paper bag as if she hadn’t seen it before. "Oh–okay, thanks," she said. She opened the bag again, and pulled out a sandwich.

"C’mon, Kristen," Janet said. "What’s eating you? Richard said he was going to try to find you a place to stay. And you’re welcome to sleep on the couch until you can find something."

"Oh, it’s not that," Kristen said, smiling at Janet and Richard. "I–I really appreciate what you guys are doing for me. It’s not that. No–sometimes I just think too much."

"What is it, Kristen?" Janet said, putting a hand on Kristen’s shoulder. "Something’s bothering you, and I’m starting to worry about you."

Kristen let out a long, deep sigh. "Have you ever been convinced–really convinced–that you understand something, but everybody around you is convinced of exactly the opposite?" she asked.

Janet furrowed her brow, puzzled. "I dunno," she said. "Maybe. What do you mean?"

Kristen sighed again, and paused for a long moment before she spoke. "Beth," she asked, "do you think those gawkers are going to try to come back again?"

Beth frowned. "Don’t worry too much about the gawkers, Kristen," she said. "Once we start to get the real crowds down here, we’ll have plenty of support in case we have to face those creeps again."

"You know what scares me?" Trina said. "I’m afraid they’re going to come down here with guns or knives or something. Even if we’ve got a bunch of people to help us, somebody’s going to get hurt."

Beth glared at Trina. "Well, yeah, that’s right," she said, "But I’ve asked for an increased presence of the beach patrol down here, at least for the next few weeks. I don’t know if we’ll actually get it, but I’ve put in the paperwork."

"They weren’t carrying any weapons yesterday when Richard and I frisked them," Don said.

"Frisked them?" Janet said. "I was watching the whole thing, and I didn’t see you frisk them."

Don laughed. "You saw them turn around and bump into us, didn’t you?"

"A misspent youth is never a total loss," Richard said quietly, raising his eyebrows and smiling.

"And it always pays to find a talented mentor," Don said, punching playfully at Richard’s shoulder. "Isn’t that right, Obi-Wan?" Richard just laughed and took another bite from his sandwich.

"Okay, so they weren’t carrying any weapons yesterday," Kristen said. She furrowed her brow, and seemed lost in thought for a long moment. "Listen, guys," she said, "if Tony comes down here again, could you all call off the cavalry and let me go face him alone?"

"What?" several shocked voices called out in unison.

"Kristen, you don’t know what you’re getting into," Beth said. "Don’t you remember what I told you about Tony?"

Janet had a tight grip on Kristen’s forearm. "It’s too dangerous," she said.

"Oh, you’re crazy," Don said, shaking his head.

Trina let out a startled little squeal. Alicia rolled her eyes in disbelief.

George and Richard each gazed steadily at Kristen’s eyes. George wore a strange smile. Richard seemed puzzled and concerned.

"What are you thinking, Kristen?" George asked softly.

"Beth," Kristen said, "how long has it been since that last encounter with the gawkers, when Tony attacked Lisa? Eight or nine years?"

Beth nodded. "I suppose that’s about right," she said.

Kristen scanned the faces of all the lifeguards gathered at the table. "I’m not crazy," she said. "But I think we’ve all been reading this wrong." She looked at Alicia, who sat at the end of the table. "Alicia," Kristen said, "when they came up to you yesterday, what exactly did they say?"

Alicia snorted. "Well, they were both breathing hard, and they were red in the face," she said. "And as they got close to me, they both looked me up and down and gave me this really dirty smirk."

"Did you recognize them?" Kristen asked.

"I recognized Tony from the pictures," Alicia said. "I’d never seen the pimple-faced boy."

"I don’t think any of us recognized the younger guy," Beth said. "But everybody recognized Tony."

"Okay," Kristen said. "So, what did they say?"

"Well," Alicia continued, "like I said, they both looked me up and down and gave me this filthy smile. Then Tony, in this really sarcastic tone of voice, says, ‘Oh, my, you’re certainly looking lovely today.’ And the pimple-faced kid lets out this dirty snicker. It’s been a while since a guy has looked at me and made me feel embarrassed, but I sure felt embarrassed right then."

"That’s right," Trina said. "And then, in the same snotty tone of voice, he said, ‘Can you suggest a good place for me to spread out a beach blanket?’ And the younger guy does that dirty laugh again."

Kristen winced a little, and slowly shook her head.

"That’s about the time Beth and George came up," Alicia said. "They gave Beth that same dirty leer, and Tony said something about how much he liked our outfits." Her cheeks reddened a little as she told the story.

"I think Tony seemed pretty nervous after Beth arrived," Trina said. "It was pretty obvious that she knew who he was."

"I said, ‘Tony, you know you’re not welcome down here,’" Beth said, tersely.

Trina nodded. "That’s right. And it looked like that knocked some of the air out of him," she said. "I guess that’s about the same time Richard and Don came running up."

"They were afraid we were gonna kick their asses, that’s what it was," Don said.

"Well, Tony looked pretty nervous. I think the younger guy was too dumb to feel scared," Trina said. "But Tony squared his shoulders, looked over at Don and Richard, and said hello."

"He said, ‘Good day, gentlemen,’" Richard said.

"That’s right," Trina said. "I think he was sweating. He seemed pretty nervous. And then he made some sort of elaborate apology, about not wanting to upset anyone, still in that same snotty tone of voice."

"He said, ‘We didn’t come down here to upset anyone,’" Beth added. "Then he said, ‘We certainly didn’t mean to give offense to any of you lovely people. Please accept my heartfelt apologies if we have wronged you in any way.’ And then he bowed, and grabbed Alicia’s hand and kissed it."

"He took me completely by surprise," Alicia said angrily.

"I think he was going to kiss my hand, too," Beth said. "But I guess he saw the look in my eyes and thought better of it. Then they both turned around and more or less high-tailed it out of here."

"After a discreet pat-down," Don added with a laugh.

Kristen was frowning and kneading her temples. She shook her head slowly. "I think we’re reading this all wrong," she said after a moment. "It–it’s just a gut feeling, but I think they were trying to be nice."

The table erupted in derisive laughter. "Oh, Kristen," Beth said, "take my word for it. Tony is *not* a nice person."

"Had you ever seen him in person before yesterday, Beth?" Kristen asked.

"No," Beth answered, "but I know his history. Richard’s seen him before."

Richard was staring at Kristen’s face with an expression of keen interest. He nodded. "That’s right. I was down here the day he attacked Lisa."

"Now, just think about it," Kristen said. "He came down and he tried to pay you a compliment, right? Then he asked a civil question about where he could put his beach blanket."

"Well, he didn’t have a beach blanket with him," Alicia said testily.

Kristen shrugged. "Then Beth came up and told him he wasn’t welcome here," she continued. "So Tony apologizes, and they leave."

"You didn’t hear that sneery tone of voice, okay?" Alicia said angrily. "You didn’t hear the way that pimple-faced kid snickered all the time, or see the way they looked at us, okay?"

"Janet and I passed them twice on the trail, Alicia," Kristen said. "I think I know what you’re talking about. They paid us the same kind of compliments, and my face sure turned red. Like I said, it’s just a gut feeling, but I think they were trying to be polite, and somehow they’ve just never learned how to act nice."

George was looking steadily into Kristen’s eyes with a broad smile growing across his face.

"Don’t you remember the kinds of stuff Tony was involved in?" Janet asked.

"I remember," Kristen responded. "Don’t you think somebody could change in eight or nine years?"

Richard reached across the table and put his hand on Kristen’s. "You’re betting an awful lot on a gut feeling, aren’t you, Kristen? It could be pretty risky if you’re wrong."

Kristen looked at Richard and nodded. "Oh, I know. But I’ve got this theory–I guess it’s my mom’s theory, really–that everybody’s entitled to be respected. No matter how obnoxious they seem. Does that make any sense? And during the past few days I’ve learned that–some of the time, at least–the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. So I’m not afraid."

Richard smiled. "If it’s any consolation, Kristen, I like your gut feeling," he said. "Sometimes all it takes is a little understanding to turn an enemy into an ally."

"What? You agree with her?" Beth said.

Richard bowed his head for a moment, then looked at Beth. "You know what I really think?" he said. "If we see Tony heading down to the beach this summer, I think we ought to saddle up the cavalry, as Kristen put it. But then I think we ought to hold our horses for a little bit, and give Kristen a chance to prove that people can change. If she’s wrong, then I want to come down on Tony with everything we’ve got. But, you know, I don’t think she’s going to be wrong."

Beth let out a long, deep sigh. "I really value your judgment, Richard. But I hate to think about sending Kristen out to face that asshole–excuse the language–alone. She–she might be risking her *life* here."

Kristen smiled. "I’m a lifeguard, Beth. Goes with the territory."

Beth blushed a little. "Okay. You win," she said. "I still want to be ready for the worst, but I’m willing to give Tony a chance to prove he’s changed his stripes."

Richard smiled and shook Kristen’s hand. "I’m proud to know you, Kristen. You’re going to be a real asset to Black Knife Beach. Whether you’re right or wrong about Tony, you’ve got the right stuff."

Kristen blushed. "Thank you," she said softly.

There was a sudden twinkle in Richard’s eye. "You know," he said, "if you’re brave–I mean *really* brave–I know a very nice house just about half a mile from the beach. A really nice place–nice big yard, swimming pool, plenty of privacy. Cheap rent, too. Two female housemates. You would be nude all the time there, and just get dressed to come back and forth to the beach."

"Wow–sounds great," Kristen said. "Why would I have to be brave? Is it one of those cliffside houses about to slide into the ocean?"

"No, nothing like that," Richard said, laughing. "It’s just that, uh, one of the housemates is my sister."

Janet shouted, "No!" A chorus of moans rose from the lifeguards gathered around the table.

"Richard, how *could* you?" Beth said.

Richard smiled and looked into Kristen’s eyes. "What do you think, Kristen? Are you up for a challenge?"

***Almost Golden***

"You look a little nervous, Kristen," Richard said, stepping around to the front of his car.

Kristen forced a tight-lipped smile and nodded. "A little," she said softly. She closed the passenger-side door quietly and moved up to stand beside Richard in the driveway. She was wearing the white tank-top and tan shorts she had worn down to the beach on Monday morning. "It’s an awesome house," she said appreciatively.

Richard sighed. "You know, I’m starting to have some second thoughts about this whole thing," he said. "You’re a really remarkable young woman, Kristen. I don’t want you to do anything that you’re not completely comfortable with."

Kristen let out a nervous, high-pitched little laugh. It sounded almost like a hiccup.

"What’s so funny?" Richard asked.

"You know, if I’d been avoiding everything that made me uncomfortable, the past few days would have been awfully dull," Kristen said, laughing. "I definitely never would have come back to Black Knife, that’s for sure."

Richard smiled. "You’re running on adrenaline," he said. "You know, if it weren’t for this one thing, I think you’d really like my sister. She’s a very bright and interesting person in general, but she’s just become obsessed with this anti-nudity thing."

"Just a few days ago, I might have been on her side," Kristen said. "Do you really think this might help change her mind?"

"I don’t know," Richard said, staring at the ground. "When I started working at Black Knife ten years ago, she was so full of curiosity and a kind of enthusiasm. She asked a lot of questions–did people really go completely naked, and weren’t the girls embarrassed when a boy looked at them, and so on–and she seemed to find the whole thing really exciting. The beach was still clothes-optional back then, and I suggested that she come down and see for herself, but she never did.

"When they made nudity mandatory at the beach, she seemed even more interested. Several times she asked me when was a good time of day or a good day of the week to come down, and would a girl be safe all by herself, or should she come with friends, and did people undress on the beach or were there changing rooms–that kind of stuff–and I thought she was going to come down. But she never did.

"After the big confrontation with Tony, it was all over the newspapers that the Black Knife lifeguards would be working nude, and she started asking me about that. Did it feel good to be naked, was I embarrassed, that kind of thing."

"*Were* you embarrassed?" Kristen asked.

"Not a bit," Richard said. "I had been surrounded by naked people for so long that I actually felt relieved when I didn’t have to wear those stupid trunks anymore. I think all the lifeguards felt like intruders. The beach people and the lifeguards never really got to know each other. But when Lisa stripped off there in front of Tony and his gang, it was like a huge wave of fellowship swept up and engulfed us all. For the first time, the beach people and the lifeguards really felt like we were all on the same side."

"Is that when your sister started to turn against nudity?" Kristen asked.

"No," Richard said, shaking his head vigorously. "She *loved* it. And when I made all that money and bought my big house, she was fascinated by the swimming pool out back. She asked me if I swam in the nude. I said, ‘Always,’ and she seemed so delighted. She asked if she could have a pool party there with some of her friends, and I said sure. And then, joking, I said, ‘No swimsuits allowed,’ and she just laughed and laughed. She never had the pool party, but she would ask about it every now and then."

"So what happened?" Kristen said. "What changed her?"

"I wish I knew," Richard sighed. "About five years ago, she stopped talking about it. If the subject came up, she would say, ‘Can’t we talk about something else?’ Then about three years ago, she started going down to complain at city council meetings, and organizing the anti-nudity picket lines, and all that stuff."

"But you still let her live in this great house?" Kristen asked.

"Oh, c’mon, Kristen," Richard said. "She’s my sister. I’m not going to toss her out in the street."

Kristen smiled and blushed. "You know, I should probably feel flattered. You were the second man to offer me a rent-free place to stay, so long as I don’t wear any clothes."

"Now, you know that was never really a pre-condition," Richard objected. "I never would have thought of it if you hadn’t told me about the other place."

"I know," Kristen said.

"My sister has a very strong personality," Richard said. "Let’s be blunt–she’s a bit of a bully. I just thought this might help you assert your own rights. Otherwise you might have to fight for the right to undress in your own home."

"It’s fine, Richard," Kristen said. "It’s really weird, but I kind of like the idea of living someplace where I’m not even allowed to wear clothes."

"I love being nude myself," Richard said, "but I just don’t see the appeal of being forced into it."

"Well, we’re all forced to go nude at the beach," Kristen responded.

"That’s different," Richard said. "All the beach people are there because they want to be, and *everybody* at the beach has to be naked, not just some people. I’m afraid you’re going to feel awfully lonely here."

"Well, you own the house, right?" Kristen said. "Why don’t you just tell your sister and her roommate that they have to stay naked, too?"

"Oho, noooo!" Richard said, laughing. "No, no, no. That is *definitely* not the way to win them over."

"Probably not," Kristen said, smiling. She took a deep breath. "Well, I’m as ready as I’m ever going to be. Let’s see–your sister is Brenda, and her roommate is Marcie, right?"

"That’s right," Richard said. "Marcie’s joined in on the picket lines before, but I don’t think she’s got the same kind of drive on this thing that Brenda does."

"Well, listen," Kristen said. "I’m not going to try to convince anybody of anything, okay? I’m not going to try to change anybody’s mind. I’m just going to live here. If that helps them to see things a little differently, that’s great."

"That’s fine," Richard said. "Let’s go up the back way, and I’ll show you the back yard and the pool before we go in." He walked to the corner of the garage, and motioned for Kristen to follow.

Around the corner of the garage, wedged in between the garage wall and the thick cement retaining wall, was a steep stone staircase. Kristen followed Richard up the steps into the back yard of the house.

"See, here’s the pool," Richard said, "and that’s the hot tub over there." He indicated a glass structure with a sloped roof attached to the end of the house. "Now, this is a sort of combination greenhouse and solarium. If it’s too wet or chilly to come outside, you can still go into that room and get some sun."

"Man, it must be nice to be rich," Kristen gasped.

Richard smiled and nodded. "It’s alright," he said. He stepped over onto a grassy little hillock. "Why don’t you come on over here. I’ve got something I’d like to show you."

Kristen stepped over and stood next to Richard. "What is it?" she asked.

"Look right over there," he said, pointing. "Between the big boulder and that hill in the distance. See it?"

"Omigosh," Kristen said, with a delighted laugh. "I can see part of the beach from here!"

Richard laughed. "The old lady who owned this house before used to complain and complain about how she could see the naked hippies, ‘bold as day,’ from her back yard. But she’d have to be standing right on that little clump of dirt, and she’d need a telescope to see people on the beach any bigger than ants," he said. "Some people go to an awful lot of trouble to find something to be offended by."

Just then, the glass patio door slid open, and a tall, trim 25-year-old woman stepped through the door. "Oh, here you are," she said angrily. "I thought I heard your car pull up. I was waiting at the front door. I thought you would at least have the decency to knock."

"See what I mean?" Richard said, giving Kristen a sly smile. "And how are you today, Brenda? I was just showing Kristen around the place before she gets settled in. Kristen, I’d like you to meet my sister, Brenda."

Kristen smiled and stepped forward to shake Brenda’s hand. Brenda glowered and snorted haughtily, and folded her arms across her chest.

Kristen thought that if it weren’t for the deep furrows of anger between her eyebrows, Brenda would be a very beautiful woman indeed. Her long, silky sand-colored hair fell well past her shoulders. She wore glasses with large lenses, that did nothing to mask the beauty of her face. She wore a very proper gray twill business suit, with a skirt that came to mid-knee, and a jacket with padded shoulders. She had a pale blue blouse with ruffles down the front. She was even wearing high-heeled businesswoman’s shoes, and nylon stockings with a seam down the back. The clothes looked strangely old-fashioned, Kristen thought, and certainly not very comfortable for casual wear at home.

"I don’t know what you’re thinking, Richard," Brenda said, "but I’m not finding it very funny."

"Well, good," Richard said, very mildly. "Maybe you’re learning to tell when I’m not kidding. Let’s go inside, Kristen. I told Brenda that you get the master bedroom. There’s a great view from the window up there."

A sort of pained grunt came from Brenda as Kristen and Richard approached the open patio door. Kristen looked at Richard, and silently mouthed the question, "Now?" Richard raised his eyebrows, gave a non-committal smile, and shrugged.

"This is gonna be nice," Kristen said. With trembling hands, she quickly pulled her tank top off over her head. She had no bra underneath. Bare from the waist up, she stepped through the patio door into the large kitchen.

Brenda, her face purple with rage, was upon Kristen in an instant. "Now, listen to me, you little slut!" Brenda roared. "You are *not* going to be walking around half-naked in *my* house! Do you understand?"

"That’s enough!" Richard shouted, slamming his hand down on the kitchen table. Kristen saw that his face was red, and his hands were shaking violently, as if he were struggling to restrain his anger.

A fragile looking young woman appeared suddenly in the kitchen doorway. "What’s going on here?" she cried. When she saw Kristen, she stopped suddenly and blushed. "Oh, my!" she gasped.

Richard cleared his throat noisily. "Marcie," he said, his voice sounding strained, "I’d like you to meet Kristen, your new housemate. She works with me down at Black Knife. She’s one of the lifeguards."

Marcie, obviously embarrassed, smiled meekly and reached out to shake Kristen’s hand. "H–hi, Kristen. Nice to meet you," she said. Brenda shot a murderous look at Marcie.

"Nice to meet you, too, Marcie," Kristen said, smiling and shaking Marcie’s hand. Marcie was very *petite*, short and very thin, her dark brown hair cut in short bangs. She looked about twenty-two or twenty-three years old. She, too, was dressed in business garb. She wore a short-sleeved white blouse, and a black skirt that reached only to the top of her knees. She, too, was wearing nylons or pantyhose, but without the visible seam of Brenda’s stockings, and she wore open-toed flat shoes instead of high heels. There was a waif-like look in Marcie’s eyes which made her seem extremely vulnerable. Kristen felt guilty for making Marcie feel embarrassed.

Brenda spoke slowly and fiercely, through clenched teeth. "Richard, I don’t care if you want to give a home to some stray alley cat. That’s your business. But I am not going to have this slut running around my house half-naked."

Richard spoke very quietly, but there was no question that he was struggling to subdue his fury. "First of all, Brenda," he said, "Kristen is a lifeguard. She’s a damn good one. And if you call her a slut again, I’ll kick your ass out in the street. I’m not joking."

Brenda stiffened and shot an angry glance at Kristen.

"And of course I don’t need to remind you that this is not your house," Richard continued. "It’s my house. I let you live here because you’re my sister. But I’ll tell you, family ties are wearing pretty damn thin right now." He pointed to Kristen. "You are going to show this young woman some respect. Even if you have to fake it. Understand? I want you to apologize for calling her a slut."

Brenda stiffened even more and let an angry hiss escape through her clenched teeth. She turned to Kristen and forced a smile that looked more like a grimace. Her eyes were filled with blistering hatred. "I’m sorry, Kristen," she said. "I hope you’ll forgive me."

"Of course I forgive you," Kristen said, barely audible.

"And one last thing," Richard said, slowly mastering his anger. "I’m not doing Kristen a favor by letting her stay here. She’s doing a favor for me. Kristen?"

Kristen looked at Richard and raised her eyebrows. "R–right here?" she asked.

Richard smiled. "Might as well make yourself at home," he said.

Kristen shrugged and kicked off her tennis shoes. Without socks, she stood barefoot on the cool tile floor. "That feels a lot better," she said, smiling at Richard. She shot a quick glance at Marcie, who seemed to have calmed down considerably, then she undid the snap on her shorts and tugged them down to the floor. She wore no panties. She picked up her shorts and shoes, and stood, totally naked, in the center of the kitchen. "A lot better," she said, with a nervous smile.

"It’s time for you to broaden your horizons a little, Brenda," Richard said. "Kristen’s not going to be half-naked around the house. She’s going to be completely naked. I told her she could stay here on the condition she doesn’t wear any clothes, and she has graciously agreed to that."

Brenda’s face was turning purple again. "This is sabotage!" she hissed. "How did you find out?"

"Find out? Find out what?" Richard asked.

"How did you find out I’m running for city council?" Brenda said angrily. "I–I’m going to have a lot of very important people coming through here over the next few months. Just how seriously do you think they’re going to take me with this–" She caught the dangerous look in Richard’s eye just in time. "With this–this naked pixie prancing around?" She groaned and sank into one of the kitchen chairs.

Richard chuckled. He crouched so he was at Brenda’s eye level. "Tell them the truth," he said softly. "Tell them your brother forced this naked housemate on you. I honestly didn’t know you were running. I wish you the best of luck, really." He reached out and put his hand on Brenda’s. Now he spoke almost tenderly. "You know, if this anti-nudity thing is worth anything at all, it certainly ought to be able to withstand an encounter or two with a nice naked pixie. And if it can’t withstand that, then maybe you need to find another issue to run on."

Brenda stared into her brother’s eyes. "You are such a creep," she said softly. She patted him on the shoulder. "What are you going to do after I put Black Knife Beach out of business?"

Richard shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "‘There’s a divinity which shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.’"

"You and George," Kristen said. "You people are just too smart for me."

Richard smiled and stood up again. "Oh, we’re not smart," he said. "We’re just show-offs. Well, let’s go upstairs and I’ll show you your room."

Kristen shot quick glances into the faces of Brenda and Marcie. She took a deep breath. "That’s okay, Richard," she said. "I think Brenda and Marcie can show me the rest of the house. Right now, if it’s okay with you, I’d just like to get outside and catch a little bit more sun before it drops behind that hill over there."

"Well, sure," Richard said, puzzled.

Kristen set her clothes down on the kitchen floor, right up against the wall. "I’ll be back in just a few minutes, ladies," she said, opening the sliding glass door and stepping naked onto the patio. "C’mon, Richard," she said as she brushed past him.

Richard followed Kristen to the little hillock that looked out on a sliver of Black Knife Beach. "I’m sorry, Kristen," he said. "I had no idea that she was running for city council. This…"

"You know," Kristen said, gazing into the distance, "in this light the beach looks almost golden."

"I will definitely understand if you don’t want to go through with this," Richard said. "And I promise, whatever it costs, I’ll find you a nice place near the beach, so don’t worry about that."

Kristen looked at Richard and smiled broadly. "Richard, I’m not worried at all. This place is great. I think that Brenda and Marcie and I are going to get along just fine, after we get to know each other. You said yourself that sometimes a little understanding can turn an enemy into a friend."

"Are you kidding?" Richard said. "You saw her pitch that fit, and you still think you can turn her into a friend?"

Kristen turned again to look at the golden beach in the distance. "Richard," she said, "from where I’m standing, this looks like it’s going to be the best summer ever."