**A Promise is a Promise**

As she watched Richard’s car backing out the driveway, Kristen felt her knees grow weak. She steadied herself against the corner of the garage, smiled gamely, and gave a little wave. Richard beamed at her, and with a quick toot on the car horn, he was gone.

Instantly, a sense of desolation settled over Kristen. Her smile vanished, and

a haunted look came into her eyes. She felt a queasy sensation in the pit of her stomach. Reflexively, she brought her knees together, hunched her shoulders forward, and folded her arms across her chest. She felt… naked. Which was surprising, in a way. It was true, she had left her clothes—all she had with her—up in the kitchen. But she had been totally nude all day at the beach, in the presence of dozens of women and men, and though she was always fully aware of her nudity, she hadn’t felt like this. Just four days earlier, Kristen had not suspected that the summer lifeguard assignment she accepted so eagerly was at a nude beach. No man had ever seen her naked, she believed, nor had she ever seen a naked man. But all that had changed with startling suddenness. The days since she had learned the truth about her summer job had been an emotional roller coaster ride. Working as a lifeguard at Black Knife Beach, she wore a “uniform” that consisted solely of a baseball cap with the word “Lifeguard” stitched into it. She was not allowed to wear anything else. The other lifeguards, male and female, were as naked as she was. To her surprise, it hadn’t taken long to grow accustomed to being nude at the beach. After only a day or two there, Kristen found herself wondering who had dreamed up the absurd idea of swaddling the human body in yards of fabric in the first place. It was hard to understand how anyone could be shocked or offended by something as perfectly natural as a naked human being.

But that was at the beach. Right here, right now, the notion that a person could be natural and comfortable with no clothes on seemed ludicrous. Kristen felt as if she was lacking some essential part of herself. Her thoughts turned to the little pile of clothing she had left up in the kitchen. She turned, unconsciously stretching one arm across her breasts, and moving her free hand down to cover her pubic mound. Stooped over, with tiny, awkward steps, always keeping her knees together, she walked to the back of the garage, where a steep stone staircase led up to the back yard of the house. She looked up the stairs. Brenda and Marcie would still be up there, in the kitchen. She felt a tightness in her chest, and her face felt hot.

Earlier in the day, when Richard had told her that he admired her courage, Kristen had puffed up with pride. Richard was the most experienced lifeguard at Black Knife Beach, and his own courage had earned him the respect and admiration of the other lifeguards. When Richard had told his sister Brenda that Kristen was a “damn good” lifeguard, Kristen had blushed. But her heart had beat a little faster, too, and she’d stood a bit taller. Now her cheeks burned again, not from pride, but from shame.

How good a lifeguard could she hope to be if she was frightened of her new housemates? The two hostile women hadn’t intimidated her when Richard had been present. How disappointed would he be if he could see the way she trembled now? Kristen was brave, it seemed, only when she could stand in his shadow. She saw her own shadow now, falling across the stone steps. She gasped when she saw the hunched and awkward posture of shame that she had unconsciously adopted, and her cheeks felt hotter still. Had the past four days meant nothing? She forced herself to stand up straight. She looked up the stairs again. She would need to be alert every second—she couldn’t let Brenda or Marcie sense any hint of the fear, doubt, and embarrassment that threatened to overwhelm her. She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. By an effort of will, she lowered her hands to her sides, then clasped them together behind her back.

Kristen had painted herself into this corner, when she had promised Richard that she would not wear any clothes at the house. He had made the original suggestion in a half-joking manner. He had seemed astonished when Kristen embraced the idea, and when she resisted his attempts to talk her out of it. She couldn’t back down now, no matter how much she might want to. She drew another deep breath, steadied herself against the thick cement retaining wall, and started to climb the steps up to the back yard.

Daylight was fading now. Kristen looked around the yard once again, and a smile spread across her face. She could scarcely believe that this place would be her home for the summer. The grass felt cool and soft under her bare feet. She longed to slip into the sanctuary of the deepening shadows under the trees, or to dive into the blue rippling water of the swimming pool. But she turned instead to the sliding glass patio doors that led into the kitchen. Her stomach churned. She braced herself, took a deep breath, slid the door open, and stepped into the kitchen.

The house was air conditioned. She had scarcely noticed it earlier, but now she felt it with every inch of her bare skin. The cool air was pleasant enough, but the sensation was yet another reminder of her state of dress. She fought off the impulse to cover herself with her hands.

Marcie sat at the kitchen table, her face a mask of tense expectation. Brenda slouched in her seat at the table, looking dejected. She looked up at Kristen with a dull, weary expression. She smiled a curious smile. “You know who you remind me of?” Brenda asked, her voice soft and sad.

Kristen smiled and shook her head. “Who?”

“A girl I knew in high school,” Brenda said. “She was really pretty, just like you. She was a cheerleader. Everybody liked her—I think she was one of the most popular girls in the school.”

Kristen’s smile broadened. Marcie’s eyes darted from Kristen to Brenda and back again.

Brenda sat a bit more upright. Her dull features became more animated as she spoke. “I hadn’t seen her for years, but I just ran into her a few weeks ago,” she said. She shook her head slowly. “It never lasts, you know. She got married. She’s got two kids now. She’s got stretch marks.” Brenda raked her fingers across her abdomen. There was a harsh edge coming into her voice. “She had a C-section, and she’s got a great big scar. She can’t wear a bikini anymore. She can’t go to the beach.”

“She could come to Black Knife Beach,” Kristen said. “There are people of all ages down there. We don’t discriminate. We don’t judge…” “All right, enough is enough,” Brenda said sharply, now bolt upright in her chair. “We’ve seen your boobs, Kristen. We’ve seen your butt. Very nice, okay? You’re cute as a button. Now get your clothes on!”

Kristen took a step back, startled by Brenda’s sudden mood change. “I can’t do that,” she said. “You know I can’t. I gave my word.”

Brenda glowered at Kristen with barely contained fury. “You are a guest in my home, and I will not have you running around bare-assed,” she said. “I—I’m not your guest,” Kristen said. “I’m Richard’s guest.” “It might be his house, but it’s my home,” Brenda fumed, “and I will not have it.”

“Listen, Richard’s not here now,” Marcie interjected. “He’s doesn’t have to know a thing about it, and we’re sure not going to tell him if you put your clothes on.”

“A promise is a promise,” Kristen said. She looked around the room uneasily. “Say, where are my clothes, anyway?” she said. “I left them right here, and they’re gone.”

“You go naked all day long at work, then you go naked all the time at home. I thought you didn’t need clothes,” Brenda sneered.

“I need them to get to work in the morning,” Kristen said. “I can’t go like this.”

“I can’t go like this,” Brenda repeated mockingly. “I can’t go like this! Why not? If it’s all as innocent and natural as you say it is, it shouldn’t make any difference.”

“I’d get arrested!” Kristen said, exasperated. “Really, where are my clothes?”

“Did you hear that, Marcie?” Brenda said. “She’d get arrested. Poor Kristen. It sounds like there are still some scattered pockets of decency in this town, after all. Some people still know the meaning of shame.” Marcie nodded, her eyes riveted on Kristen’s face.

Kristen studied Brenda and Marcie’s faces. “You’ve hidden them,” she said.

“You’ve hidden my clothes.” Brenda smirked.

Kristen’s eyes darted around the room. “Where’s the phone?” she said. Through the doorway she spotted a phone in the living room. She shot a dismissive glance at Brenda, and headed through the door.

For an instant, there was a panicky look in Brenda’s eyes. She leapt to her feet and followed Kristen to the phone. Kristen had the receiver in her hand, and was dialing her number.

“Oh, is this the way the lifeguard business works?” Brenda said, her face contorted with rage. “So what do you do, Kristen? You race up and down the beach, pointing out drowning people so Richard can rush in and rescue them?” Kristen winced. Brenda had struck a nerve. The two women locked eyes. Kristen forced a tight-lipped smile. “Yes, if that’s what it takes to get the job done,” she said. She punched the final digits of the phone number. She heard ringing on the other end of the line.

Brenda lunged toward the phone, but Kristen turned and swiveled her hip out to block her.

Marcie rushed into the living room, carrying Kristen’s clothes. Brenda cast a withering look at Marcie, who threw the clothes onto the floor at Kristen’s feet. “Here!” Marcie shouted. “Here are your clothes. We were going to wash them for you!”

For a moment all three women eyed each other, their faces taut and flushed with fury. Then Kristen heard the phone picked up on the other end of the line.

“Hi, Mom, it’s Kristen,” she said. “Guess what—I’ve got a place to stay down here.” Brenda turned away from Kristen, shaking her head and letting out a sharp hiss of breath. Marcie took a step back, but watched Kristen and Brenda warily.

“No, it’s a house,” Kristen said into the phone. “You won’t believe it when you see it. Say, could you bring me out some clothes? My roommates are practical jokers, and I’m not completely sure I trust them.” She looked at Brenda and Marcie, and smiled.

Brenda slumped into a chair and glared balefully at Kristen and Marcie. Marcie took a couple steps back and leaned against the door frame. Kristen gave her mother the address and directions to the house, then hung up the phone.

“So,” Brenda said icily, “your mother knows you’re prancing around naked all summer?”

“My parents met on Black Knife Beach,” Kristen said. “I never knew about that until Saturday. My mom told me I’m a full-blooded nudist.” She smiled and blushed.

“Unbelievable,” Brenda sneered, shaking her head. “The whole family.” “You know, Brenda, your brother told me you’re really a very good person,” Kristen said.

Brenda laughed harshly. “Well, now you know that he’s really a very bad liar,” she said.

“I don’t think you realize how—how dear you are to him,” Kristen said. “You know, you’re not very well-liked down at the beach. But whenever one of the other lifeguards or anyone else tried to say anything against you, Richard stood up for you.”

Brenda stared intently into Kristen’s eyes for a moment, then shook her head. “I think I’m gonna be sick,” she said. “Marcie, can you show Pollyanna here up to her room? I don’t have the stomach for it.”

“Okay, Brenda,” Marcie said softly. “Would you follow me, please, Kristen?”

Kristen stooped to gather up the clothes at her feet, and followed Marcie silently down a corridor and up an elaborate staircase to the second floor. “Hey, thanks for offering to wash these things,” Kristen whispered, hoisting the little bundle of clothes in her hands. “I don’t want to be any trouble, though.” Marcie cast a strange look back at Kristen over her shoulder. Marcie stopped in front of a large wooden door and turned to face Kristen. “This is your room,” she said. “It’s the master bedroom.” She opened the door to reveal a large, elaborately furnished room with a four-poster bed and a bay window overlooking the pool behind the house.

“Holy cow,” Kristen said, following Marcie into the room. “I—I’m not kicking you or Brenda out of your room, am I? I’d be glad to take a smaller room. I don’t want to be a bother.”

Once again Marcie gave Kristen a strange, dour look. “You didn’t kick anyone out,” Marcie said. “Brenda’s room is next door, and mine’s at the end of the hall. We’ve always used this as a guest room. Richard insisted we give this room to you.”

“This is just too much,” Kristen said, shaking her head and setting her clothes down on a little side table just inside the door. “This room is almost as big as our whole house. I don’t need this much space. I don’t want anyone to go to so much trouble for me.”

“You keep saying that!” Marcie exclaimed sharply. “You don’t want to be any trouble. Don’t you have any idea how much trouble you’re already causing by being here? We’re getting things lined up right now for the official announcement of Brenda’s candidacy for the City Council seat. There are important people coming here every day, you know—lining up support, planning campaign strategy, meeting with reporters. Do you imagine that you can run around here in the raw all the time and not cause any trouble?” There were tears glistening in Kristen’s eyes. She blinked them away. “I didn’t know anything about that, and neither did Richard. I needed a place to stay, and Richard thought it might do Brenda some good to spend some time around someone from the beach. Maybe she’d learn that we’re not perverts or monsters or…” Her voice trailed off, and she brushed a tear from the corner of her eye. “We’re people, you know. We’ve got feelings.”

Marcie sighed, and gave Kristen a sympathetic smile. “Everybody has feelings,” she said softly. “Look, I’m sorry she’s being so hard on you. She’s a fighter when she needs to be, but she really is a good person. I suppose you just don’t realize the kinds of things you’re liable to stir up by running around like that.”

“I’m not trying to stir up anything,” Kristen said. She sighed and nodded toward the open bedroom door. “Say, what’s Brenda’s problem, anyway?” Marcie’s smile disappeared. “I can’t believe this,” she fumed. “What’s her problem? You parade around stark naked in public every day, and you’ve got the nerve to ask what Brenda’s problem is?” She shook her head. “You have a lot to learn, Kristen. A lot to learn!” With that, she turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Kristen plopped down on the bed and stared at the door. Tears were starting to sting in her eyes. “I know I’ve got a lot to learn,” she muttered. “Maybe the two of you have something to learn, too.”

Kristen went to bed early that night, soon after her mother had dropped off two laundry baskets full of clean summer clothes. She felt better with clothes hanging in the closet and filling the dresser drawers, even if she didn’t intend to wear them. She turned off the air conditioning in her room, and opened the window to let in the fresh night air. The bed was soft and luxurious, with flannel sheets that felt good against her bare skin. Exhausted, she slipped into a deep and dreamless sleep soon after she turned off the lights.

Kristen awakened with a start. She was breathing rapidly, and her heart was pounding. It took a moment for her to remember where she was. The lighted numbers on the nightstand clock showed that it was almost 3:00 o’clock in the morning. She was puzzled by her sudden awakening—she didn’t remember any dreams.

When her breathing and her heartbeat had slowed, she lay back down and closed her eyes. Almost immediately, she heard a quiet splash through the open window. Curious and a little frightened, she got out of bed and tiptoed over to the large bay window.

In the pale moonlight, Kristen saw Brenda, wearing a white terrycloth robe that almost brushed the ground. She was walking very slowly around the edge of the pool, stopping from time to time to trail her foot through the water. While Kristen watched, Brenda completed her slow circuit of the pool. She loosened her belt and let the robe slip off her shoulders.

Kristen was disappointed to see that Brenda wore a dark one-piece swimsuit under the robe. She had imagined that at this hour, in her own pool, even Brenda would swim nude. Brenda slipped quietly into the water, and began to swim the length of the pool. She glided smoothly, swiftly and silently through the water. Kristen stopped counting after a dozen laps, but Brenda kept swimming tirelessly. Kristen was about to go back to bed when Brenda finally pulled herself out of the pool. Brenda picked up a towel and dried herself, then put on the long white robe once again. She picked up the towel, cast a last glance back at the pool, and stepped into the house through the patio doors.

Kristen, feeling a rush of guilt for spying on Brenda in the pool, tiptoed back to her bed. After a few minutes, she heard Brenda passing her door on the way to her own room. Kristen closed her eyes and tried to go to sleep. The next thing she heard, she heard so faintly that she wasn’t certain she heard it at all. Through the thick bedroom wall, she thought she heard a muffled sobbing from Brenda’s room.

**Opening Day**

Already, there were thirty or more vehicles in the parking lot—cars, trucks, campers, vans, plus a couple motorcycles. Around them milled people of all ages, with picnic baskets, thermos jugs, beach blankets, and more. Two or three women were bare-chested, and one man was completely naked except for a pith helmet. Everyone was talking, smiling, laughing. One man hoisted a large ice chest out of the trunk of his car, opened it, and started handing cold soft drinks to everyone who happened by.

Kristen felt as if she had stumbled into some stranger’s family reunion. The mood was festive; everyone here seemed to know everyone else, and they looked happy and excited to be meeting old friends once again. Kristen lowered her eyes and strode intently across the parking lot toward the steps that started the path down to the beach. The beach bag that swung slowly from her left hand brushed against her calf as she walked.

“Crystal! Hey, Crystal!” a man’s voice shouted so insistently that Kristen turned to see who was doing the shouting. “Over here!” the man shouted, with a sweeping motion of his arm.

Kristen smiled, and walked toward the man, who stood next to the driver-side door of his car. She peered through the windshield at the blonde woman in the passenger’s seat. “Hi, Paul,” she said. “Hi, Maria. Nice to see some familiar faces. I remember you two from Saturday.”

Paul smiled and puffed out his chest theatrically. “Hard to forget a hunk like me, isn’t it, Crystal?” he said.

Kristen laughed. “Maybe so,” she said, “but I think I’ve just got a good memory.” Paul clapped one hand to his chest and turned his eyes heavenward in a mock display of wounded dignity. “And my name is Kristen, not Crystal,” she added.

Paul looked puzzled, then he smiled. “That’s right,” he said, nodding.

“Kristen is such a beautiful name.”

“Just not as beautiful as Crystal, though?” Kristen said with a mischievous smile.

Paul shook his head. “Crystal’s a nice name—a very nice name,” he said. He boldly looked Kristen up and down, and a broad grin spread across his face. “But Kristen is so much nicer, in so many ways. I think I just couldn’t believe that I’d met an actual Kristen. Your kind is rare, and exceptionally precious.”

Kristen blushed and fidgeted uncomfortably under his frank appraisal. “What a nice thing to say,” she said. Other men had looked at her the way Paul did—he was undressing her with his eyes, she thought. But in this place, that phrase seemed bizarre. Soon she would truly be undressed, and Paul, like every other man on the beach, would really be able to see her then. She glanced over at Maria, who sat with eyes downcast, as if lost in thought. “You’re very good with flattery, Paul,” Kristen said.

“Hey, babe, it’s the simple truth,” Paul said, smiling and taking a step toward Kristen, who shrunk back just a little.

Maria stuck her head out the passenger-side window. “I remembered your name, Kristen,” she said.

Paul scowled and slapped his hand noisily against the roof of the car. “Hey, shut up in there and get your clothes off,” he shouted. He lowered his head to look into the car. “Look, you haven’t even started. Do we have to go through this every damn time?”

“Sorry,” Maria said meekly. She started fumbling with the buttons on her white blouse.

“When are you going to grow up?” Paul said.

“Hey, that’s not very nice,” Kristen said.

Paul looked up and smiled. “Hey, every now and then a man’s gotta give his old lady a kick in the ass to show her he cares,” he said jovially. Kristen didn’t laugh. She watched him warily. Paul returned her gaze, and thumped a couple more times on the car roof. Then he looked down and muttered, “Jeez, hasn’t anybody got a sense of humor anymore?”

Maria had her blouse unbuttoned, and was removing the black bikini top she wore under it. She put her head out the car window again. “I’m okay, Kristen,” she said.

“Honest.”

Kristen looked into Maria’s eyes, then into Paul’s. “Okay,” she said, nodding.

“Listen, it was good to see you two again, but I’ve got to get down there now. Have a good day today.” She turned and took a few steps away from Paul and Maria’s car, then stopped and turned back toward them. She smiled. “Play nice,” she said. Paul nodded, and Maria smiled and waved. Kristen turned and resumed her trek across the parking lot. A rusted-out black van sat near the beach steps. Kristen eyed the vehicle idly as she approached it. The van’s windows were dark, the glass tinted, but as she came closer to the van, Kristen realized there was someone in the driver’s seat. She knew that much only because she saw movement when the person’s head turned. Feeling curious, she watched the darkened windows intently as she walked. She was about four or five car lengths from the van when its engine came to life with a sudden roar. Kristen jumped out of the way when the van lurched forward, tires squealing, and raced across the parking lot. “Stupid sonofa…” Paul shouted. He picked up a small rock and hurled it at the back of the van as it passed him. People scattered as the black vehicle careened across the lot, trailing blue smoke. The van kicked up a spray of gravel when it turned onto the narrow gravel path that led out to the main road, and disappeared through the trees that screened the beach parking lot from the road.

Paul and Maria ran to where Kristen stood. Maria wore only her unbuttoned white blouse and the bottom of her fairly conservative black bikini. The tail of the blouse flapped behind her, and her firm bare breasts had a rhythm of their own as she ran.

“Are you okay, Kristen?” Maria asked breathlessly when she reached Kristen’s side.

“That moron could have killed somebody,” Paul said, looking toward the parking lot exit, where the van had disappeared.

“Was it somebody you guys know?” Kristen said. “He sure was in a hurry.” “I didn’t recognize the van,” Paul said, shaking his head. “It was sitting there when we came in. I didn’t know there was anybody in it.” “Hey, Maria, are you okay?” Kristen said.

There were tears in Maria’s eyes. “I should have put some shoes on,” she said, wincing. “I think I scraped my feet up.” She leaned against Paul’s body, and raised one foot. The sole was scratched and oozing blood. “Don’t run barefoot on blacktop if you don’t have a tough sole,” she said, through clenched teeth. “I think I can handle it at the end of the summer, but not this early in the season.”

“You’ll have to get that cleaned up, and get some disinfectant on it,” Kristen said, concerned.

Maria nodded. “We’ve got a first aid kit back in the car,” she said. “I’ll go take care of it. See you down on the beach, okay?” Maria turned and hobbled back toward the car, obviously in some pain.

Paul stood beside Kristen and watched Maria walking away for a few seconds. Then he turned to Kristen. “Are you sure you’re alright? That guy was some sort of maniac.”

“I’m fine,” Kristen said. “Not a scratch on me. Shouldn’t you be worrying about Maria?”

“Aw, she’s tough,” Paul said. “She seems all meek and mild, but she can take care of herself.”

“I hope she can,” Kristen said, watching as Maria paused for a moment before resuming her painful trek. “Listen,” she said, “I’ve got to get down to the beach, and you’ve got to go help Maria, whether she needs it or not. Okay?” Paul shrugged and nodded.

“Okay,” Kristen said. “I suppose I’ll see you down there.” Kristen turned and started down the beach steps.

The steep rocky trail down the cliff side to the white sand beach seemed easier now. As she made the descent, Kristen watched the waves washing over the sand. She was fascinated by the rhythm of the waves, like the slow and steady pulse of the earth itself. This sea had beat against this shore millions of years before any human being had stood here. A smile spread across Kristen’s face. The animosity and fear that filled up so much of people’s lives seemed very distant on Black Knife Beach. This place was a world apart. When she had walked clear of the rocky rubble that littered the beach near the base of the cliff, Kristen stopped for a moment and took off her shoes and socks.

Barefoot, she walked across the soft white sand to the main lifeguard station. She stepped through the open doorway, and stopped. The little office at the front of the building was empty. The locker room door stood open, and the lights were on in the locker room. “Beth, are you here?” Kristen called through the locker room door.

“Yes, just a second,” came Beth’s voice. A moment later, Beth stepped through the locker room door, totally nude. “Hi,” she said, smiling brightly. “Ready for opening day?”

Kristen was surprised to feel the blood rush to her cheeks. “Kristen, you’re blushing!” Beth said. “You’re not getting cold feet on opening day, are you?”

“I’ll be fine,” Kristen said. “But this is like déjà vu. This is exactly how I first met you on Saturday.”

“I should be ashamed of myself,” Beth said, looking down at her bare body.

“Wearing the same drab old outfit day after day. It’s so un-chic.” Kristen laughed, but a rush of powerful old emotions flooded over her, revived by the memory of her introduction to Black Knife Beach. She had come a long way since then, but she still felt she should look away, though her eyes wanted to linger. Beth herself seemed perfectly comfortable having curious eyes study her nakedness.

Kristen was still baffled by Beth’s total lack of self-consciousness. The smooth shoulders, the slender but strong arms, the firm round breasts, the trim stomach that curved out just a little between her navel and the neatly trimmed reddish-brown pubic hair, the narrow waist that tapered out to the roundness of her hips, the swell of her buttocks, the long shapely legs, even the bare toes with their perfect pedicure—every part of Beth’s body was exposed to anyone who cared to look, and Beth seemed totally oblivious. Kristen’s own body seemed almost to tingle with nervous anticipation at the thought of going back into the locker room, where she would take her clothes off for the day. She thought of herself as a nudist now, but when she was nude—especially on the beach, knowing that everyone could see her—a curious warmth seemed to spread out from the pit of her stomach through her entire body. The sun against her skin, the breeze moving over her, even the sensation of her own arms brushing against her hips or her thighs as she walked—Kristen felt her own nakedness with every atom of her being. It was not an unpleasant sensation, but it was a powerful one. She couldn’t understand how Beth and the other people she had met on the beach managed to go about their business so calmly, while this fire raged within herself.

“I just realized, Beth, I’ve never seen you with clothes on,” Kristen said.

“Do you even own any clothes?”

Beth laughed. “Of course I own clothes, silly. I even offered to let you wear them home on Saturday, remember? I just don’t wear them down here. Speaking of which…” “I know,” Kristen sighed. “The dress code.”

“It’s strictly enforced, you know,” Beth said with a smile. “So I’ve heard,” Kristen said, taking a step toward the locker room. “Oh, would you…” “I’ll be glad to help you with your sunscreen,” Beth said. “You ought to ask George to help sometime,” she added. “He really has the magic fingers.” She raised both her hands and wiggled her fingers.

“Magic fingers!” Kristen laughed, rolling her eyes. “Just what I need!” She took another few steps toward the locker room door. As she brushed past Beth, Kristen leaned over to whisper in Beth’s ear. “Anyway, why would we settle for hamburger when we have filet mignon?” she said, giggling. Beth looked at Kristen with an expression of puzzlement for a moment. Slowly comprehension dawned in her eyes. Kristen was startled when Beth suddenly guffawed loudly. “You just don’t know a filet mignon from a hot dog,” Beth said, laughing. “You’re pretty young. You’ll learn.”

Beth’s laugh was contagious. “I was talking about Don,” Kristen protested, as she struggled to suppress her mirth.

Beth’s eyes twinkled. “I know very well who you were talking about,” she said. “But, listen. We can’t waste the whole day with idle chit-chat. There’s work to be done.” She stepped to a position behind Kristen, planted her hands squarely on Kristen’s back, and gently started to push the laughing Kristen toward the locker room door. “Hurry! Hurry!” Beth said. “I don’t like being the only naked person in this room.”

“Okay, okay!” Kristen said. She walked into the locker room and sat down on the bench in front of her locker, still laughing. She looked out through the locker room door, and saw that Beth was already busy with some sort of paperwork. Kristen let out a sigh, and stared for a moment at the lock on her locker. Beth almost always seemed to be tangled up in some kind of bureaucratic red tape, Kristen mused. It was good to see her laugh from time to time. Burdened as she was with her responsibilities as senior lifeguard, did Beth ever have a chance to relax and just enjoy this beautiful beach? Kristen reached out, dialed in the locker combination, and opened her locker. She tossed the shoes she had been carrying into the locker and they landed with a noisy bang. She grabbed the hem of her dark blue t-shirt, and quickly pulled it up and off over her head. She ran her fingers through her hair, restoring some rough order to her tousled platinum blonde pageboy bob. Kristen hadn’t worn a bra this morning, and a sort of warm glow seemed to spread through her body when she felt the air on her bare breasts. Her mother had brought clothes out to the house the night before, including underwear. But this morning it had seemed silly to put underclothes on just for the short walk down to the beach, where she would only have to take them off again. She pulled a towel from her beach bag, and tossed the bag into the locker. Standing, she spread the towel neatly over the wooden bench. Kristen undid the snap and lowered the zipper on her dark blue shorts, then slid the shorts smoothly to her ankles. She sat on the bench and bent over to pull her shorts off over her feet. The decision not to wear knickers this morning had been more difficult than the choice to forego her bra, but now she was happy she hadn’t worn anything under her street clothes. For some reason she couldn’t understand, the thought of the other lifeguards catching a glimpse of her in her underwear was intensely embarrassing. She pulled the bottle of sunscreen from her locker. Starting with her forehead and working downward, she carefully coated every inch of her bare skin with a protective layer of the suntan lotion. On each of the previous two days at Black Knife Beach, she had evidently missed some small patches of exposed skin. She hadn’t suffered a serious sunburn, but the small unprotected areas glowed an angry red, and felt sore and sensitive. The experience reinforced her mother’s advice—Kristen had to protect absolutely every part of her body from the summer sun.

She glanced frequently through the open door into the office. At any moment, some visitor might walk through the office door, and Kristen knew that anyone who entered the office would be able to see her through the open locker room door. Her cheeks reddened at the thought, but she continued to work methodically, spreading the lotion over her body, and watching through the open door.

She hesitated when it came time to apply the lotion to the most private parts of her body. On the two days before, she had stepped around the corner of the row of lockers, where she couldn’t be seen from the office. The other lifeguards all seemed so matter-of-fact about every part of their own bodies. Kristen didn’t want them to see that she could feel embarrassed about something as straightforward as applying sunscreen. She looked away from the door. She poured a small drop of the suntan lotion onto one finger, and traced that finger slowly down the narrow groove between her buttocks. Her face burning, she poured some lotion across the fingertips of her other hand, and slowly rubbed it onto the sensitive flesh between her thighs. She closed her eyes and stood motionless for a moment before she had the courage to look again through the open door. Beth was still alone, standing naked, pinning something up on the bulletin board. Kristen breathed a relieved sigh. “I’m ready, Beth,” Kristen said, stepping out into the office with the bottle of sunscreen in her hand. “I just can’t get the upper part of my back.” “Okay, just a second,” Beth said, with a nod.

Kristen studied the photos Beth was pinning to the bulletin board. There were four of them—portraits—one boy about ten years old, and three young adults, two men and one woman. There was a thick black border around each photo. Under each photo was a little white square with a name and a date. “What’s this?” Kristen asked.

“We do this every year, at all the lifeguard stations in the city,” Beth said.

“It’s a tradition.”

“Who are they?” Kristen asked.

Beth gazed into Kristen’s eyes for a long moment. “These are the people who died last year at places where the Department of Parks and Recreation provides lifeguards.” She tapped the photo of the young boy. “Maidstone Beach was closed due to dangerous tides. This boy’s parents came to the beach anyway and let him go into the water. There was no lifeguard there to save him.” She pointed to another photo, one of the young men. “This guy was drunk. He fell off the high diving board at one of the outdoor pools, and got a concussion. He never woke up.”

Kristen stiffened and drew a sharp breath through her teeth.

“The other two were lost just a little while ago, actually,” Beth continued. “After their prom, at about two o’clock in the morning, they went down to Horseshoe Cove to go skinny-dipping. There was no lifeguard on duty to protect them, either.”

Kristen let out a long slow breath. She put one hand over her mouth as she studied the faces in the photos. “I—I guess I’ve never really understood just how serious this job really is,” she said, her voice quavering. “It’s the best job in the world,” Beth said. “It really matters whether you do it well.”

**Beach People**

There were two lifeguard towers at Black Knife Beach, and the lifeguard office itself had a large wooden shutter on the seaward side, which could be lowered to provide a third outpost. The office sat at the end of the beach, where the strip of sand was narrow and the water was littered with large jagged boulders. Almost nobody tried to swim at this end of the beach, but the shutter was always opened anyway. Kristen was assigned to work as a runner, spending some time at each station, running errands and relieving the other lifeguards while she learned the job. She stayed to help Beth with the shutter while George and Trina carried supplies and opened the other two lifeguard stations.

“If I had my way,” Beth said, “we’d have two people at each station, and one person to run relief. This beach is too big and too busy. If things start to get hairy, we just don’t have enough depth to cover every situation.” She shrugged. “But I don’t always get my way. That’s why it’s so important to know the beach regulars—people like Erik and Sheila. Remember them from Saturday? Sheila’s a nurse, and Erik’s a good man in a tight spot. We need to know who we can count on, and who has what skills. The beach people back us up every day.”

Kristen nodded. “What about Paul and Maria?” she asked. She hadn’t told Beth about her encounter with the couple in the parking lot this morning. Beth frowned, and shook her head. She thought for a moment, then said, “Maria would be okay if you need someone to go for help or carry a message, I think. I wouldn’t count on Paul for anything.” She looked up at the weathered wall of the office building. “Now let’s get this window open,” she said. “You ready?” Kristen nodded. “I thought a lifeguard’s job was to sit high up in a chair with all the cute guys gathered at her feet,” she said, with a wry smile. She and Beth took positions at opposite ends of the shutter. They would each draw back a stout metal bolt, and the shutter would begin to drop open. They stood with their feet well back from the side of the building, each with one palm pressed firmly against the wood high up on the shutter, their naked bodies stretched to full length, leaning into the anticipated weight of the dropping shutter.

“Not the glamour job you expected, eh? Now, be careful, it’s heavy,” Beth said as they drew back the bolts.

“Wow, you’re not kidding!” Kristen gasped, when the massive shutter started to tip away from the building. She hastily adjusted her hold, now pushing against the rough wood with both hands. It took all her strength to control the weight. She looked up at her hands. “It looks like wood, but it must be made out of lead,” she said.

“This is good weight training,” Beth said. “Just think how strong you’ll be after…” Suddenly Kristen shrieked and jumped back, raising her hands to cover her face, and tumbling unceremoniously onto the sand. Beth struggled with the shutter, but she couldn’t handle the full weight by herself. She let go, and the shutter slammed against the side of the building with a loud bang that shook the building and echoed from the cliffs.

Beth spun on Kristen, her eyes flashing angrily. “What’s wrong with you?” she shouted. “Why did you drop it?”

Kristen’s face was pale, and her eyes were opened very wide. She looked straight up into the clear blue sky. “There was something up there,” she said breathlessly. She scrambled awkwardly to her feet and looked into Beth’s eyes with a desperate expression that seemed to suggest that she didn’t expect to be believed. “Some huge dark thing just whooshed right over us.” Kristen’s heart sank when she saw the furious look in Beth’s eyes. But Beth’s expression softened suddenly, and a smile slowly spread across her face. She walked up to Kristen and put a hand on her bare shoulder. “You can’t let anything you see on Black Knife Beach surprise you,” Beth said warmly. “I want you to meet somebody,” she said, gently turning Kristen about just in time to see a naked man dangling under a dark-colored hang glider settling onto the ground about fifty yards down the beach. Together they walked toward the flying man.

“Johnny, you almost gave our rookie a heart attack,” Beth called out. “You need to be more careful.”

“Sorry, I didn’t see you two,” Johnny said, smiling apologetically as he disentangling himself from his flying gear. “Want me to make a hawk cry next time, or would that just make it scarier?”

Beth laughed. “Johnny, this is Kristen. This is her first summer as a lifeguard. Kristen, meet Johnny Bee.”

Johnny arched an eyebrow in surprise, and shook Kristen’s hand. “First summer anywhere?” he asked. “I could tell you were a rookie down here because of the bunny tail. But your first year as a lifeguard and you’re starting at Black Knife? You do dive right into the thick of things, don’t you?” he said. Kristen blushed at the mention of her “bunny tail,” the tan lines that distinguished her from almost everyone she had met at this beach. She studied Johnny’s face. He had a broad and steady smile that seemed to shape every part of his face. There was a merry glint in his eyes. Johnny Bee looked like the happiest grownup she had ever seen, and Kristen found she couldn’t help but smile herself when she looked into his eyes. He wore a backpack, and thick-soled leather shoes with thick woolen socks. Encircling his neck was a necktie, carefully tied with a neat Windsor knot right under his Adam’s apple. Otherwise, he was totally nude. His skin was dark from the sun, and he had a burly athletic build.

“What’s with the tie?” Kristen asked, laughing.

Johnny’s smile instantly vanished, replaced by a pinched, dour expression that took Kristen aback.“It’s so everyone can tell that I’m important,” he said coldly. “The only bad thing about a nude beach is that nobody can tell who the big shots are,” he added, jerking a thumb toward his chest. Confused, Kristen looked at Beth, but Beth’s impassive expression provided no clue about how to take this strange comment. She turned her eyes back to Johnny. His smile was back, as if it had never been gone. He started singing softly: “Slow down, you move too fast.”

“Johnny’s got one thing in common with you, Kristen,” Beth said. She looked up to the top of the cliff that towered over the beach. “He hates walking down that trail.”

Kristen studied the hang glider lying on the sand. “But he has to haul all this stuff back up the hard way, doesn’t he?” she asked. “Ah, it’s no trouble at all,” Johnny said, beaming. He slipped the backpack off his shoulders and dropped it on the ground. He stooped and started unlacing his shoes.

“It—it looks dangerous,” Kristen said, her eyes still on the hang glider. Johnny shrugged. “It can be, if you don’t know what you’re doing,” he said. He slipped off his shoes and his socks and stood up. “You pitch it too far forward, or too far back, and you don’t so much glide, as plummet. Now, I suppose that’s exciting in its own way, but it seems to me it would all be over much too quickly.”

Kristen laughed, watching curiously as Johnny started to fold up the hang glider. He sang another line: “Got to make the morning last.” “Beth, do you mind if I go grab my axe?” Johnny said.

“No problem,” Beth said. “It’s right where it always is, in the corner behind my desk.” Johnny jumped up and trotted toward the lifeguard office. “His axe?” Kristen said.

Beth smiled. “His guitar,” she explained. “He’s really good, too—you have to hear it to believe it. He plays this one classical piece—I think it’s by Vivaldi—and it’s so beautiful it brings tears to my eyes.” “Classical music on a guitar?” Kristen asked, suspecting she was being put on again.

“Guitars were around long before Elvis,” Beth said, laughing. “The world is full of interesting things, Kristen. Keep your eyes open, your ears open, your senses alive. You’ll be surprised again and again—just don’t get so surprised you drop what you’re doing.”

“Sorry,” Kristen said ruefully. “I’d never seen one of these things before. I didn’t have any idea what it was.” She looked up from the hang glider partially disassembled on the sand. Her eyes followed Johnny Bee as he stepped through the door of the lifeguard office.

“Listen, I think we’re squared away here,” Beth said. “You might as well get started. Go see how George and Trina are doing.”

Kristen nodded. She saw Johnny emerge from the lifeguard office with an acoustic guitar carefully cradled in his hands. “Sometime I want to hear what classical music sounds like on a guitar,” she said. Reluctantly, she turned away and started the long walk down the beach.

The sand was soft under her bare feet. She felt the morning sun and the sea breeze on her body, making her even more conscious of what she could not forget—that she didn’t have any clothes on. The beach wasn’t crowded, but there were more people than she had seen here before—certainly more people than she had ever imagined would see her naked. She could see even more people making their way down the steep trail from the parking lot. Most of the people on the beach sat or sprawled on beach blankets, soaking up the sun. A handful were starting to venture into the water. They were as naked as she was, or they would be soon. They seemed completely at ease with their nudity. Kristen had been at Black Knife Beach for two full days, and she wondered when she would outgrow the self-awareness that made every fiber of her body seem to tingle. With every step she took, she felt her nipples jiggle just a little bit. She looked down, and saw the little bounce. She felt the rolling rhythm of her hips as she walked, and she could imagine what that must look like to anyone who cared to watch. The beach people here might be accustomed to nudity, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that every pair of eyes was following her. Her cheeks were growing hot. She couldn’t turn back; she couldn’t cover up. She bit her lip, then drew a deep breath and tried to stand a little taller as she continued her walk down the beach. She looked straight ahead, not daring to let her eyes wander to the faces of the people she walked past.

George stood on the wooden deck of the first lifeguard tower, alertly scanning the environment all about him. Kristen focused on him as she walked. She felt a vague pang of disappointment at the sight.

For the first two weeks of the season, while Kristen was getting oriented, all the lifeguards were working seven days a week, in two shifts. Kristen was on the first shift; Janet, Richard and Don were all on the second shift. Kristen had hoped to get reacquainted with Janet, the childhood friend with whom she had been reunited only two days ago. She had a thousand questions for Richard, the brother of her mysterious new housemate, Brenda. And more than once a warm glow had suffused her body when she imagined herself standing beside Don on the deck of one of the lifeguard stations.

George was a nice-looking guy, but he wasn’t Don. Don was—well, spectacular. He had worked as a male model, and he radiated a kind of personal magnetism that Kristen had never experienced before. But he was working the second shift, and she was working the first. Kristen sighed.

She had reached the foot of the lifeguard tower. The lifeguard station was essentially a wooden shack standing on stilts. On the seaward side was a deck with a wooden railing around it, and the roof of the shack extended over the deck to provide essential shade. There was a ramp from the sand up to the deck. Standing at the foot of the ramp, Kristen looked up. George was leaning against the railing, looking back down at her with a beatific smile. “Hi,” Kristen said. She started to walk up the ramp.

“Welcome aboard,” George replied.

As she climbed the narrow but sturdy wooden ramp, Kristen looked back down the beach, where she could see Johnny Bee at work disassembling his hang glider while a curious crowd started to gather around him. “There sure are some strange people on this beach,” she observed with a smile. “Oh, don’t say that,” George said. “You’re unique, but you’re not really strange.”

“Funny man,” Kristen said, laughing. “I was thinking about people like Johnny Bee.”

George looked down the beach and nodded. “He’s unique, too,” he said. “What’s strange about him?”

“What’s strange about him?” Kristen repeated, incredulously. “Oh, I dunno—he swooped down onto the beach on that hang glider and scared the crap out of me. Beth says he plays classical music on a guitar. And he’s on a nude beach, but he’s wearing a necktie.”

George frowned and nodded soberly. “Okay, you’ve got a point,” he said. “I’ve always thought there was something a little creepy about people who wear neckties.”

“You know what I mean,” Kristen said.

“I probably do,” George said softly. He was silent for a long moment. “Listen, Johnny Bee’s okay,” he continued. “Everywhere you go—even down here—you’ll see people twisting themselves into all sorts of shapes, trying to be what they imagine everyone else wants them to be. When you meet someone who isn’t all twisted up—well, it can take a little while to get used to that.” Kristen cast another glance down the beach. “A little while, huh?” she muttered.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re here,” George said. “Could you go down and talk to those folks back there on the blue blanket—see them?” He inclined his head toward a couple stretched out on a beach blanket a few dozen yards behind the lifeguard tower. “Straighten them out a little? I would have done it myself, but I didn’t want to leave the post for that, and I knew you would be coming along soon.”

Kristen looked down at the man and woman relaxing on the blanket. “What do you mean, straighten them out?” she asked.

“They’ve still got their swimsuits on,” George said. “They’ve been down there fifteen or twenty minutes already, and they haven’t made a move to get undressed. Like I said, I would have done it myself. I didn’t want to leave the post, and I didn’t want to shout at them or use the bullhorn. It’s probably their first visit. No sense embarrassing them.”

“You—you mean go down there and tell them they have to take their clothes off?” Kristen said, aghast.

“Yeah,” George said. “Be polite, but remind them…” His voice trailed off when he saw the expression on Kristen’s face. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “I—I can’t walk up to a couple total strangers and order them to strip naked,” Kristen stammered.

“Well, don’t phrase it like an order,” George said. “Be friendly, just…” Kristen’s face was very pale, and she was shaking her head slowly. An annoyed expression flashed across George’s face for just a second. Kristen was taken aback—George always seemed utterly serene. “Who did you think was responsible for enforcing the dress code down here?” he asked. “If you were working at a pool or one of the other beaches, you might have to tell some people to put their clothes on, you know. It’s part of the job.” “What—what if they refuse to undress?” Kristen said, her mouth dry.

“They won’t refuse if you ask them right,” George said softly.

“But, what if…” Kristen said.

“Listen, just forget it,” George said sharply, holding up a hand to halt Kristen’s objections. He glanced down at the couple, and let out a long sigh. “I’ll take care of it. You stay and hold down the fort here. Keep a sharp eye on anyone who goes into the water. You do know how to swim, right?” “Of course I know…” Kristen said. George didn’t wait for her answer; he vaulted effortlessly over the railing at the side of the deck and dropped catlike to the sand below.

Kristen watched George walk toward the people on the blue blanket. She turned toward the water and put her hands on the rail facing the sea. She lowered her head dejectedly.

Was she in over her head? This was opening day—her first day really working as a lifeguard. Already she had angered Beth, when she dropped the heavy shutter at the lifeguard office. Now George was upset with her, too, because she had balked at something as simple as reminding some beachgoers of the rules. Kristen stifled a sob and tried to blink away the tears that were starting to sting her eyes. She had worked so hard, for so many years, to become a lifeguard. Could it really be that she just wasn’t cut out for this job? She leaned heavily against the wooden railing. The wood creaked a little. She listened to the waves washing rhythmically over the sand. Somewhere farther up the beach some seagulls were making a lot of noise. Then, not far away, two girls shrieked as a big wave crashed against the shore.

Kristen snapped to attention. She stood fully erect, even rising onto her tiptoes. Her eyes darted along the shoreline until she found the two girls. They were wading in water waist deep, a little unsteady, trying to keep their balance as the water surged around them. But they were laughing now, and splashing each other. Kristen smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. Sharp-eyed, she scanned the scene before her. Off to her left, some distance away, a scrawny young man was cautiously approaching the water. He didn’t look like a strong swimmer, and Kristen made a mental note to keep a close watch on him if he went into the water.

She noticed the way the water surged and eddied as the waves hit the beach—the places where the water welled up and the way it rushed out when a wave receded. Without giving it much conscious thought, she was already mentally mapping out her path into and out of any danger point in the water. Her gaze swept slowly up and down the shoreline. She started counting heads—three people down there, the scrawny guy still trying to make up his mind, a couple individual people out there, the two girls, splashing and shrieking, a couple more people beyond them. If she didn’t see one of them the next time she looked their way, she watched hawk-like until the missing person was accounted for. But even then, she somehow managed, with quick glances, to keep an eye on the other swimmers, too.

Kristen was so intent on the water and the people in it that she didn’t even see the sandy-haired man until he was almost directly in front of her. She might not have noticed him even then if it hadn’t been for the clicking of the shutter on his camera.

She looked down and found herself staring directly into the camera lens. The man quickly snapped another photo. Kristen’s face turned red. “Hey, you can’t take pictures here!” she shouted.

The man lowered his camera and gave Kristen a quizzical look. He wore wire-rimmed aviator glasses. He had a camera bag slung over one shoulder, and another camera with a long telephoto lens hung from a strap around his neck. Otherwise he was completely nude. “Can’t take pictures? Why not?” he asked. “It’s a nude beach, that’s why not!” Kristen said. She looked up and quickly scanned the shoreline again. She couldn’t let the photographer distract her from her real duties.

The man smiled. “You’re new here, aren’t you?” he asked pleasantly. Kristen glared at the man and gave a quick nod. “Yes, I’m new here,” she said, with growing impatience. “But that doesn’t alter the fact that those cameras have got to go. People are naked here.”

“I’ve noticed that,” the man said, nodding. “But you really should talk to Beth or George or somebody before you start making up rules.” He gave a little nod to George, who was returning to the lifeguard tower. “This beach is a public place, you know. If somebody doesn’t want me to take their picture, they should stay home.”

George looked up and smiled at Kristen. “I see you’ve met the skinny-dipping shutterbug,” he said.

“He was taking pictures of me, and who knows who all else,” Kristen said.

“Take his film away, George!”

George shrugged and shook his head. “Can’t do it, Kristen. He’s right, this beach is a public place. He has a right to take pictures in a public place. Anyone who wants to bring a camera down here can take pictures.”

“What?” Kristen cried incredulously.

“Don’t worry,” George said. “The photographers on the beach are all nude themselves. You don’t find them abusing the situation.”

“Listen, I understand,” the man said. “Some people are a little camera shy. It’s okay. I know what my rights are, but I’m not trying to embarrass you, honest. So for today, at least, I won’t take any more photos of you. Deal?” “Oh, that’s more than fair,” George said, encouragingly. “How—how many pictures did you take of me?” Kristen said after a long, stunned silence. “I want you to throw out those negatives.”

The man shook his head. “No, there’s good stuff on this roll of film,” he said. “It’s not all you, either. I won’t take any more photos of you, but I’m not throwing out anything I’ve already shot.”

Kristen stared at the man for a long moment, then threw up her hands in frustration. “What choice do I have?” she sighed. “Do whatever you want, I guess.”

The man looked up at Kristen and smiled. “Don’t worry,” he said. He turned to George. “You should have seen her, George,” he said, pointing up at Kristen. “Eyes like laser beams. She’s going to be a fine lifeguard, if she learns to relax a little.” He looked down at the camera in his hands. “Well, I’m going to go see whether there’s a Pulitzer Prize somewhere on this beach, so I’ll see both of you later.”

George smiled and nodded. “Good luck,” he said. As the man walked away, George walked up the ramp to join Kristen on the deck of the lifeguard station. “Ol’ Skinnydipper there is a pretty decent photographer,” he said. “He’s managed a few shots that made even me look good.”

“He took photos of you… naked?” Kristen asked.

“I didn’t really pose,” George said, nodding. “He took some shots while I was working, and I’m afraid this was the only outfit I had.”

“Were—were you embarrassed?” Kristen asked.

George shrugged. “There was nothing in any of the pictures that folks down here don’t see every day,” he said. He gave Kristen a curious look. “Are you okay? You don’t seem like yourself today.”

“I—I just don’t understand how you do it,” Kristen said, shaking her head in amazement. “You and Beth and—and most of the people on the beach, I think. Everybody acts like it’s, ho-hum, just another day at any old beach.

‘Everybody’s running around stark naked? Oh, I hadn’t noticed.’” She blushed.

“Am—am I the only person here who feels a little bit embarrassed about that?” “Embarrassed? Really?” George said. “You seemed to take to this place like a duck takes to water. And didn’t you say your parents were nudists?” “They used to be nudists,” Kristen said. “Years ago. And I didn’t know about it until last Saturday, so… I guess it’s easy for you, but I wasn’t raised as a nudist.”

“Neither was I,” George said. “I was never nude in public until I got assigned to work this beach. I think the only lifeguard here who grew up as a nudist was your friend Janet.”

“Well, then… don’t you feel a little self-conscious sometimes?” Kristen asked. “Maybe a little when I first started working down here,” George admitted. “But not anymore.”

“So, I—I guess it’s something you just get used to after a while?” Kristen asked.

George started to nod, then furrowed his brow and shook his head. “No, it’s not really that,” he said. “It’s kind of hard to… can I ask you a question? When you first came down here, do you remember how the sun and the breeze felt against your body?”

Kristen nodded, and smiled at the memory.

“It felt good, right?” George said. “For me, it felt like I was suddenly using all these nerve endings that had been anesthetized for my whole life. I knew right then that this beach was where I wanted to be.”

“I think I understand that,” Kristen said quietly.

George smiled. “Some people talk about ‘getting used to’ being nude, and I think they mean somehow deadening those senses. But if that’s the secret to feeling comfortable on a nude beach, why bother? For me, at least, the secret was not ‘getting used to’ being nude, but understanding something about being nude.”

“Understanding what?” Kristen asked.

“I can’t tell you,” George said. “I mean, even if I could find a way to put it into words, it’s not something you can understand in that way. You can really only understand it when you’ve learned for yourself.”

“Well, can you give me a hint, at least?” Kristen said.

George thought for a moment, then rubbed his chin and nodded soberly. “I’ll give it a try,” he said. “Can you take a couple steps back that way and turn to face me, please?”

Curious, Kristen complied. George backed away from Kristen until he was leaning against one of the side rails. “Could you lower your hands to your sides, or put them behind you, please?” he said.

Kristen blushed. “Okay,” she said weakly, and clasped her hands behind her back.

George stared intently into Kristen’s eyes. He made a great show of covering his left eye with his left hand, then, after a few seconds, switching and covering his right eye with his right hand. Kristen smiled nervously. Slowly, his eyes moved down her body. His gaze seemed to trace every curve and line of her body, as if he were searching for something. She felt her face growing hot. She was curious about the point he was trying to make, so she stood patiently and let him look. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t seen everything already. George was every bit as naked as she was, so Kristen decided to take a good long look at his body. His physique couldn’t match Don’s, but she had to admit that George was a good-looking man. His body looked sleek and lean and powerful. She remembered how he had jumped effortlessly over the deck railing and dropped gracefully onto the sand just a few minutes before. Now she admired the clearly delineated muscles of his arms, his legs, his chest, his stomach… Suddenly she felt embarrassed and flustered. She raised her eyes to George’s face. He was still staring at her body with an intensity that seemed entirely out of keeping with the notion that it was perfectly ordinary to be naked at the beach. The hot flush in Kristen’s cheeks now seemed to spread over her entire body.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Kristen said sharply. She turned away from George. With one hand, she covered the place between her legs, and she draped her other arm across her breasts. “That’s enough,” she repeated.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” George asked.

“No, of course not,” Kristen said.

George smiled. “I didn’t think so,” he said. “Well, I’m happy to report that you are all there. Whole and entire. Not a thing missing.” Kristen shot an irritated glance at George. “Nothing missing but my clothes, you mean,” she said.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” George said, with a sort of eager excitement in his eyes. “See now, on the planet where I come from, people don’t have removable parts. So I don’t believe that you left any part of yourself back in your locker. This is the real Kristen—the natural Kristen—right here.” Kristen looked down at her body, still blushing.

“And at the end of the day, when you go back to the locker room and you get dressed, you aren’t making your incomplete self whole,” George said. “You are complete, right now. When you put clothes on, you’re still complete, plus you have clothes on.”

Kristen gave George a curious look. “That’s it?” she asked. “After all that rigmarole, that’s it? That’s kind of obvious, isn’t it?”

George smiled and shrugged. “Really? And here I thought I’d revealed some deep insight.”

Kristen laughed and shook her head. “Nope, sorry,” she said. George looked chagrined. “Gosh, then do you think it’s obvious to Brenda, too?” he said. “Because I wonder about her sometimes. And is it obvious to all the people who support her efforts to close this beach? Is it always obvious to you when you’re away from the beach? After you’ve hung around with Brenda for a month or two, will it still seem obvious to you?”

Kristen looked into George’s eyes for a long moment. “Those—those are good questions,” she said softly.

She thought about the questions for a long time. When George showed her how to use the walkie-talkies, Kristen was attentive, but she was remembering how incomplete she had felt the night before when she couldn’t find her clothes. George demonstrated what Kristen thought of as the ultimate symbol of a lifeguard’s authority, the battery-amplified bullhorn. “A little bit of that goes a long way,” he warned. Kristen nodded, but she was thinking about the harsh sound of Brenda’s voice the night before, when she had called Kristen a slut.

The questions were still turning over and over in her mind when Kristen finally left George and made the long trek down the beach to join Trina at the second lifeguard tower. She couldn’t help thinking about the clothes she had left back in the locker room—so far away now, and she was walking away from them.

The beach was bustling. There were several hundred people now, with more still making their way down from the parking lot. There were people of all ages, shapes and sizes, walking, running, talking, laughing—enjoying their day at the beach, just as if it were any other beach. A growing number were venturing into the water now, and Kristen tried to stay alert for any sign of a swimmer in trouble.

Small crowds congregated around a handful of vendors who sold cold drinks, hot dogs or ice cream out of bulky white metal boxes. They had apparently hauled the boxes all the way down the steep beach trail.

Kristen shook her head with astonishment. Hundreds of people, completely naked. But everyone seemed so relaxed, and there was such an absence of self-consciousness that she almost wondered whether her eyes deceived her. She was still thinking about George’s questions, but the more she watched the people unashamed on the beach, the harder it was to remember just how she had felt the night before, naked in the presence of Brenda and Marcie. When Kristen reached the other lifeguard tower and climbed the ramp, Trina was there with an expectant look in her eyes and a huge grin spread across her face. “Okay, rookie, tell the truth,” Trina said. “Exhibitionist or voyeur?” “What?” Kristen said.

“C’mon, give!” Trina said, her grin growing wider still. “Do you like having all the guys watch you, or do you prefer watching them?” “I—I don’t understand,” Kristen stammered.

“Oh, come on!” Trina said, laughing. “Deep down, everybody’s either an exhibitionist or a voyeur. And either way, this beach is paradise, right?” Kristen’s cheeks reddened. “I—I don’t think I’m either one,” she said. “Oh, my gosh—you’re in denial!” Trina exclaimed. “You know what that means, don’t you? You’re both! You’re an exhibitionist and a voyeur! Wow, you must be in seventh heaven right now!”

Kristen scowled. “That’s not what this beach is all about, and you know it,” she said sharply.

Trina laughed again, her eyes sparkling. “Oh, come off it,” she said. “You’re a bright girl. That whole ‘nudity is perfectly natural’ scam is fine for the general public, but we don’t have to pretend down here. Everybody knows it’s all about sex.”

Kristen frowned and shook her head. “That’s not true,” she hissed. “You sound just like Brenda!”

Trina laughed and slapped a hand to her forehead. “Like Brenda?” she said. “Oooh, that’s just mean! Brenda is…” The smile suddenly disappeared from Trina’s face. “Oh, crap!” she muttered. With a little nod, she said, “Excuse me, please.” She brushed past Kristen and purposefully marched down the ramp to the beach.

Kristen stood, confused, for a few seconds, then followed after Trina. “C’mon, Larry! For cryin’ out loud!” Trina shouted to a man walking along the beach near the waterline. “Somebody’s going to take a picture of you from one of those boats that cruise by, and you’re going to be the ammunition they need to close the beach.”

Kristen stopped a little behind Trina. Puzzled and curious, her eyes darted from Trina to Larry and back again.

“It’s perfectly natural,” Larry protested, his voice full of wounded dignity.

“Yeah, so’s drowning,” Trina said. “We don’t allow that down here, either.

People come down here with their families, you know.”

Larry lowered his eyes. “It’s a reflex reaction, you know,” he said. “I can’t help it.”

“Baloney!” Trina said. “I’m not stupid, Larry. If you don’t behave yourself, I’m going to have the beach patrol come haul you in.”

Larry planted his feet, put his hands on his hips and glared defiantly at Trina. “This would be a free country if it weren’t for…” Suddenly Kristen let out a little shriek and clapped a hand over her mouth. Red-faced, she looked away from Larry. “Oh my gosh!” she gasped. “I didn’t see it.”

Trina cast a quick look at Kristen.

“I didn’t see it,” Kristen repeated, trying in vain not to laugh. Trina started laughing, too. Larry looked at the two laughing women in puzzlement. “She didn’t even see it!” Trina guffawed. “You’re wasting your time, Larry. You’re completely wasting your time.”

Larry’s face turned bright red and his shoulders slumped. He turned and started to walk away.

“Larry,” Trina called out, still laughing. “Face down on your blanket until you’ve got things under control, you understand?”

Larry nodded sullenly and covered his privates with both hands. “I understand,” he muttered, then he walked back toward his beach blanket. “He’ll behave himself for a while now,” Trina whispered to Kristen. She grabbed a handful of her long auburn hair in each hand and pulled hard, opening her mouth wide as if screaming. “Being a lifeguard is so much fun,” she whispered.

Kristen, still trying to contain her laughter, glanced at Larry’s retreating figure. “Do you get a lot of stuff like that?” she asked.

“Not a lot,” Trina replied, still whispering. “We get all kinds of screwballs down here, but most people know how to behave themselves.” “Do you think he’s dangerous?” Kristen asked.

Trina shook her head. “No, Larry’s not dangerous, just annoying. You’d think a beach where everybody’s naked would sort of defeat the purpose for an exhibitionist, but I guess not. I think his real problem is that he can’t enjoy the freedom he has. He’s not happy unless he’s pushing the limits, and then he’s not happy when we push back. But a word of warning now and then keeps him fairly much in line. We get all kinds down here—exhibitionists, voyeurs, people rebelling just for the sake of rebelling. And a lot of perfectly nice people, too. It all comes with the territory.” “I thought you said everybody here was an exhibitionist or a voyeur,” Kristen said.

Trina laughed. “I’ll bet Larry thinks that’s true,” she said. “Maybe, at some level, it is true—who knows? But I think most of the people down here…” She paused, groping for words. “I think most of the people down here just want to breathe free, you know? They come down here and all the trivial things that weigh down on them seem a million miles away.”

Trina and Kristen walked up the ramp of the lifeguard tower together. “In a way, I’m almost glad we’ve got characters like Larry down here,” Trina said. “Most of the time we’re just handing out bandaids or helping somebody with a sunburn. There aren’t that many real Hero Moments, thank goodness. The hardest thing about this job is staying alert. People like Larry help to keep us on our toes. But don’t tell him I said that.”

“I won’t,” Kristen said, laughing.

“So you’re running relief, right?” Trina asked. “You’re here to give me a break?”

“Yes,” Kristen said, nodding. “Well—that, plus I’m supposed to learn something about the job from you.”

Trina smiled. “I’m supposed to pass all my bad habits on to you?” she said. “Actually, you know what I need more than a break right now? I could really, really, really use some ice cream.”

“It’s turning into a hot day,” Kristen said sympathetically. “I noticed some people selling ice cream while I was walking down here.” Trina got money from a little black bag she had left inside the lifeguard station. “You see that guy with the long hair pulled back in a ponytail?” she asked, pointing out one of the vendors on the beach. “Everybody else just sells popsicles and ice cream bars and that kind of junk, but he does things right. He makes a hot fudge sundae, believe it or not, that’s out of this world. I’ve been dreaming about it since the beach closed at the end of last season.” She handed the money to Kristen. “Tell him it’s for me; he’ll know how I like it. Get yourself one, too. You’ve got to taste it to believe it.” “Gosh, thanks,” Kristen said, accepting the money. “I haven’t had a hot fudge sundae for years.” She hurried down the ramp and across the sand. Many people looked up, smiled and greeted her cheerily as she walked by. She returned their smiles and nodded in response to their greetings. She was halfway to the ice-cream vendor before she realized that her errand was taking her through one of the thickest clusters of people on the entire beach. She glanced up to watch a frisbee sail over her head and almost collided with a very rotund woman hurrying down to the water.

“Oh, excuse me!” Kristen said, stopping short and stepping out of the woman’s way. “I’m so sorry! I wasn’t looking where I was going.” “No problem,” the woman said, smiling. She looked down at her body. “You would have just bounced right off anyway. I’ve got enough padding for both of us.” The woman laughed and winked, then bustled off again. Kristen watched for a moment, amazed by the woman’s unabashed self-acceptance. There was something unusual about Black Knife Beach, Kristen thought. Something more than the fact that everyone was naked. Every other beach she had been to was crowded with strutting men and slinky women. The regulars formed tight little cliques with a rigid pecking order. But here, virtually everyone seemed relaxed, cheerful and friendly—friendly to everyone. A few people—newcomers, perhaps—seemed nervous and tentative, but they smiled, too, and their eyes were bright with excitement.

Kristen’s eyes widened when she approached the place where the ice cream vendor had set up shop. A large white tarpaulin was spread over the ground. There were several insulated boxes with clear plastic covers. There, in a frosty haze, were cardboard drums of vanilla, chocolate and strawberry ice cream. Another box was packed with an assortment of small containers of more exotic flavors. A gleaming metal rack held glass containers with a variety of sundae toppings—chocolate, butterscotch, and strawberry syrups; nuts, maraschino cherries and more. She marveled at the amount of work it must have taken to bring everything down the steep trail. She was surprised at how spotlessly clean everything looked, outdoors on a sandy beach. A few feet from the other things, on a metal stand of its own, was a little black kettle. It was heated by a brilliant beam of sunlight focused on it by a glass lens mounted on a long metal arm that extended from the stand that held the kettle. The curious arrangement seemed to work. Kristen inhaled the rich warm aroma of hot fudge sauce.

“Ooh, no fair!” Kristen said to the man serving the ice cream. “If there isn’t a law against filling the air with hypnotic smells to make people buy your stuff, there ought to be.”

“Oh, the hot fudge?” the man said, smiling. “It smells good, doesn’t it? It’s the specialty of the house.” He stretched his hands out to indicate the makeshift ice-cream shop laid out on the tarpaulin.

Kristen noticed that the man wore a large white towel tightly wrapped around his waist. She glanced around uneasily—was she supposed to make him take it off? She bit her lip, and decided to say nothing. She took another deep whiff of the tempting vapors.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” she said. “Not on a beach, anyway.” She winced. “You know, I was going to be good this summer—eat right and get lots of exercise.” She shook her head and sighed. “Two hot-fudge sundaes, please. I’d like mine plain—just vanilla ice cream and the hot fudge topping. The other one is for Trina, the lifeguard. She says you’ll know how she wants it.”

The man’s smile broadened, and he nodded. “Yes, I do indeed,” he said. He picked up his metal ice-cream scoop and raised the lid on one of the big insulated boxes. With his other hand he picked up two paper ice-cream cups. “Trina likes the whole works—nuts, whipped cream, cherry on top.” He neatly scooped a dip of ice cream into each of the cups. He lowered the lid on the ice cream box, then turned to the simmering kettle of hot fudge sauce. He opened the lid and Kristen let out a little moan when a wave of the sweet scent struck her in the face. The man looked at Kristen and grinned. With a long-handled metal ladle, he poured hot fudge sauce over one of the cups of ice cream. “Here you go,” he said, handing the cup to Kristen. “You can get started on yours right now. Help yourself to a spoon.” He turned his attention to Trina’s sundae.

Kristen blushed, embarrassed that her eagerness was so obvious. She picked a plastic spoon out of a little box and scooped a spoonful of the sundae into her mouth. “Oh, it’s good!” she said.

“Was there ever any doubt?” the ice-cream man said, as he finished making Trina’s sundae. “A real work of art, if I do say so myself,” he said. He stuck a spoon into the ice cream and handed the finished creation to Kristen. “Thanks,” Kristen said, and handed the man the money Trina had given her. Already the hot chocolate topping was sliding down into the cup as it melted the ice cream underneath. The man opened a black leather money bag and fished out Kristen’s change. Kristen noticed that some of the fudge on her own sundae was starting to drip over the rim of the cup. Her hands were full, so she lifted the cup to her lips and licked off the errant drip.

“Here’s your change,” the ice-cream man said. There was a bit of awkward fumbling while Kristen tried to accept the money without losing hold of the two cups of ice cream. The man laughed. “Sometimes it can be a little tough with no pockets,” he said.

When Kristen finally felt she had both ice cream and money under control, she muttered a hurried “Thank you,” and turned away to rush her burden back to Trina. Immediately she smashed into the bare back of a tall man. The man let out a loud yelp, but Kristen’s startled shriek was louder. The collision had smashed both sundaes against her chest. Now a soupy mess of hot chocolate sauce, whipped cream, nuts, and ice cream was dripping slowly over her breasts and down her stomach. “Oh, yuck! Yuck!” Kristen cried. She tried to wipe the mess away with her fingers, which served little purpose but to get her hands messy, too.

The man she had collided with turned. “Oh, it’s you again!” he said. Kristen looked up into the face of the sandy-haired photographer with the aviator glasses. He still carried his two cameras and his camera bag. “Say, I’ll bet you could find volunteers willing to help lick that off,” the photographer said brightly. Kristen shot him an icy glare. “Sorry,” he muttered. His face changed instantly to a mask of remorse. “There’s a shower right up there,” he said, indicating the public restroom building. Kristen noticed that she and the man were becoming the center of attention on this part of the beach. “Okay, thank you,” she said tersely. Her face burning with shame, she started walking toward the restrooms. The photographer walked along beside her.

“I can find it myself, thanks,” Kristen said angrily.

“Hey, I need a shower, too,” the man said. “You plastered me pretty good, see?” He turned to show her the ice cream and chocolate running down his own back and over his buttocks. “It’s cold, too.”

“I’m sorry,” Kristen said softly.

It didn’t take them long to reach the large concrete block building. Kristen groaned when she realized there was a single showerhead mounted over a grating on the outside of the building, between the men’s and women’s entrances to the restrooms.

“This is it?” she said. “They expect people to shower outdoors?” The photographer gave Kristen a curious look. “Ladies first,” he said. “I’ve got to put my cameras and stuff down somewhere. Can’t let them get wet.” Kristen watched the man warily as he backed away from the shower, still carrying his camera equipment. She glanced down at the gooey mess that still dripped down her body, and wrinkled her nose in disgust. She looked up at the showerhead, which glinted brilliantly in the sunlight. She turned and scanned the beach, where hundreds of people had an unobstructed line of sight to the outdoor shower.

Heaving a great sigh, Kristen turned on the water and stepped under the shower. Feeling painfully aware of all the people who could watch her, she closed her eyes. The warm water streamed over her body. Slowly, she rubbed her hands over her breasts and across her stomach. The chocolate sauce and melted ice cream washed off easily.

An involuntary gasp escaped the photographer’s lips as he watched Kristen under the shower. The sunlight on her hair and on the million tiny droplets of water from the shower enveloped the naked lifeguard in a dazzling halo of light. Instinctively, the man’s hands reached for one of his cameras. With a supreme act of will, he resisted the impulse to raise the camera to his eye. He had promised, no more photos. Scarcely daring to breathe, he watched. This image would survive, he knew. It would be locked in his memory for as long as he lived.

**Accommodations**

“Her Mission: Close Black Knife Beach.”

“I don’t like it already,” Kristen said, scowling at the headline. She slid the newspaper across the tabletop, away from her.

“Come on,” Marcie pleaded. “You have to read it. You promised.” She sat down opposite Kristen at the big round table near the bay window in Kristen’s bedroom. She pushed the paper back across the table toward Kristen. Kristen glanced up at Marcie. She was glad Marcie wasn’t wearing an “Iron Maiden”—that was the private name Kristen had given to the prim, starchy business suits that Brenda and Marcie seemed to wear constantly, even at home, even on weekends.For some reason, those clothes reminded Kristen of a medieval suit of armor—they looked almost that uncomfortable. Kristen felt distinctly disadvantaged when her housemates were so accoutered. Today, uncharacteristically, Marcie was casually dressed in neat black slacks and a brightly patterned sleeveless blouse. A faint hint of a smile passed over Kristen’s lips. She couldn’t be certain, but she thought it was possible that Marcie wasn’t wearing a bra.

Kristen, of course, was wearing nothing at all. She still felt a little uncomfortable being nude with Marcie here. It was purely a psychological thing—when she was alone, and the weather warm, she preferred to have absolutely nothing on. She slept now without the top bedsheet covering her. She preferred to feel only the night air against her bare skin. But she felt edgy when everyone around her was fully dressed, and she was naked. It was exactly the opposite at the beach, where she felt uneasy until she had all her clothes off.

This was an awkward situation for Marcie, too—her gaze was continually dropping, involuntarily, to Kristen’s naked body, and her cheeks glowed a rosy red.

Kristen leaned back in her chair and eyed the newspaper skeptically.

“You promised you’d try to have an open mind,” Marcie said. “There’s something about Brenda that tends to close an open mind,” Kristen said, shaking her head slowly.

“You don’t know her like I do,” Marcie said. She smiled, and nudged the paper another inch toward Kristen.

“And I never will,” Kristen said bitterly. “Not if she keeps walking out of the room whenever I walk in, or yelling at me whenever I try to say hello. And she’s been almost as nasty to you lately as she has been to me. I don’t know why you put up with it.”

Marcie lowered her eyes. “Oh, yeah—I’m sure when you have a fight with a friend, you just turn your back on them forever, right?” she said softly. She looked up into Kristen’s eyes. “You and I disagree about almost everything, but we still get along pretty well, don’t we?”

“That’s different,” Kristen said. “You and I disagree, and we even argue about things. But we respect each other, you know? I mean—even when I think you’re wrong about something, I know it’s okay for you to have your own ideas. We argue, but at least we try to understand each other. Brenda, though…” Kristen looked directly into Marcie’s eyes and bit her lip. “Well… you know,” she muttered.

“There are a lot of people counting on Brenda right now,” Marcie said. “She’s been under a lot of pressure. She’s so—so busy all the time. And your being here hasn’t helped matters any.”

“I’ve made all sorts of accommodations,” Kristen said impatiently. “I stay late at work so I don’t get in the way here. I go in on my days off. I leave to go visit friends. I stay in my room with the door closed wheneverthere are people here. And there are people here all the time—this house is like Grand Central Station!”

“We’ve made accommodations, too,” Marcie said. “You usually have breakfast in the kitchen, with us. Most evenings you can swim in the pool. And your little refrigerator and microwave,”—she nodded toward the appliances in a corner of the large bedroom—“Brenda bought those for you with her own money.” “True,” Kristen acknowledged, “but just so I wouldn’t have to leave my room. I feel like a prisoner, you know? I mean, this is a nice room, but…” “Well, you could get dressed,” Marcie said softly. She didn’t wait for an answer. “You are right about one thing, though. You and I do try to understand each other, even when we disagree, right?”

Kristen nodded.

“So try to understand Brenda,” Marcie said. Again she nudged the newspaper toward Kristen. “Somebody has to take the first step, right?” Kristen closed her eyes and nodded sullenly. “Yes,” she sighed. “Somebody has to take the first step.” She picked up the newspaper.

Marcie leaned forward almost imperceptibly in her chair, watching Kristen with a look of keen expectancy in her eyes. Kristen noticed the look, and felt sad. Marcie’s devotion to Brenda was touching, in its own way. She worked tirelessly, and repaid Brenda’s frequent outbursts of temper with nothing but patience and kindness. Kristen felt certain that her own presence had helped provoke many of those outbursts. More than once, Marcie had deflected Brenda’s anger away from Kristen, often bearing the brunt herself. Kristen didn’t want to upset Marcie, but whenever the topic of conversation turned to Brenda, she felt as if she were walking on eggshells. Without warning, a seemingly innocent remark could touch some raw nerve, and Marcie would be angry or hurt, and for a few days Kristen would feel even more isolated and lonely, alienated from the only friend she had here at the house.

Kristen glanced up into Marcie’s eyes. Marcie smiled encouragingly, and nodded toward the newspaper. Marcie was always eager to have others share her own high opinion of Brenda. Kristen lowered her eyes again to the newspaper. “That’s a really good picture of her,” she said. She lowered the paper and tapped the photograph that accompanied the article. “She’s really pretty. She doesn’t have that sour-lemon expression here, or that knotted-up look over her eyebrows, see? If she would ever smile, I’ll bet she’d be beautiful.” “She doesn’t smile much because she has so much responsibility,” Marcie protested. “She cares about people, you know? She cares about everybody. She worries. That’s why she has worry lines.”

“I think she’d be happier if she stopped worrying about other people and let them worry about their own lives,” Kristen said.

“That’s a strange thing to hear from a lifeguard,” Marcie said. “Your whole job is worrying about other people, isn’t it?”

“That’s completely different,” Kristen said. “We’re not trying to stop people from doing the things they enjoy. Lifeguards are there to help people in trouble.”

“Wait a second—you told me how you wore yourself out last week on the day after the storm,” Marcie said. “Remember? You spent the whole day running up and down the beach telling people they couldn’t go in the water, even though they wanted to. It didn’t matter that they thought it was perfectly safe—you knew conditions were too rough, and you may have saved more lives stopping people from doing what they wanted to do than you’ll save in ten years of dragging people out of the surf. Sometimes people don’t know when they’re in trouble.”

“Maybe so,” Kristen muttered half-heartedly. “There’s still a big difference.”

She picked up the newspaper again.

She studied the photograph. It had been taken in the parking lot at Black Knife Beach; the big sign that stood at the top of the trail down to the beach was visible in the background. Brenda faced several furious-looking people, men and women. Kristen recognized some of the faces from the beach. One of the men had a fist raised menacingly. Brenda appeared calm, confident and fearless in the face of their fury. She looked almost heroic.

Kristen found the photo puzzling. It was very different from what she saw at the beach every day, where beachgoers braved a hostile gantlet of anti-nudity picketers organized by Brenda.

The picketers lined the road near the entrance to the beach parking lot. They shouted vicious epithets, waved placards, and shook their fists at each vehicle that entered or left the parking lot. Some placards had crude drawings of Adam and Eve being driven out of the Garden of Eden; some read “Shame! Shame!” Picketers with cameras ostentatiously snapped photos as people entered the parking lot, capturing images of beachgoers hiding their faces as if they were notorious criminals. Some of those photos were blown up and they were held aloft by other demonstrators. The crowd seemed to grow larger and angrier every day.

It was odd to see the tables turned—to see Brenda standing alone, bravely facing a hostile crowd. Kristen didn’t know the people in the photo very well, but they seemed pleasant enough when she saw them at the beach. The story had been written by a reporter named Ian Froste. The photograph was credited to him, too. The name was vaguely familiar—Kristen believed he had written many of the articles about the city’s corps of lifeguards that she had read when she was preparing to try out for a lifeguard job. With a quick glance across the table at Marcie, Kristen started to read the article. “It gets very lonely here sometimes,” she read. Kristen felt an odd little chill when she read that: she was away from her parents and friends for the first time, living in a house where she was not welcome. It was lonely. But the words were Brenda’s:

“It gets very lonely here sometimes, but somebody has to do this. I couldn’t live with myself if I just turned my back and pretended this problem doesn’t exist.”

Kristen rolled her eyes and snorted. “Brenda’s probably got a hundred people out there on the picket lines with her every morning. She’s got people coming here to see her by the busload. She gets lonely? Give me a break!” Marcie smiled. “It was lonely, yes,” she said. “Things have changed a lot since that article was printed last year. She was doing it all alone. Every now and then one or two people would join her—some of them real nut cases. There was nobody she could really rely on. It took courage, too. She’s told me about the some of the things the nudies said and did when she was picketing at the beach. It was only after that article came out that people started to take notice, and things started to turn around.”

“Well, she wasn’t all alone—she had you with her, didn’t she?” Kristen asked. Marcie shook her head. “No, I hadn’t seen her since we were in college together,” she said. For a long moment, she seemed lost in thought. “Brenda was a great friend,” Marcie continued, with a catch in her voice. “After I saw the article, I gave her a call. I’ve been helping her ever since.” “See, I don’t understand why you got involved in this whole thing,” Kristen said, lowering the newspaper. “There are a million problems in the world—a million things you could be working on. Why this? I know you and Brenda are old college friends, but—I mean, you’ve admitted to me that you don’t think the human body is anything to be ashamed of, and you don’t think the government should get too involved in how people choose to live their lives. And yet you’re one of the ringleaders of the movement to close down Black Knife Beach.”

Marcie smiled shyly. “I’m not a ringleader,” she said. “I’m just not capable. You might not believe this, Kristen, but I really do admire you—I mean, being a lifeguard and all. You and Brenda have a lot in common—you’re both dedicated to helping people. I wish I could be like that, you know? If it weren’t for Brenda, I’d just be a meek little mouse, hiding in my little mouse hole and pretending that this whole problem didn’t exist.”

Kristen shook her head wearily. “People go to the beach and enjoy themselves,” she said. “I don’t understand what the problem is with that.” She raised the newspaper again and resumed reading.

Although the article focused on Brenda, it seemed to deal fairly with other points of view. Brenda’s comments were balanced by quotes from Black Knife Beach regulars. Experts were cited on both sides of the issue. “Almost everybody thinks that the nude beach is all about sex,” Brenda was quoted as saying. “The people on the nude beach will deny that to their last breath. I think they’re sincere.”

Kristen was astonished to see Brenda making that concession. “The nudists have fooled themselves,” Brenda continued. “They haven’t fooled anyone else. They’ve come to believe their own propaganda. But I’m convinced that if they look deep inside themselves, and are honest with themselves, they will see that it’s sex that’s driving this nudity fetish.”

Kristen frowned. Only people who had never been to the nude beach thought it was about sex. She was about to say just that, but she thought about Larry, the man she and Trina had encountered on opening day. He was at the beach almost every day. He seemed to behave himself most of the time, but there was nothing innocent in the way he looked at the nude women on the beach. She remembered Trina’s joke that everyone on the beach was either an exhibitionist or a voyeur. Maybe there was some truth to that, after all. There were a few men at the beach that Kristen enjoyed watching. Whether they were standing, sitting, walking, running, tossing a frisbee—she liked seeing them. She tried not to stare. She didn’t fixate on any particular part of their bodies—well, maybe the shoulders—but she liked knowing that no part of those strong, supple bodies was hidden from her.

Maybe Trina was right, too, when she joked that Kristen was both a voyeur and an exhibitionist. The blood seemed to sing in her veins when Kristen realized someone was watching her. Just yesterday, she had noticed a man who watched as she walked across the beach. He had a big smile on his face, and there was no doubt that his eyes were following her, taking in the way her bare breasts bounced with each step and the rolling motion of her naked buttocks. He wasn’t even a particularly good-looking man, but Kristen had felt a warm tingling sensation grow from the pit of her stomach and spread over her entire body, just knowing that he was looking at her. She blushed now, remembering that she had fallen asleep last night thinking about that man.

Could Brenda be right, after all? Was it really all about sex?

Perhaps it wasn’t entirely innocent. But there was more to Black Knife Beach. Kristen remembered how she had felt her first day on the beach, when she first felt the warmth of the sun on her naked body. She remembered how the breeze felt, caressing sensitive skin that had not felt the touch of nature for far, far too long. Almost as soon as she had felt those sensations, she knew she wanted more.

“You know,Marcie, I—I really think you should come down to the beach some day and just try it,” Kristen said, in a conspiratorial whisper. “If you would just give it one hour—fifteen minutes!—you’d see what it’s really like. Brenda doesn’t have to know anything about it. You don’t know what you’re missing.” There seemed to be a strange sadness in Marcie’s eyes. “It’s not gonna happen,” she said, with a wistful chuckle. “But who knows? If I had a body like yours, maybe I’d want to give it a try.” She looked down at Kristen’s naked chest.

Kristen blushed and smiled. “What are you talking about?” she said. “You’re a beautiful girl! You have a great body—I’ve seen you in your swimsuit, you know. You definitely have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“You keep saying it’s not a ‘meat market,’” Marcie said, “and then you tell me I have nothing to be ashamed of because I have a ‘great body.’ You can’t have it both ways, Kristen.”

“You’re the one trying to have it both ways,” Kristen protested. “You’ve been to the clothed beaches, I’m sure. Every day you can see the really ‘hot’ women and men parading up and down the beach in their skimpy, expensive swimsuits. They never go in the water, you know. And those suits don’t hide anything—they just call attention to what they cover.” With a swift and sudden motion, she cupped her hands over her bare breasts and lifted them a bit to illustrate her point. “Everybody else at those beaches gapes and drools and feels like total crap because they don’t have the so-called ‘perfect’ body. Well, you have a great body, Marcie. You buy the right kind of suit and you could be a big hit parading up and down at that meat market. But that doesn’t change the fact that it’s not like that at Black Knife Beach.”

“Yeah, sure,” Marcie said with a skeptical smirk. “There are no voyeurs on Black Knife Beach. No exhibitionists. No perverts of any kind. Every day, hundreds or even thousands of people risk their lives to go down that dangerous cliff. Must be some mighty special sand down there. People travel halfway around the world to get to Black Knife Beach. And it has absolutely nothing to do with sex, right? Everyone’s as innocent as a newborn baby. And you don’t think your new friend—what’s his name? The peeper?” “The—the gawker,” Kristen said glumly. “His—his name is Tony.” “You don’t think Tony has something in mind?” Marcie said. “You nudies might think your beach isn’t a meat market, but I think that guy has plans. From what I’ve heard, I wouldn’t want to be seen at any beach where Tony hangs out.”

“You know, someone like that could go to any beach in town,” Kristen muttered. “You’re right,” Marcie said, “but that pervert—and plenty of other perverts just as bad, let me tell you—they seem to gravitate to Black Knife Beach. Why do you suppose that’s so?”

“Tony hasn’t been there since the day I told you about, and that was before the beach even opened. It’s been years since he caused trouble at the beach,” Kristen said. “Anyway, you can’t blame the victims for the crime.” “I’m so tired of hearing that,” Marcie snapped. “The whole point is, we don’t want there to be any more victims. Black Knife Beach is a disaster waiting to happen. It lures the wrong kind of people into the area. They call that an ‘attractive nuisance.’ It’s all in the article.”

“Yeah, and a bank lures bank robbers, so let’s close all the banks, too,” Kristen said huffily, picking up the paper again. Marcie grinned and leaned back in her chair, watching Kristen read.

Kristen read with growing interest. She learned that Brenda had carried out a lonely campaign against Black Knife Beach for several years, writing letters to city council, to the mayor, to legislators, to the governor. No politician wanted to touch the issue. Public opinion polls consistently showed 75% or more in favor of the existence of the nude beach, though fewer than 1% ever visited the beach themselves.

With dogged determination, Brenda had switched tactics. She needed to influence public opinion. She spoke at dozens of small community organizations. She wrote hundreds of letters to the editors of newspapers throughout the state. She started her lonely vigil picketing at Black Knife Beach.

Kristen couldn’t help feeling a grudging admiration for Brenda’s persistence and determination. It reminded her of her own long struggle to win a post as a lifeguard. Only her single-minded sense of purpose had enabled her to overcome the many disappointments and distractions that stood in the way of her goal. That single-mindedness had upset some of her friends. They had called her a fanatic. But Kristen had known that she was pursuing something important, and hoped that some day she would be able to make them understand. “I’ve lost friends,” Brenda said in the article. Again, Kristen felt a strange chill. “I’ve been at odds with people in my own family. It’s a terrible feeling. If I can’t make even my family and my friends understand why I’m in this fight, what chance do I have? But my conscience won’t let me walk away.” The more she read, the more Kristen frowned and fidgeted. Brenda cited some worrisome statistics about sexual assaults. Some expert countered with an assertion that nude beaches were actually safer than most clothed beaches. Kristen wasn’t sure whom to believe.

“They don’t like me,” Brenda said, “I accept that. The nudists aren’t bad people, but they’ve blinded themselves. They’re in denial about the reality of human nature. A human being is an animal. We live on the knife’s edge, between civilization and savagery. I know it’s exhilarating to take risks, to tempt fate. But there are forces within the human animal that refuse to be corked up. These nudists are playing with fire. Somebody’s going to get burned.” Kristen lowered the newspaper and let out a long sigh. Marcie leaned forward in her chair. “So? What did you think?” she asked eagerly. “It was… interesting,” Kristen said tentatively. “I don’t know whether I understand her better or whether I’m in the dark more than ever.”

Marcie smiled. “Well, if it makes you think a little…”

“I still think she’s wrong,” Kristen said. She handed the newspaper to Marcie and stood up. She walked to the big bay window and looked down at the pool. “Brenda thinks she knows why everybody does everything,” Kristen said faintly. “It’s not that simple. You can’t know what the nude beach is really like without going down there and experiencing it for yourself.” Kristen watched the sunlight glinting off the water. She longed to go down for a quick dip. But there would be people coming to the house shortly, and she had made accommodations.

**A Favor**

“Johnny? Hi, Johnny,” Kristen called.

The naked man assembling his hang glider near the edge of the cliff stood up and turned around. A smile spread over his face when he saw Kristen approaching across the beach parking lot. She was wearing a crisp white blouse and dark blue shorts that showed off her long tanned legs. On her feet were dark blue canvas deck shoes with white laces and white trim. On her face was a big bright smile that made something inside Johnny Bee ache. “Hi, Kristen,” he said. “How are you today?”

“Fine, I think,” Kristen answered, a little skeptically. “Do I look alright?”

She spun around to give him a chance to look at her.

Johnny laughed. “You look terrific,” he said. “You always look great. I think you’d look good even in dirty dungarees.”

Kristen rolled her eyes, laughed, and looked down at herself dubiously. “Thanks for the compliment, but I’m serious,” she said. “I was wondering if there was something wrong with me,” she said. “I was getting a lot of strange looks from people as I walked across the parking lot.” She cast a quick glance back over her shoulder. “I thought maybe the back was ripped out of my shorts or maybe my hair looked goofy or something.” She turned slowly to give Johnny another chance to inspect her appearance. “See anything?” she asked. “Nothing wrong. You look fine,” Johnny replied.

Kristen looked puzzled, then shrugged. “I guess it’s just my imagination,” she said. “Oh!—I almost forgot,” she added. “I brought your book back.” Johnny’s face fell as he reached out to take the book. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought you would like it. It’s pretty technical, I suppose, but…” “Oh, I did like it,” Kristen said. “I finished it last night. There were a few things I didn’t understand, but I took some notes. They’ve got a couple books on hang gliding at the library, and I’ve got them reserved. I figure I can read those books, too, and then maybe ask you a few questions—I mean, if that’s okay with you…” “You—you read the whole book already?” Johnny said, incredulously. He hefted the book in his hand, and smiled. “I don’t remember how long it took me to read this. You’re welcome to ask me questions anytime you want. We might be going about this all wrong, though. Maybe you should be teaching me.” Kristen laughed. “Not until next week, at the earliest,” she said. “Thanks for letting me borrow the book.”

“My very great pleasure,” Johnny replied. He could feel the warmth from her hand still on the spine of the book.

Kristen turned to walk away, then stopped. “Say, Johnny, do you know anything about that spooky black van? The old rusted-out one parked near the head of the trail?”

“No, ’fraid not,” Johnny said, shaking his head. “Why? What’s spooky about it?”

“Spooky—sounds stupid, doesn’t it?” Kristen said, with an embarrassed laugh. “That van’s here about half the time when I come in to work. I’ve asked around, and nobody knows who it belongs to. Nobody’s seen anyone getting out of the van or getting into it, either.”

“Probably somebody who comes early and leaves late. An awful lot of people coming and going here, you know,” Johnny said.

“There’s somebody inside,” Kristen said. “The windows are all tinted, but there’s somebody behind the wheel, watching. I know that because several times I’ve had to walk right past the van. Whenever I get close, the engine starts and it drives off in a big hurry. The first time, it almost ran me down—me and several other people.”

“Yikes,” Johnny said. “Have you said anything to the guys from the beach patrol?”

Kristen shook her head. “No, I didn’t want to bother them,” she said. “They always have more important things to do. I’m really more curious than worried.”

“Say, you know who might be able to help?” Johnny said. “The guy with all the cameras. Aw, heck—I can’t think of his name—I’m sure you’ve seen him, though. Everybody calls him Skinnydipper.”

“Sandy hair and aviator glasses? I—I’ve met him.” Kristen said ruefully. “That’s him. He’s a good man to know,” Johnny said, smiling. “He’s got a lot of connections, naturally. I’ll bet he could get that license number traced and at least find out who owns the van.”

“You think he could?” Kristen asked. She looked at the van squatting malevolently near the redwood staircase that started the trail down to the beach. “I’m probably overreacting, but—but maybe that would be a good idea,” she said. “I’ll try to get the license number. The photographer, uh, Skinnydipper—I think he’s trying to avoid me. I wish there was some way to contact him.”

“I’m sure you could just call him at the—hey, speak of the devil! Look who just drove in!” Johnny said. He pointed to a car that had just rolled to a stop halfway across the parking lot.

Kristen saw a man get out of the car, then pull a camera bag out of the car and sling it over his shoulder. He pulled out a camera with a long lens and seemed to be giving it a close inspection. “That’s him,” Kristen said, uneasily. “I—I guess I’d better go catch up with him.” She cast a quick glance at Johnny Bee’s partially assembled hang glider. “I’ll let you get back to work. Thanks again, Johnny.”

A warm smile spread across Johnny’s face. He nodded, and touched a finger to his forehead in a kind of salute as Kristen walked away. Instead of returning immediately to the task of assembling the hang glider, he looked down at the book she had handed him, and flipped through the pages. His smile grew wider. He looked up to watch her walking across the parking lot. Now he noticed it, too. As Kristen walked by, heads popped up from open car doors where people were unloading things for their day at the beach. Men and women walking across the parking lot stopped in their tracks, or turned to watch Kristen pass. Johnny chuckled and shook his head in puzzlement. With a shrug, he turned back to his hang glider.

Kristen noticed the stares, too, and tried her best to ignore them. She had always attracted her share of attention—perhaps she was just overly conscious of it this morning. At least she still had clothes on. She focused instead on the photographer, who was still fussing with his camera. She wanted to catch up with him before he left his car, but she didn’t want to call even more attention to herself by yelling at the man or running across the parking lot. She quickened her pace.

Kristen saw the passenger-side door of the photographer’s car swing open. A shapely blonde woman stepped out, hesitantly. She was wearing a red top and white shorts. She looked around the parking lot with quick, nervous movements of her head. Then she vehemently shook her head, said something to the photographer, and moved as if to get back into the car. The man walked quickly around the front of the car. He and the woman seemed to be arguing about something.

Kristen was close enough now that she could hear some of what was said.

“I beat you fair and square,” the man said.

“I know,” the woman replied. “But ‘outdoors’ doesn’t mean ‘in public’. There must be several hundred people here!”

“They’re nice people,” the man said.

“There are plenty of secluded little groves of trees around here,” the woman said. “I thought we would do it somewhere like that.”

“No, no, no,” the man said, shaking his head. “It was you who made the condition that we had to do it some place where there wasn’t any risk of getting arrested, remember? It was a big deal that everyone had to witness my promise that I wouldn’t get you in trouble with the law. So, this is the place. On this beach, you won’t get arrested for being naked. In fact, you can get arrested if you’re not naked.”

Kristen was close to the car now, and she hesitated. She didn’t want to intrude upon a personal argument between these two people. Still, there was a playful tone in their voices. Slowly, she walked closer to the car. “So, if I don’t take my clothes off, I’ll get arrested, and you will have broken the promise you made in front of all those witnesses,” the woman said. “Seems to me you’re in a very tough spot, Skinny.” The woman laughed, and her cheeks glowed a bright red. A grin spread across the photographer’s face. Emboldened by the woman’s laughter, Kristen stepped forward. “Ma’am, you have to be very careful around this fellow,” she said, trying hard to keep a very serious look on her face. “He traumatized me for life.”

The woman gave Kristen a look of puzzlement, then smiled. “Oh, he specializes in that,” she said, with a quick glance at her companion. The smile had vanished from the photographer’s face. “Listen, Kristen,” he said. “I owe you an apology. It wasn’t my…” “Thanks to him,” Kristen continued, with a comically exaggerated expression of mock anguish, “I’ll never be able to eat a hot fudge sundae as long as I live!” She buried her face in her hands.

“Wait a second—the ice cream sundae?” the photographer said. “I thought you…” Kristen lowered her hands and looked up with a big smile on her face. “You don’t owe me an apology,” she said. “I’m the one who should be apologizing. I bumped into you, remember? And then I was really rude to you, which wasn’t fair at all. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“Sure, sure,” the photographer said, with a baffled look on his face. “But—but I don’t understand—I thought you would want to wring my neck today.” “Ian, I should have realized you’d know all the ladies here,” the woman said, laughing and shaking her head.

The man smiled uneasily. “I guess I’m just the gregarious type,” he said. “Ruth, this is Kristen. She’s one of the lifeguards here. And Kristen, this is Ruth Banks. She’s a friend from a club that I visit sometimes.” “Oh, a lifeguard!” Ruth said brightly. “Hey, are there any male lifeguards?”

Kristen nodded, smiling at Ruth’s sudden enthusiasm.

Ruth’s eyes quickly ran up and down Kristen’s body. “I’ll bet a lot of guys pretend to be drowning just so you’ll have to jump in and rescue them, am I right?”

Kristen laughed. “Nobody’s tried that yet,” she said, “but there are a few guys who keep dreaming up new ways to get some attention.” “This is the first time I’ve ever been to a place like this,” Ruth said, with a nervous laugh. “Last night at the club I lost to Skinny in a trivia game. I—I guess you could say he beat the pants off me. So, tell me—can I keep my clothes on for a while, at least until I have a chance to get used to the idea of taking them off?”

Kristen noted a look of mingled excitement and apprehension in the woman’s eyes. She remembered how she had felt on her own first visit to this beach. “Sorry,” she said sympathetically. “It’s not a clothing-optional beach. Once you’re on the beach, the rules say you’re not allowed to have any clothes on at all. Naturally, we realize it takes a while to find a spot and to get settled in. I guess if we were being super strict, we’d make everybody undress up here.”

The photographer brightened up and looked as if he were going to say something, but then he seemed to think better of it. The woman still seemed worried.

“Listen, I know it can be a little frightening the first time,” Kristen said encouragingly. “I had never even thought about going to a nude beach until I was assigned here. I thought I was going to die of shame. But trust me—once you’ve got your clothes off, you’ll start to wonder what all the fuss was about. After you’ve been swimming in the nude, and felt the sun all over your body, you’ll never want to give it up. You just have to be brave enough to try it that first time.” Kristen couldn’t believe she was saying this—it sounded more like one of the other lifeguards.

“I dunno—you might be right,” Ruth said. “I know I’d feel a lot better about this if I didn’t have to pose in front of everyone once I get down there.” “You don’t have to pose,” the photographer said. “We could just do some candid shots.”

“You—you agreed to let him take photos of you? In the nude?” Kristen asked, blushing.

Ruth smiled and nodded ruefully. “Yes, but it wasn’t my preferred outcome, let me tell you,” she said.

“Well, Skinnydipper comes down here fairly regularly,” Kristen said reassuringly. “The people on the beach have a pretty high opinion of him. And he seems to be a decent photographer.”

The man was visibly surprised. “I sure didn’t expect to hear you say that,” he said.

“I guess I owe you more than one apology,” Kristen said. “You must have thought I was a total jerk the day you met me. You were right about the beach being a public place. I really went off the deep end when I told you that you couldn’t take pictures down there. It’s embarrassing to remember it. So, I—I want to apologize.”

“I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop,” the man said. “I keep thinking you’re going to grab my camera and smash it over my head, or rake your fingernails across my face, or something.”

Kristen laughed. “Oh, do you get a lot of that?” she said.

“No, but I…” the photographer said.

“Well, maybe this is the other shoe,” Kristen said sheepishly. “I came to ask a favor. See that black van over there? It comes here a lot, but nobody knows who it belongs to. Nobody’s seen anyone get out. Whenever I get close, the engine starts and it races off.”

“Okay,” the photographer said warily. “So, what do you want me to do?” “Johnny Bee said you might be able to find out who owns it, if I could get the license plate number,” Kristen said.

The photographer stared intently at the van. He frowned, and without saying a word, he raised his camera to his eye. Slowly he swept the camera across the parking lot, turning a ring on the long lens as he did so. Kristen watched, puzzled. When he had the camera pointed toward the van, he seemed to hunch his shoulders a little. He clicked the shutter and lowered the camera. “I can’t make any promises, but I’ll see what I can do,” he said. He turned his head, but his eyes stayed fixed on the black van.

“O—okay, thanks,” Kristen said uneasily. The photographer seemed to be taking this very seriously indeed. “I’ll get the license number,” she said, as she turned to walk away.

“Be careful,” the photographer said gravely. Kristen nodded and walked toward the beach steps and the black van.

“Well, she seems nice enough,” Ruth said softly. “Oh! I didn’t even recognize her, Ian. She’s the girl from the picture!”

The photographer smiled and nodded. “That’s right,” he said. “Can you believe it? She wouldn’t let me apologize. She apologized to me. She certainly is a remarkable person.”

“Maybe so,” Ruth said. “Or maybe she just hasn’t seen the newspaper yet.”

**Fame**

Alicia climbed the ramp of the lifeguard tower slowly and deliberately. On her head was the baseball cap that was the lifeguard uniform at Black Knife Beach. Over one shoulder was her white canvas beach bag. On her face was a great big grin.

Kristen, leaning against the railing of the tower’s deck, was glad to see her.

It was time for the shift change, and Alicia was her relief.

“So, how does it feel to be famous?” Alicia asked brightly. “Oh, no! Not you, too,” Kristen moaned. “All day long, people have been bugging me about that. I can’t believe how many people read that stupid newspaper.”

“Then, am I to take it that you’re not enjoying being a celebrity?” Alicia asked.

“I’m not a celebrity,” Kristen protested. “You can’t even tell it’s me! It’s all in silhouette—you can’t see anything.”

Alicia set her beach bag down and knelt beside it to fish out something inside. “I think they probably had to do the dark silhouette thing to get it into the paper,” she said. She pulled a folded section of a newspaper from the bag and stood up. “But, c’mon—be honest.” She unfolded the newspaper and held it up before Kristen. “Are you really suggesting that somebody won’t be able to guess who this is? Look at those lines! Look at that profile!” Alicia was holding the “Lifestyle” section of the newspaper. A bold headline announced the “Summer Sun & Fun Review.” The headline and the opening text of the article were printed over light-colored areas of a huge color photograph that filled the entire page. It was a photograph of Kristen, standing watch at the lifeguard tower. Seen from behind and slightly to the right, she stood on tiptoe, the heels of her hands resting on the wooden railing of the tower, her chin high, her eyes keenly alert. Naturally, she was wearing the uniform of the Black Knife Beach lifeguard—absolutely nothing. Nothing but that baseball cap. Under the bill of her cap, the outline of her nose, her lips, her chin, her throat—all were sharp and clear, and very recognizable. The outline of the rest of her body was very crisp and distinct, too.

“Face it, Kristen. You’re the official poster child of Black Knife Beach.” Kristen groaned. “All day today, the ‘droolers’ have been hanging around a lot more than normal. I guess I should expect that from them,” she said. “But even normal people—people who come down here regularly—they’ve been staring at me. Like they’ve never seen me before, y’know?” Her cheeks reddened. “Like they’ve never seen a naked girl before. They’ve even brought me copies of the paper to autograph.”

“Oh! Thanks for reminding me,” Alicia said. She stooped to pull a pen from her beach bag, then handed the pen and the newspaper to Kristen. Kristen rolled her eyes.

“My boyfriend went absolutely nuts when he saw your picture,” Alicia said. “He said he might have to start coming down here himself. I’ve been trying to get him down here for a long time. Make it out to Ben, and put, ‘with love.’ He’ll just eat that up.”

“You sign it!” Kristen said, with disgust. She pushed the pen and newspaper back into Alicia’s hands.

“It’s not just down here, you know,” Alicia said. “People are talking about it all over town. I went to the store this morning and I overheard people in the aisles talking about it. Then I was listening to one of those dumb call-in shows on the radio. The announcer says the topic is so-and-so—I can’t remember what it was today—but from the first call, all anybody wanted to talk about was your picture.”

“What—what did they say?” Kristen asked warily.

“At first, all the callers said it was disgusting that they’d put filth like that into a family newspaper. Some thought it was disgusting that we have a beach like this in our fine city, and blah, blah, blah.” Alicia said. “Filth?” Kristen repeated.

“That’s what they called it,” Alicia said. She held up the newspaper and looked at the photograph. “Unbelievable,” she said, shaking her head slowly. “Does that look like filth to you? Is there anything filthy in that picture?” Her hands trembling, Kristen took the paper from Alicia and stared at the photograph.

“Finally, one woman called who said she liked the picture. She said if she had a figure like that, she’d show it off, too,” Alicia continued. “Then there was a guy who said the only filth was in the minds of the people who thought there was something dirty in that picture. After that, the balance really shifted. A couple people said that now they wanted to come to Black Knife Beach. Other callers said they’ll never come here themselves, but it doesn’t hurt anybody if some people want to go nude on the beach. There was a lot of jockeying back and forth: some people liked it; some people hated it. In the end, I think the pro-Kristen people just slightly outnumbered the anti-Kristen people.” “It—it doesn’t give my name, thank goodness,” Kristen said. “The caption just says ‘a lifeguard.’” For the first time, she noticed the credit line on the photo and the accompanying article. “Hey, Ian Froste,” she said. “I’ve seen that name somewhere before.”

“Oh, yeah, Skinny gets around,” Alicia said. “He covers the whole Department of Parks and Recreation for the paper. I think he likes this place best, though. He comes here on his days off. In fact, he’s here today—did you see him? He’s got a crowd following him around. I think he’s a celebrity today, too.”

“That’s because of the woman with him,” Kristen muttered, distracted. “I guess she lost some kind of bet and had to pose for him. She started out really shy, but she’s been getting into it as the day goes on.”

“This beach is a great place to lose your inhibitions,” Alicia said, smiling. “When he was taking pictures down here, I had no idea he was working for the newspaper,” Kristen said. “There was a big article about Brenda in the paper last year. I think Skinny—uh, Ian—was the guy who wrote it.” “I remember that article,” Alicia said. “Some people down here were mad at Skinny for giving Brenda the publicity. I thought it was a pretty good story, myself. It showed what a kook Brenda is, you know? But after it came out, the kooks started crawling out of the woodwork. There were a lot more of them than I expected. That’s when they started to form those picket lines. I guess you can’t underestimate the intelligence of the general public.” Kristen stared at the newspaper in her hand. “I didn’t think it made Brenda look like a kook, exactly,” she said.

“Oh! Speaking of kooks—I almost forgot!” Alicia cried suddenly. “One of the callers on the radio show proposed marriage to you, and said he was looking forward to learning your name.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Kristen asked incredulously.

Alicia raised her right hand. “Scout’s honor,” she said.

“Unbelievable,” Kristen said, laughing and shaking her head. She gave the newspaper back to Alicia.

“So now I know what it means when they say something is the ‘talk of the town,’” Alicia said. “You’re famous, Kristen. Even if people don’t know your name. Beth’s already got this posted on the bulletin board, and Don says he’s pinning it up on his wall at home.”

“He wouldn’t dare!” Kristen said, red-faced.

“Why not?” Alicia said, laughing. “Gosh, I’d be flattered if it was my picture. It’s not like he hasn’t already seen you naked, you know.” “That’s different,” Kristen said. “Down here, it’s one thing. But staring at a picture on the wall…” “You do realize this picture is going to be pinned up in hundreds of dorm rooms when college starts this fall, don’t you?” Alicia said. “That’s not funny!” Kristen said, a look of horror in her eyes. “I—I’d die of shame!”

“What?” Alicia said, startled by Kristen’s reaction. “I don’t understand you, Kristen.” She held up the newspaper again. “There’s not a thing in that picture to be ashamed of.”

“That might be true down here,” Kristen said. “But this beach isn’t like the real world. I know how people see pictures like that.”

Alicia shook her head in puzzlement. “I’m starting to worry about you, Kristen. I think Brenda’s brain-washing you or something. How does it hurt you if a guy looks at you and likes what he sees? If this picture makes somebody happy, you don’t need to balance that out by making yourself miserable, you know.”

“People are going to think I’m some kind of slut,” Kristen said forlornly. She leaned heavily against the wooden railing encircling the lifeguard tower and hung her head.

Alicia looked again at the large photograph. She sighed, then folded up the newspaper and slipped it back into her beach bag. “So,” she said softly, “do you think you might marry that guy? The one from the radio show?” “What?” Kristen said. “That’s just ridiculous.”

“Maybe you should meet him, at least,” Alicia said, staring directly into Kristen’s eyes. “He sounded like he really liked you.”

“He liked me?” Kristen cried incredulously. “He doesn’t know a thing about me!

What in the world are you thinking of?”

Alicia shrugged. “Well,” she said, “it’s just that you seemed really impressed with the opinions of the people who’ll look at that picture and decide that you’re a slut. They don’t know a thing about you, either.” Kristen groaned. She laid her forearm along the railing and lowered her head, resting her forehead on her arm. “I have to live in the real world,” she muttered. “That picture’s already out there. I can never get it back.” Alicia watched Kristen for a long moment. “Do you know what my grandpa always used to tell me?” she asked. “He said, ‘The truth is just exactly what it is, and it doesn’t care what you or anyone else think about it.’” Kristen looked up, puzzled.

“You know what Popeye the Sailor always used to say?” Alicia continued, smiling. “He said, ‘I yam what I yam.’”

Kristen couldn’t suppress a little laugh.

“‘The truth is what it is.’ Even when I was a little kid, I wondered whether the old man was just a little bit crazy,” Alicia said, with a small sad smile. “It’s a nice picture,” she added, very softly. “And that’s the truth.”

**Exhibition Game**

It was something like déjà vu, but it wasn’t déjà vu.

Kristen didn’t know what it was. There was something simultaneously familiar and strange about this locker room. It was bigger than the one at Black Knife Beach. The banging of the locker doors reverberated louder in this large space. The damp smell from the showers was like any other locker room. There was a mingled aroma of several kinds of soaps and shampoos. It was a big locker room, and it was almost empty now. It was nice to be able to spread out a bit. There was just herself, and Janet, and the four models. Oh, and the lady doing their hair and makeup. She bustled about busily, attending to each of the models in turn. Kristen caught a faint whiff of hairspray.

The scent of the hairspray—that was the key. “I just realized something,” Kristen said, turning to Janet. “This is the first time since high school that I’ve been in a women-only locker room. Feels kind of strange, you know?” “What, you have co-ed locker rooms at your beach?” asked one of the models, a tall brunette with a trim athletic figure. She sat on a bench, wearing only a towel wrapped around her waist. She was drying her hair with another towel, which she lowered when she asked the question.

Kristen shrugged and nodded. “It’s a pretty small lifeguard station,” she said. “We share the locker room and shower with the guys. It doesn’t make much sense to have two completely separate facilities, since we all see each other naked every day, anyway.”

“That’s gross,” the brunette said, and resumed drying her hair. “I know I should be beyond all this stuff,” Kristen said, as she picked up her old one-piece suit from the bench. She quickly glanced toward the locker room’s entrance, then back to Janet. “After all this time, it shouldn’t matter at all. But, you know, it’s really nice to know that the door’s not going to suddenly swing open and some big beefy guy swagger in just in time to see me halfway into my suit.”

Janet laughed. “If some guy barges in here, I don’t think he’s coming to peek at you or me,” she said. She glanced at the four models, all in different states of dress.

Another of the models, a short shapely blonde, looked up and smiled. She was dressed already, in a modest but flattering two-piece suit. She had a large towel draped over her shoulders while the hairdresser brushed and sprayed her hair. “Hey,” she said, “that hunk you were with—the tall one with the muscles—he’s welcome to come in here any time!”

The brunette laughed. “The views expressed by Kim, here, are not to be taken as the opinions of the Dream Team as a whole,” she said. “Just because you’re the team captain doesn’t mean you’re my mom, Donna,” the blonde said jovially.

Kristen looked over at Janet and smiled. “See, now this is what I can’t believe,” she said, watching Janet pull on the bottom half of a charcoal grey knit tank suit. “I didn’t think you even owned a swimsuit.” Janet laughed. “I’ve never owned a swimsuit in my life,” she said. “One of my roommates let me borrow this one. I think it’s a little tight in the butt.” “It looks fine to me,” Kristen said. “You’re just not used to it. You know, it’s really awfully generous of you to do this.”

Janet shrugged. “It’s just one day. It’s a good cause,” she said, tugging impatiently at the seat of the suit. “Man! How do people put up with this?” she muttered.

“You’re really making quite a sacrifice, though,” Kristen said. “I mean, this spoils your record, doesn’t it?”

Janet laughed. “What record? Does Guinness have a new category now? ‘Longest time naked, Female?’ I’ve never tried to set any records. I just like to be comfortable.”

“Wait a second,” said Donna. “Let me get this straight—you go naked all summer?”

Janet grinned and nodded. “I try,” she said. “I grew up kind of spoiled. My parents owned a nudist club. I’ve almost never had to wear clothes during the summertime.”

“Nudists?” Donna said. She shook her head. “I just don’t understand how anybody can live like that.”

“Gosh, I didn’t expect to hear that from you, of all people,” Janet said with a chuckle. “Aren’t the four of you all kind of famous for posing nude in a magazine? You’re the last people I would have expected to have a problem with nudity.”

“On a hot day like today, I wish I could go naked all the time,” Kim said.

“I don’t have a problem with nudity,” the brunette said, ignoring Kim. “That’s not true, Donna.” A lithe, lean young woman with strawberry blonde hair cascading over her shoulders stepped around the corner of a row of lockers to join the conversation. “You haven’t done any nudity for, what—almost a year, now? You’ve said you’re never gonna do it again.” “That was a purely professional decision, Hayley,” Donna responded, very seriously.

“You’re missing out on some good paydays,” Kim said, in a sing-song voice. Donna glanced over at Kim and gave her a condescending smile. “Kimmy,” she said, “you do nude work to open doors and break into the business. If your career starts to go somewhere, you don’t have to do it anymore. That’s all.” She looked up at Janet. “Anyway, it’s the nudists who really have a problem with nudity.”

“What?” Janet said, with a puzzled laugh.

“I mean, be honest—doesn’t it seem a little dumb to organize your whole life around going naked?” Donna said.

“I—I don’t think that’s really…” Janet stammered.

“Nudists choose where they’re going to live, how they spend their free time, even who their friends are—they choose everything based on whether they can run around naked,” Donna continued. “I guess some people like going naked, but that much?”

“You seem to know all about what nudists do and why they do it,” Janet said. “Have you ever met any actual nudists? Have you ever been to a nudist club or resort? Have you ever been to a nude beach?”

“I’ve been to all kinds of places since I got into this kind of work,” Donna said dismissively. “I’ve met all kinds of freaks. I’ve seen pictures of people at those nudist camps. No offense, but I’m glad there are laws to make people keep their clothes on. But, hey—I’m in no position to judge anybody, okay? Live and let live, that’s what I always say. It’s just that, personally, I don’t understand why anybody wants to live that way. Kinda dumb.” Janet glared at Donna for a long moment. “I’m so happy you’re not the judgmental type,” she said quietly. She shrugged, sighed, and turned back to her locker.

“Wait—kinda dumb?” Kristen said angrily. “Then I suppose it’s smart to spend your whole life just trying to fit in, huh? Just going along? Always afraid to be different from anybody else? Afraid to try anything new? Afraid of looking silly? Always worried what the neighbors might think?”

Janet looked up, startled by Kristen’s vehemence.

“You want to know why nudists hang out with other nudists? Why they congregate at nudist clubs and nude beaches?” Kristen said. “First of all, it’s because your stupid laws say they can’t live free anywhere else. You force people to go to isolated places, and then you ridicule them for going there.” Donna seemed amused by Kristen’s intensity. “Tiger!” she said. “Second, maybe nudists like to hang around with interesting people,” Kristen continued. “People who think for themselves. People who dare to wonder whether the way things are is the way things ought to be. You think it’s all about being naked. I think it’s about a lot more than that.”

Janet smiled, astonished.

“Hey, I know you!” Hayley exclaimed. “You’re the girl from the picture. That was you in the newspaper, right?”

“Yes,” Kristen said, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “That was me.” The fourth model, a statuesque brunette, stepped around the corner of another row of lockers. She was totally naked, still damp from her shower. “The girl from the picture? Really?” she said. Her eyes widened when she saw Kristen. “Oh!” she cried.

Hayley grinned. “What do you think, Lauren?” she said.

Lauren pursed her lips and ran her eyes searchingly up and down Kristen’s body. “Turn around, turn around,” she commanded, making a little circular motion with her finger. Kristen, startled, turned slowly while Lauren continued to examine her body. “Tiger, you need to talk to Bruno. Definitely,” Lauren said, jabbing a finger toward Kristen for emphasis. “Who—who’s Bruno?” Kristen asked.

“He’s our photographer,” Hayley said.

“Actually, he’s sort of a photographic talent scout for the magazine,” Lauren said. “He doesn’t shoot that many of the big photo spreads, but he’s got a good eye.”

“You might need to get your boobs done,” Kim said. “I know a great doctor.

It’s expensive, but it pays for itself in the long run.”

“I don’t think that’s really necessary, Kim,” Lauren said. “Well, it might improve her odds,” Kim said defensively. “I’m just saying it wouldn’t hurt.”

“That would be for Bruno to decide, anyway,” Lauren said.

“Wait a second—I’m confused,” Kristen said. “What are you talking about?” Lauren stepped forward and laid a hand on Kristen’s shoulder. “I don’t want to get your hopes up,” she said, “but I think you might be a good candidate for the centerfold.”

“The centerfold?” Kristen said, blushing. “You mean, like…” She looked at the four models, and at Janet. “I—I’m not interesting in being a model,” she said. “It’s a great opportunity,” Donna said. “It opens all sorts of doors.” “The pay’s pretty good,” Kim said. “You get to meet a lot of interesting people, including a lot of rich celebrities.”

“It starts out as modeling, but it can lead to all kinds of stuff in show business, if you’ve got any talent,” Lauren said. “Donna here just got a thing on a made-for-TV movie. No nudity required, either.”

Kristen glanced down at Donna. “Congratulations,” she said. “But—but I don’t want to be in show business.”

Kim laughed. “C’mon, everybody wants to be in show business,” she said. Donna laughed derisively. “Oh, you run around naked on the beach every day, shake your ass for all the customers, and you’re not in show business?” she said.

“I’m a lifeguard,” Kristen said frostily.

“You’re a lifeguard who runs around naked all day,” Donna said. “You pose for a very sexy picture in the paper. You come out to represent your beach at a charity volleyball game. That’s show business, baby.”

“I wish they’d hurry up,” Don said, fidgeting nervously. He looked at the two burly bodyguards flanking the entrance to the women’s locker room, then he glanced over at Richard. “Do you think those guys ever get to go inside? You know, do they ever get to see the Bunnies naked?”

“I have no idea,” Richard said. “Why don’t you ask them?” “That would be a helluva job,” Don muttered. “Traveling all over the place with some of the most beautiful women in the world, but never being able to do anything about it.”

“I’m sure they can read the magazine, just like the rest of us,” Richard said. “Y’know, those guys don’t look so tough,” Don said with a wry smile. “I think the two of us could take the two of them. What do you think?” Richard laughed. “I think our next-of-kin could take the two of them to court after they’ve murdered the two of us,” he said. “Just a little patience.” There were several dozen people, mostly men, gathered—at a respectful distance—near the locker room door. “I think I understand why the Bunnies want some privacy,” Don said, “but don’t you think it’s kind of insulting that Janet and Kristen wouldn’t use our locker room?”

“The rules are different here,” Richard said. “This is Maidstone Beach.

They’ve got separate facilities for men and women. You have to respect that.” “They should have had this at Black Knife Beach,” Don said. “Centerfold models vs. nude beach lifeguards. You know everybody wants to see the Bunnies naked.” Richard chuckled. “I’ll bet there’s not one person in ten who bought a ticket for this who would go down to Black Knife Beach, even for that. These people are pure spectators. And besides, they made such a big deal about how the Dream Team doesn’t do nudity at in-person events.”

“I guess you’re right,” Don said glumly. His countenance brightened when the locker room door swung open. “Here they come,” he said. Kristen and Janet stepped through the door, looking grim.

“You shouldn’t have done it,” Janet said, tugging at Kristen’s elbow.

“She made me mad,” Kristen fumed. “We just have to win, that’s all.”

“They’re trying to psych you out,” Janet said. “They’re trying to win this game before the first serve. Now you’re going to be worrying about that instead of playing the game. I’ve heard about these women. They’re tough competitors.”“We’re not bad, ourselves,” Kristen said. She smiled when she saw the two male lifeguards.

Don gaped at Janet and laughed aloud. “I’m sorry, Janet,” he said. “You just don’t look right.”

Janet frowned and looked down. “What’s wrong?” she said. “Is it riding up my butt again?” Janet was wearing a two-piece dark grey knit tank suit. The top was long enough, and close-fitting enough, that a casual observer might think the top and bottom were a one-piece suit. Over their swimsuits, she and Kristen each wore a cut-off white t-shirt with the words “Black Knife Beach Lifeguard” printed in large block letters.

“You look fine, Janet.” Richard said. He was wearing Speedos and a full-length version of the same t-shirt. “It just takes some getting used to. I don’t think either one of us has ever seen you with clothes on.” “I’ll tell you,” Janet said, tugging again at the bottom of the swimsuit, “even here, with all these people around, I’d feel a whole lot better without.”

A man standing not far away overheard Janet’s comment, and let out a loud whistle. “Get comfortable, baby!” he yelled, clapping his hands noisily. For the first time, Kristen noticed the people gathered near the locker room door. She heard one man ask another, in a hushed voice, “Is she one of them?” The other man shook his head.

“Are they coming out?” Don asked, glancing at the locker room door. Kristen shook her head. “They’re still getting ready,” she said. “I think they’re supposed to make some sort of grand entrance after we’re already down there.” She looked down the beach to where bleachers had been set up on two sides of a sand court for volleyball. The seats were already filled with people who had paid for admission. The entire area was surrounded with a tall canvas fence, to prevent anyone who hadn’t paid from seeing the game. “I guess they’re the real stars of the show, aren’t they?” she said, uneasily. “I think everybody’s paying to see them, yeah,” Don said. He was bare-chested, holding his own t-shirt in one hand. He looked down and tugged at the waistband of his baggy trunks. He glanced up at the two female lifeguards. “They wanted me to wear these baggy shorts instead of Speedos,” he said. “Tell me, do I look like a total dork?”

“Don’t answer that!” Janet said, with a quick glance at Kristen. “If we said ‘yes,’ he’d think we were just talking about the shorts,” she said, winking. Don laughed good-naturedly, and shot another glance at the locker room door.

“So, what are they like?” he asked.

“What are what like?” Janet responded.

“The Bunnies,” Don said, rolling his eyes.

“Ooh, don’t let them hear you calling them that,” Kristen said. “You might lose some body parts.”

Janet nodded gravely. “Maybe some parts you really like, too,” she said. “They’re not Bunnies,” Kristen said. “They’re centerfold models. I guess there’s a big difference.”

“Were they naked?” Don asked, a little too eagerly.

“Umm… I wasn’t paying that much attention,” Janet said. “Yes, I guess so. Some of them, anyway. Part of the time.”

“And? And? And?” Don said. Richard, grinning, took a couple steps away from Don, as if embarrassed to be seen with him.

“And what?” Janet said impatiently.

“What are they like?” Don demanded.

“Where did you find this guy?” Janet said, laughing. “I didn’t pay too much attention to them, really. They’re pretty, I guess. Why are you so obsessed with them? You see naked women on the beach every day.” Don laughed. “Not women like them. That Kim is an earth-bound goddess,” he said. “I can’t believe you two were in there with her, and you couldn’t see that. I wish I could have traded places with you.”

“Maybe it’s all lighting, or makeup, or special effects, or something. Maybe she’s just not my type,” Janet said.

“Oh, one of them said we should let you into the locker room,” Kristen told Don.

“That’s true,” Janet said, nodding.

“Really? Which one?” Don asked eagerly.

Janet shrugged. “I don’t know. They all look alike to me.”

“What? Let him in, but not me?” Richard said, smiling.

“I think it’s some sort of airhead affinity thing,” Janet said, casting a quick glance at Don. “Maybe they saw a kindred spirit in Don.” Don laughed and turned his face heavenward, his hands outstretched in a gesture of supplication.

“Those women aren’t airheads,” Richard said. “I just saw them on television.

They all seemed very bright. They’re surprisingly good athletes, too.” Janet seemed to weigh this new information and nodded soberly. “Maybe they were just impressed by all the muscles,” she said. “We may need those muscles to win this game. Don’t feel bad, Richard. I’ll bet if they could have seen your wallet, they might have let you in and left Don dangling.” “That one did seem kind of shallow,” Kristen said.

“Yes,” Janet said. “Not quite as shallow as Don, though.”

“Shallow?” Don said. “How am I shallow?”

“Pining away over a picture in a magazine,” Janet said. “Never noticing all the goddesses who parade before you every day.”

“It’s not shallow to admire physical beauty,” Don said. “Not unless that’s the only thing you care about. And I’m not ‘pining away.’ There’s an extraordinarily beautiful woman walking the surface of the earth. I’ve only ever seen her in photographs, but now I’m about to meet her in the flesh. Naturally, I—I’m looking forward to that.”

“Ooh! In the flesh!” Janet turned to Kristen. “Do you think Don will be totally heartbroken when his dream girl comes out, all dressed up?” “I think Don prefers women who wear clothes,” Kristen said, giggling. “It gives him a chance to use his spirit eye to see her true inner beauty.” She tapped the center of her forehead.

“No, Don likes naked women just fine,” Janet said. “They just have to be in a magazine. A naked woman in the locker room or on the beach is just one of the guys. But a naked woman in a magazine has received the official seal of goddess-hood. If these four hadn’t been in that magazine, he wouldn’t give them a moment’s thought.”

“True,” Kristen said, nodding. “He’s a very shallow fellow, isn’t he?” Don laughed and shook his head. “You guys are asking for it,” he said. “My own teammates, so pretty on the outside, and so vicious on the inside.” He pulled his t-shirt on over his head, then looked toward the bleachers and the volleyball court. “I suppose we should get down there and get ready.”

The sandy volleyball court was clean and well-maintained. This court was well-regarded in beach volleyball circles. Kristen had a vague recollection that there had been some sort of national tournament played here at Maidstone Beach last summer.

A harried, sweat-stained man met the four lifeguards at the gap that formed the entrance to the canvas fence. He carried a walkie-talkie in one hand, and an amplified megaphone in the other. “I’m glad you’ve made it,” he said breathlessly. He led the lifeguards inside and had them stand far back, beside one of the bleachers. “Wait right here,” he said, then he hurried away again. “He seems a little nervous,” Richard observed.

“Probably afraid these people will turn into a bloodthirsty mob if things don’t go just right,” Janet said.

The bleachers were packed. There might have been almost a thousand people, with perhaps a hundred more loitering in the sand at either end of the court. Kristen was surprised to note that there were almost as many women as men in the stands. There were no children. It was just a volleyball game, but the organizers had worried about what might happen when they brought a team of sexy models together with four lifeguards from a nude beach, so only adults were admitted.

Two mixed teams were already on the court, playing out a fiercely competitive game. Kristen didn’t know a lot about beach volleyball, except that the sport seemed to be growing in popularity. She had heard that there were even some professional players. She had no idea how the kind of volleyball she had learned to play this summer compared to beach volleyball as it existed elsewhere. In the naked games at Black Knife Beach, some players took the competition very seriously indeed; others just wanted to have fun. With a loud grunt, a woman on the court leaped into the air and spiked the ball violently over the net. It landed at the feet of a muscular man with a dumbfounded expression on his face. The spectators applauded politely, but they seemed only vaguely attentive to the game. It was clear that they were waiting for something else. They were impatient for the big event—the match between the Black Knife Beach lifeguards and the centerfold models, who called themselves the Dream Team. Kristen noticed that many of the men in the stands held copies of the popular men’s magazine in which the four models had appeared. She supposed that the men intended to ask the models to sign the large color photos of themselves posing naked.

A tall police officer in a crisply-pressed dark blue uniform strode over to the four lifeguards. He stopped, put his hands on his hips, and shook his head. “I wouldn’t believe it if I didn’t see it with my own eyes,” he said. “I didn’t recognize you guys with your clothes on.”

“Raley!” Richard said, stepping forward to shake the policeman’s hand. “I almost didn’t recognize you in your dress blues, here.”

The policeman looked down at his uniform a little self-consciously. “Yeah, I don’t wear it much. They put me in charge of the security detail here. They wanted four uniformed officers—I guess the blue and the badge is supposed to remind people to behave themselves. Just wish it wasn’t so hot. The other guys are over there.” He jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. “They’re all from the beach patrol, too. We probably feel every bit as awkward in these uniforms as you guys do in those swimsuits.”

“The uniform looks nice, Raley,” Janet said coyly. “You look very official.” The frazzled man with the bullhorn returned. “Everybody here?” he said. “This game’s nearly over. Okay, listen. When the Bunnies get down here, they’re going to wait outside.”

Kristen and Janet exchanged an amused glance.

“It kind of spoils the entrance if anyone spots them early,” the man continued. He mopped sweat from his forehead.

“I’m sure it will be a big entrance if they come in naked,” Richard said, grinning.

A panicky look flashed across the man’s face. He shot a quick glance over his shoulder, at the entrance to the fenced-in area. “Very funny,” he said irritably. “They never do any kind of public nudity. But these women are famous, whether you know it or not. As soon as they show their faces, two-thirds of the guys here are gonna go nuts.”

Janet glanced around with a bemused expression of skepticism. “Their faces?

You really think these guys are going to recognize their faces?” she said. The man snorted and shook his head angrily. “Listen,” he said, jabbing a finger at Janet, “you all just sit tight. When I go out and introduce your team, you all come out and walk to the far end of the court. Okay?” The lifeguards nodded. “Then I’ll introduce the Dream Team. You might want to stick your fingers in your ears. It’s gonna be noisy.” He glared icily at the four lifeguards, turned on his heel, and stomped away.

Kristen couldn’t help laughing. “No sense of humor,” she said. “And in such a hurry! I didn’t even have a chance to warn him about calling them Bunnies,” Janet said. “What a pity!”

“Some people just aren’t cut out to be in charge of things,” Raley said. “Of course, that’s the kind of person who always winds up in charge.” “You’re a strange kind of a cop, Officer Raley,” Janet said.

The policeman laughed. “You’d be surprised,” he said. “Anyway, I’d better go. Good luck to you. I hope you beat the pants off them, figuratively, if not literally.” He shook hands with all four lifeguards.

“Literally would be great,” Don said, laughing. The policeman laughed, too, saluted, and walked away.

Don turned to his fellow lifeguards. “Listen, guys, this is just an charity game. The people here deserve a good show. So let’s try not to beat the Bunnies too bad, okay?”

“Listen, if you think those women are going to be pushovers, you’re nuts,” Janet said. “They’re smart, they’re tough, they’re very competitive, and they’re in great shape.”

Don laughed. “Tell me about it!” he said.

“They’re not going to be easy to beat,” Janet said.

“Yeah, well, we’re not bad, either,” Don said. “We win most of our games back at Black Knife. We’ve got two guys and two gals against four gals.” “At Black Knife we play pick-up games against random collections of nude beach partiers,” Janet said. “These women are going to play like pros. Believe me—unless we get serious and get focused, they’re going to mop up the place with us.” She cast a quick glance at Kristen, then addressed herself to Don and Richard. “Guys, we’ve got to win this game. There’s a lot riding on it. If we don’t…” “Don’t!” Kristen cried.

Janet continued without missing a beat. “If we don’t win today, I personally am going to kick both your butts all the way back to Black Knife Beach. When we get there, I’m sure Beth will want to kick both your butts all the way back here.”

Richard’s eyes flicked from Kristen’s face to Janet’s. The look of puzzlement on his face slowly gave way to a quiet little smile. He watched Kristen’s expression closely.

A loud round of applause arose from the bleachers.

Janet glanced over her shoulder to the volleyball court. “Looks like the game’s over,” she said. “That mean’s we’re up. Is everybody ready? It’s showtime.”

There was a palpable excitement in the air. It grew while the man with the megaphone stood in the middle of the volleyball court and extolled the virtues of the various charities that benefited from this event. The charities “will be there when you need them, because you were there when they needed you,” the man declared. The audience clapped dutifully, but the buzz of their hushed conversations only grew louder. The man looked down at his notes and sighed. He had more, but he could sense that it was time.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “it’s time now for the game you’ve all been waiting for. Would you please welcome our own Black! Knife! Beach! Lifeguards!”

Kristen was astonished by the throaty roar that arose from the stands. She saw hundreds of people rise to their feet, clapping their hands and cheering. She exchanged glances with the other three lifeguards. They were all wide-eyed, mouths agape.

Don laughed, and shouted over the noise of the crowd, “They like us! They really like us!” He stepped around the corner of the bleachers, leading the team down the court.

“Don’t be a hot dog!” Janet shouted.

When the crowd saw Don, the applause grew even louder. Don looked up and smiled. He resisted the temptation to clasp his hands together triumphantly above his head. Instead, he smiled and nodded as he walked down the edge of the court.

“Boy, girl, boy, girl,” Janet said authoritatively, and after a moment she followed Don around the corner and into the view of the audience. Once again the applause swelled.

Richard exchanged a puzzled look with Kristen. He leaned toward her and spoke loudly to make himself heard over the crowd. “I guess Black Knife Beach is famous, even if we’re not,” he said.

Kristen smiled and nodded.

“You know, you never struck me as the type to gamble, Kristen,” Richard said. “You have to be very careful about making bets.” He winked, and stepped around the corner, and the roar of the crowd swelled again.

Kristen stood for a moment, thunderstruck. How did he know? How had he found out about the foolish bet she had made back in the locker room? Richard was always very perceptive. Sometimes she wondered whether he was a mind-reader. She listened to the cheering crowd and wondered how many of these people had ever visited Black Knife Beach. How many wanted to visit, but had never been able to work up the nerve? How many of them would never dream of visiting a nude beach? How many would like it, if they did visit? She wondered whether this appearance by the lifeguards would help anyone to understand what she had learned only by going to the beach. She took a deep breath and stepped out onto full view of the people in the bleachers.

She saw the other lifeguards spaced out ahead of her, walking to the far end of the court. Janet was looking around and smiling. Richard waved to people in the crowd. Kristen fell into step behind them. She realized, with a sense of disappointment, that the wave of applause that had greeted the appearance of each of the other lifeguards hadn’t come when she appeared. If anything, the applause faded a little. Perhaps the audience was tired of clapping? Perhaps she didn’t look like she could be a lifeguard? Maybe she had waited too long, or hadn’t waited long enough, to follow Richard? She realized she shouldn’t take it personally—the applause was for all the lifeguards, not for any individual. The team had already received an ovation far beyond anything any of them had expected. But still she felt disappointed.

It began with an ear-splitting whistle. Another man let forth a howl that sounded like the cry of a wild animal. Someone else shouted, “Yeah! Yeah!” There were more whistles and shouts from people on both sides of the volleyball court, then a thunderous wave of applause came from the stands. Kristen turned to look behind her, certain that the four centerfold models had entered the makeshift arena.

“It’s her! That’s her!” came a voice from the midst of the tumult. There were more whistles and shouts. Kristen looked up into the stands and gasped when she noticed a number of people were holding up the newspaper photo of herself, on duty at Black Knife Beach. Several people held the newspaper itself. Others had fastened the photo to stiff cardboard, and raised those placards over their heads. One man held what appeared to be an oil painting based on the newspaper photograph. Kristen gaped at the spectacle. Flashbulbs popped everywhere in the bleachers, though it was still broad daylight. A noisy wave of cheers engulfed her.

Kristen’s knees felt weak. Her cheeks burned a bright red, but she held her head up and smiled gamely. She didn’t know how she should feel. Ahead of her, the other lifeguards had stopped and turned to watch her. They were clearly as astonished as she was herself. But no one seemed more surprised than the man with the megaphone. He stared at Kristen, then looked up at the noisy crowd. He looked uneasily toward the end of the arena, to where the models would make their entrance, and shook his head in bafflement.

Only when Kristen and her teammates had reached their positions at the end of the volleyball court did the crowd begin to settle down. Janet put a hand on Kristen’s shoulder. “Wow, huh?” she said, laughing giddily.

“A tremendous welcome for the home-town team,” said the man with the megaphone. “Just—just tremendous.” He lowered his megaphone and scratched the back of his head. Janet caught his eye and theatrically stuck her fingers in her ears. The man scowled and turned away. He looked worried. After a moment, he raised the megaphone to his lips again. “You know, I was kinda wondering… do we even need to bring out the other team? I mean…” “Yes! Yes!” came shouts from the crowd.

“Now, hear me out!” the announcer said. He shot a quick glance at Janet, and gave her a sly grin. He turned toward the end of the arena where the models would enter. “These ladies are tremendously popular everywhere they go. They have a very busy schedule of public appearances. They’re in demand everywhere!” There was scattered applause from the stands. “Now, since we love our own lifeguards so much, I thought maybe we could save some time and trouble, and just let those ladies out there go home and get a well-deserved rest. Whadda you say?”

“No!” came the throaty roar of the crowd. Dozens of men leapt to their feet, waving copies of the magazines with the models’ photos. “No! No! No!” Hundreds of people were stamping their feet.

“No?” said the announcer, feigning surprise. “No? Then, ladies and gentlemen, please show our special guests what kind of hospitality this city has to offer. I don’t think they need any introduction here. Please welcome your Dream! Team!”

The bleachers erupted with cheers and applause. The cheers grew louder when the four models entered the canvas-fenced arena, flanked by the two beefy bodyguards.

The four women wore matching long-sleeved beach cover-ups that came down to about mid-thigh. For famous nude models, the four women weren’t showing much bare skin—just their faces, their hands, their long lean legs—but the effect of their appearance was electric. The crowd had come to their feet. Men pressed forward clutching their magazines in their outstretched hands. The women smiled and waved, and walked with a motion that was almost hypnotic. Kristen gasped. Their hair and makeup had worked a dazzling transformation on the four models since she and Janet had left the locker room. She glanced over at Don. He had a big grin on his face, and was clapping his hands. Kristen realized it would be rude not to applaud, so she started clapping, too. Now she noticed the four uniformed police officers coming onto the court with the four models. They took positions near the corners of the volleyball court. They shifted their positions slightly as the two bodyguards who had accompanied the models took up positions near mid-court. Kristen looked up at the enthusiastic crowd. Apparently the Dream Team needed a lot of protection from their fans.

The short blonde model approached the net near where Don was standing. “Hi, there,” she cooed seductively.

Don stepped forward, a huge grin on his face. “Hi, Kim,” he said. “I’m a big fan.”

Kim smiled the kind of smile that could fell a strong man at fifty paces. “On a hot day like today…” she started to say. She stopped abruptly when Donna walked up behind her and put a hand on her elbow.

“Sorry, Kim,” Donna said in a stage whisper. “You can’t have him until after we’ve won this game.” Kim frowned and turned away.

Hayley, the athletic strawberry blonde, walked up to the net and laced her fingers through it as if it were a chain-link fence. “Your lady friends here are mean,” she said to Don and Richard. “They wouldn’t let us invite you two guys into our locker room. They want to keep you for themselves.” “That’s not true,” Kristen said. Hayley smiled impishly and turned away. Richard chuckled and glanced over at Janet. “Well, I can see they play to win,” he said.

The models’ cover-ups looked a little bit like silk pajama tops. Now the models took them off, with a casualness that seemed anything but casual. The crowd whistled and hooted. Underneath, the four women wore modest but stylish two-piece suits. To the casual eye, all four models’ suits looked identical, but Kristen noticed that each suit had been modified in various subtle ways. The suits had been carefully tailored to show off each model’s figure to best advantage. The audience responded with an appreciative ovation as the models took their positions on the volleyball court.

Kristen felt embarrassed when the lifeguards removed their own cover-ups, pulling their t-shirts off over their heads. There was polite applause from the crowd, and a few women cheered lustily as Don bared his torso. But they were a motley crew. Richard wore Speedos, and looked fairly good in them. But Don, who had more to show off, wore a pair of the big, baggy trunks that were inexplicably fashionable this summer. Janet was obviously uncomfortable in her borrowed two-piece tank suit.

Kristen looked down at her own simple one-piece suit. She had worn it many times in high school, and had never felt dissatisfied with it. It was sturdy and comfortable, and, she thought, flattering. But now she compared her suit and the suits worn by her teammates to the outfits worn by the four models, and she felt positively frumpy.

The lifeguards were some of the most physically fit people on Black Knife Beach. They had overpowered most of their opponents in volleyball games at the beach. But sometimes they struggled against teams of lesser ability, but greater determination. Kristen felt the lifeguards—including herself—had never taken the games very seriously. There was always a lot of joking and horseplay. Don had a habit of playing to the crowd, generally delighting the onlookers and sometimes annoying his teammates.

Kristen was worried. If the lifeguards lost this game, she would have to meet Bruno, the “talent scout” for the magazine. He would undoubtedly insist on seeing her with her clothes off. He would size her up like a piece of meat. He would determine whether her butt was too big, or too small, or just right. He might declare that she needed a “boob job.” He would take pictures, which would be inspected by uncounted other people at the magazine. The models had assured her that a session with Bruno would be fun, but the entire prospect seemed humiliating to Kristen.

The models tied their long, lustrous hair back in ponytails. Kristen watched them with a growing uneasiness. These were no delicate porcelain dolls. Now they looked like athletes, and they seemed determined to win this game. Don watched them, wide-eyed, a big smile across his face.

Kristen moved a little closer to Don. “It’s really important that we win this,” she said, a faint blush glowing on her cheeks.

“It’s just an exhibition game,” Don said. He noticed that all the lifeguards were watching him. “Jeez,” he said irritably, “why are you all treating me like the village idiot?”

“You—you just seem a little distracted,” Kristen said, casting a quick glance at the four women on the other side of the net. “This is more than an exhibition game, okay? I think you’ll kick yourself if we lose. Just keep your mind on the game, okay?”

Don’s cheeks reddened. “I seem to be getting kicked a lot today. You guys sure you’re playing the right game? Volleyball, not soccer, right?” he said. “Don’t worry about me. I’m not going to screw up,” he added confidently. “Let’s teach these amateurs how the game is played,” Donna shouted to her teammates on the first serve.

The first few volleys were fairly sloppy, on both sides. The crowd cheered each play as if it were championship caliber. Kristen felt relieved to see the Dream Team making mistakes, but her relief was short-lived. She could see the models assessing the lifeguards’ strengths and weaknesses, and adjusting their game accordingly. In the locker room, the four models had seemed kind of silly and vapid. It was hard to believe these were the same women. They were disciplined competitors. They worked as a team. They knew each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and they played to cover each other. They played to win.

Kristen played to win, too. She ran. She jumped. She fought for points that seemed hopelessly out of reach. She dove face-first into the sand, digging out the ball when it looked like a sure point for the models. She spit out sand, and the crowd clapped. The other lifeguards fought just as hard. Janet was panting after a couple heroic saves. Don smashed the ball across the net with a force that started murmurs of admiration from the women in the crowd. Richard played a slow and steady game, then shocked the opposing team with a well-placed spike that scored a point for the lifeguards. But it wasn’t enough.

As the game progressed, it became increasingly clear that the Dream Team was gaining control. While the lifeguards wore themselves out, the models seemed calm and relaxed. The lifeguards played a power game; the models were all patience and position. They seemed to read the lifeguards’ game perfectly: when the ball came across the net, one of the models was ready for it. There was a hint of a swagger in the way the models moved. Donna laughed and told her teammates “You know, I think those muscles are nothing but hot air. This isn’t going to be very hard, after all.” Some in the audience laughed and applauded.

The lifeguards exchanged gloomy glances. They had the edge in size and strength. They weren’t responding effectively to changes in the models’ game plan. “I can’t believe we’re going to let them do this to us,” Janet said through clenched teeth. “Some hair-dos and painted faces, and they’re beating the Black Knife Beach lifeguards!”

“If that were all they are, they wouldn’t be beating us,” Kristen said. “They’re good. We’re terrible.” She wondered what Bruno looked like. For some reason, she imagined him wearing a beret. She bit her lip and looked at her teammates. “We haven’t been playing like a team. Look, everybody’s got a zone. Play it!” she said. The other lifeguards nodded tentatively. The lifeguards had never had a team captain, but they rallied around Kristen’s leadership now. As play resumed, she barked out terse commands: positioning players, calling plays. She tried to anticipate the flow of the game. She tried to spot weaknesses on the other side of the net and close the gaps on this side. It didn’t take long to spot one great weakness: each of the lifeguards—herself included—had been trying to win the game single-handedly. “Feed your teammates!” Kristen cried. “No glory ball!”

With Kristen calling out directions, the lifeguards started to play more like a team. Slowly they battled back into contention. As the game wore on, the models lost some of their swagger. The game had become a real contest. The next few volleys were long ones, hard-fought. No player on either team was willing to concede any point. The play was fast-paced and intense. Hot sweat stung Kristen’s eyes. She paused to blink it away. She drew a forearm across her feverish brow and glanced over at her teammates. The heat and the pace of the game were taking a toll. Janet’s silky dark hair was matted with sweat. There was a dark V-shaped stain extending down from the neckline of her gray knit tank suit, and dark stains spread out under each arm. Janet was breathing hard, but when she noticed Kristen’s gaze, she smiled gamely and gave a thumbs-up. Kristen looked down at her own suit. Sweat trickled over her skin, but she felt relieved that her suit wasn’t showing any stains. Richard and Don were breathing hard, but the bare-chested men seemed to coping with the heat and exertion better than the two female lifeguards. Across the net, the four models were breathing hard. Their skin glistened with sweat. Somehow, it only made them look even more glamorous. Dark-haired Lauren brushed a stray strand of hair from her eyes with a slow and sultry movement of her right hand. Kristen wondered: how many times had Lauren rehearsed that movement? Had the mysterious Bruno “discovered” these four women? What had they been like before they posed for the nude photographs that had made them famous?

Donna whispered something in Kim’s ear. Kim smiled and nodded while Donna whispered. There was an impish look in her eyes. When Donna returned to her position on the sandy court, she wore a sly smile that made Kristen nervous. Kristen wasn’t calling out commands now; the lifeguards were playing a solid game, steadily gaining on the Dream Team. When Janet barely blooped the ball over the net, she took the models by surprise. The ball dropped in, and the lifeguards finally took the lead. Don and Janet exchanged high fives. “Don’t celebrate until we’ve won,” Richard warned. Kristen felt an inexplicable sense of disappointment at the good news.

The lifeguards’ lead didn’t last long. Instead of setting the ball for Janet, who was in position to put it over the net, Don made a flashy but ill-considered attempt to spike the ball himself. The ball rocketed straight into the net, then plopped ignominiously onto the sand. The score was tied. Kristen picked up the ball and glared at Don. “Don’t be a hot dog!” she shouted angrily. She flung the ball at Don’s midsection. He caught it easily with both hands. “That wouldn’t have been a good shot even if you’d managed to get it over the net! Play the game!”

Don seemed to be fighting back his anger. He knew Kristen was right, and he lowered his head in shame. He heard a rising murmur from the crowd, but he didn’t see Kim creeping under the volleyball net behind him. He didn’t suspect a thing until he felt the sharp tug on his shorts.

In a single swift motion, Kim pulled Don’s shorts down and left them puddled about his feet. Don turned when he felt her body brush against his legs and his bare backside. He saw her lunge under the net, back to her team’s half of the court. The four models laughed and pointed.

Half the audience were on their feet, and a deafening roar arose from the bleachers. Raley and the other three police officers watched the crowd warily. Hundreds of women stared wide-eyed at the naked man and shouted, whistled, clapped their hands, and laughed delightedly.

His cheeks glowing, Don had started to bend over to pull his trunks up. He paused, and looked around at the cheering throng. He stood up straight, held his head high, and spread his arms out triumphantly. He turned around slowly, nodding his head to acknowledge the ever-louder cheers from the women in the crowd. Officer Raley, reassured that the crowd was excited, but not out of control, laughed and clapped. When Don had completed one full turn, he bent over and pulled up his trunks. A disappointed groan, and cries of “No, no!” came from the stands, but the applause continued.

“Oh, take it off!” Kim called, clapping and laughing. “Take it off!” Don cast a sly sideways glance in Kim’s direction, then made a quick lunge under the net at the blonde model. The two burly bodyguards swiftly moved forward to block him, drawing down good-natured hissing and booing from the crowd. Kim laughed and called out, “Too slow!”

Don looked at Kim, a big grin on his face. He looked into the faces of the two bodyguards, as if trying to find a way over, around or through them. Reluctantly he stepped back and shook his head, but his eyes were riveted on Kim. “You!” he said, pointing a finger at Kim, “Watch your ass!” “Ooh! I thought that was your job,” Kim said, laughing. She turned and shook her backside, to laughter and applause from the crowd. Even Kristen laughed. Suddenly, Don turned and took hold of the shoulder straps of Kristen’s swimsuit. With a single swift motion he peeled the one-piece suit from Kristen’s body. Astonished, Kristen stumbled backward, and Don arose with the suit in his hand. He held it high over his head.

For an instant, time seemed to stand still. Kristen saw hundreds of men jump to their feet. She was buffeted by wave after wave of noise from the bleachers. Don looked into her eyes, a huge grin across his face. He was swinging her swimsuit around and around over his head. The cool air on her bare skin seemed to revive her weary body, and brought home the fact that she was naked now, stark naked in front of all these people. She felt a powerful, queasy, tickling sensation arising from the pit of her stomach. Even before the rushing blood had reached her cheeks, she knew she would feel that familiar flush. She could feel the blood rushing not just to her cheeks, but to every part of her body. She felt it rushing even to her fingertips. She saw countless flashes of light. Flashbulbs. Raley and the other police officers were smiling and clapping. The four models were laughing and pointing. She saw her swimsuit swing over Don’s head again. She saw the big dumb grin on Don’s face. She held out her hand and took a step toward him. He took a step back. He wanted her to jump for her swimsuit. She lowered her hand, and watched the suit swing overhead once, twice, three times. Richard stepped in between Don and Kristen. “That’s enough,” he said gruffly. He held out his hand. “Give me the suit,” he said. It was hard to hear him over the roar of the crowd. Don looked down at Richard’s outstretched hand and continued to swing Kristen’s suit over his head. He looked up into Richard’s eyes, and his grin disappeared. He handed the suit to Richard. Richard turned and gave the suit to Kristen. “Here you are, Kristen,” he said.

“I’m sorry.”

Kristen held the suit before her by the shoulder straps. She looked at it as if seeing it for the first time. The suit’s lining was discolored with sweat. The stains had not seeped through to be visible on the outer layer of fabric. The suit was made of stretch material, and without her body in it, it seemed small, shriveled and shapeless.

Her face burning, Kristen looked around for a place to sit while she pulled the swimsuit on. There was no seat to be had. She didn’t much relish the idea of trying to balance on one foot as she raised the other foot high and wormed it through a puckered up leg hole. She contemplated dangling the suit only a few inches above the sand. She could put her feet through the leg holes with two small steps, but then she would have to bend over to pull the suit all the way up her body by the shoulder straps. She imagined herself pushing each breast down into place as she pulled the straps up over her shoulders. Flashbulbs were still popping all around her. The four models seemed to be taking great delight in Kristen’s humiliation.

She looked again at the tiny pathetic-looking swimsuit and sighed. She glanced over at Officer Raley and held the swimsuit aloft by its shoulder straps. There was a question in her eyes. Raley understood the question, but he blinked in surprise. He looked up into the stands; he exchanged glances with the other three police officers; then he smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Kristen nodded. She looked at the four models, still laughing. She smiled. She stepped over to the sideline and dropped her swimsuit beside the four t-shirts the lifeguards had discarded earlier. An astonished hush settled over the crowd. The models weren’t laughing anymore. Kristen returned to mid-court and bent to pick up the ball where Don had dropped it. She tossed the ball to Don. “Play the game!” she said.

“See, this just proves my point that nudists are crazy,” Donna said. “They’d have to be crazy to want to climb down this damn cliff.” “Will you just shut up for a minute and take a look around you?” Kim said. They had reached the base of the cliff. Black Knife Beach spread out before them. “Look at this!”

All four models stopped and took in the spectacle of Black Knife Beach. The sand seemed golden in the summer dusk. The four lifeguards paused, too, and smiled as the four newcomers discovered their beach.

“It reminds me of that island, remember?” Kim said. “The one where you and I did that shipwreck photo shoot?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Donna said. “That was—that was a beautiful beach. That photographer—he could never capture this light.”

“That was one long day. Neither one of us wanted to cover up on breaks, remember? It just felt so good to be there, naked,” Kim said. “I—I had forgotten all about that. You’re right, Kimmy,” Donna replied. “It’s gonna be dark soon,” Kim said, unbuttoning her blouse. “I wish we could have got here earlier.”

“We had to lose the volleyball game first,” Hayley said. “I’m kind of glad we did.”

“It’s nice and cool down here,” Lauren said. “Does it get really chilly after dark?”

Janet kicked off her sandals. She had left her clothes up in the car. “If it gets too cool, sometimes they build a bonfire,” she said. “Sometimes people even put clothes on, but most folks down here don’t like to do that.” “I think I understand why,” Lauren said, taking her own shoes off. “That feels good,” she said.

Kristen pulled the baggy t-shirt off over her head. She had nothing on underneath. “You can have your shirt back,” she said, handing it to Don. “Don’t say I never gave you anything.”

The beach was nearly deserted now. The group made their way to a small cluster of people who were gathered in a sort of loose circle near the middle of the long beach. The people in the circle were all naked, except for one woman, who wore a short t-shirt. They nodded politely as the newcomers joined their circle, but they were all listening to a man who played a very precise piece of music on a guitar.

“I recognize that!” Donna whispered. “That—that’s Bach!”

The guitarist looked up, smiled, and nodded.

“Shh!” Hayley said, touching a finger to her lips. She closed her eyes and smiled serenely as she listened to the music.

The four models undressed quietly, and handed their clothes over to the lifeguards. That had been a part of the bet, although right now Kristen felt it wasn’t necessary. Don and Richard kicked off their shoes and dropped their trousers. They spread out blankets, and everyone settled onto the sand. Donna felt the cool breeze on her body and sighed.

When Johnny Bee finished the Bach piece, everyone clapped appreciatively. One man produced a pair of bongo drums and beat out a strange rapid rhythm that took the visitors by surprise. Another man picked up a guitar and exchanged a significant glance with Johnny. Johnny smiled, and launched into a raucous Chuck Berry tune, accompanied by bongo drums and rhythm guitar. Donna couldn’t hold back a delighted laugh.

Kim jumped to her feet. “I’m dancing,” she declared. She grabbed Don’s hand and pulled him to his feet to join her. Other people got up, too, to dance naked in the fading light.

Donna looked around the circle of naked beach people. She watched the dancers. She looked down at the waves washing over the sand.

“This is nice,” she said softly. “This is really nice.”