

Chapter One

“KELF, the island’s number one place for the hits!”

Nadine Butler leaned forward as soon as the station identification finished playing and smiled at the microphone. “Welcome back, my little ones,” she said. Turning her gaze toward the window set in the wall across from where she sat, she admired the crystal blue glare of the harbor and marina. Through the latticework of sailboat masts, she saw the large Washington State ferry easing its way through the calm waters.

“I can see the first ferry of the afternoon through my little window here. Hello, to all you newcomers. Hello, to everyone coming home after a journey. For those meeting me for the first time, I am Nadine Butler, the Pixie of KELF AM 1220, and I am here with you for another three hours or so. We’re taking requests right now, so if you’re a tourist, give me a call at 232-KELF and I’ll do my best to make your stay on our little island as memorable as possible. Coming up, we’ve got the Eagles, Jackson Browne, and Fleetwood Mac. Stay tuned!”

For each of the ferries that arrived during her show, she had a special introduction that was especially welcoming to the last of the summer tourists who visited the tiny northwestern island of Squire’s Isle, thirty miles off the coast of Washington. Some of the tourists were from Seattle or Vancouver, but the vast majority came from all over the country to see a real American small town...her town.

Nadine’s broadcast booth was a nondescript closet-type space dominated by the semi-circular table that held the various odds and ends necessary for radio broadcasting. A stack of CDs and tapes towered to Nadine’s left. Just over her right shoulder, a wide picture window overlooked the bullpen and the sea of cubicles KELF called its business offices. As Nadine finished her welcome message, she hit the button that would begin a pre-set block of commercials and turned her attention to the phone banks.

The button for telephone Line Three had been flashing since the end of the last song, so she depressed it first. “This is Nadine Butler, and you’re on the air with the Pixie. Tourist or local?”

“Um...tourist,” replied the uncertain male voice. “Is this really on the air?”

“Live on tape, honey,” Nadine said. She rested her elbows on the table and leaned toward the microphone. It increased the volume of her voice, and listeners had told her it sounded more intimate, like she was physically in the room with them. “What’s your name?” Nadine asked.

“Robert.”

“And what can the Pixie play for you, Robert?”

“You got any Springsteen? *Born to Run*?”

She glanced at the stack and saw a Bruce Springsteen’s *Greatest Hits* CD within easy reach. Stretching her arm out, she plucked the CD off the rack, withdrawing the disc as she spoke into the microphone. “Robert, that is one of my all-time favorite Springsteen tunes, and I *do* have it right here. I’m gonna play that for you the first chance I get. All right? Thanks for tuning in to the Elf! Have a great trip, okay?”

“All right.”

Smiling, Nadine disconnected the call. She glanced at the clock to see how much time was left on the commercial before she moved her finger to the next flashing phone light. “You’re on with the Pixie,” she said to the caller. “Tourist or local?”

She answered the next three calls, got a request from each of them, and seeded the songs into her already-planned play list. Running her finger over the list of song titles, she frowned. With this list plus the commercials she was obligated to play during this hour, she was still going to run a little short on air-time. Nadine pulled the headphones from her ears and hurried to the door of the booth, opening it and sticking her head into the bullpen. She glanced around until she spotted an older black man pushing a mail cart between the desks. The man she knew only as Billy — the resident “mail boy”, janitor, and jack-of-all-trades — appeared to be in the middle of handing out the day’s memos. She whistled, making him lift his rheumy eyes to hers.

“I need just under three minutes,” Nadine said.

Billy leaned against his mail cart and drummed his long fingers on the handle. His eyes danced back and forth across the carpet as if reading something written on the hardwood

underneath. Suddenly, he smiled, pointed at her, and proudly said, "*Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves*, two minutes and thirty-six seconds."

"Cher?" Nadine asked, wrinkling her nose in displeasure.

He shrugged and gripped the mail cart's handle tightly. "I like 'er. Nice voice."

Nadine held her hands out in surrender and said, "Then Cher it is. Thank you, Billy."

She returned to her seat in the booth just as the ad for Gail's Seafood Restaurant ended. She put the "cans" back over her ears and depressed the broadcast button with her pinky finger. "Gail's Seafood Shack, man...talk about some good eatin'!" she said into the microphone. "If you haven't been there, it's just the greatest seafood you will ever eat. And to prove it to anyone out there who doubts their Pixie, I have a coupon awarding dinner for two to Gail's if you can answer one extremely easy trivia question. Trust me, with food this good, I'm all but giving this prize away. Here's the question: who, in 1966, said his band was bigger than Jesus? Give me a call at 232-KELF with the right answer and you'll be eating very, very well tonight.

"Right now, though, I'm sending this one out to Robert, a newcomer to our fair shores. Robert, I hope you have a great time on Squire's Isle and that you don't feel the urge to run." She snickered and said, "Yeah, I know how bad that was. This is the Boss from 1975 — it's *Born to Run* on KELF."

As the song started, she saw that the phone lines had all lit up once more. It was a typical reaction when she ran a contest, especially an easy one, so she ran her fingers over the three lights and pressed one at random. "Hi, KELF. You're on with the Pixie."

"Hey, this is Tony. I just came over on the ferry and I wondered if I could request a song...?"

"Sure thing, Tony! What do you wanna hear?"

"*Me and You and a Dog Named Boo*, by Lobo, I think...?"

"Oh, I adore you for requesting that, Tony. I've loved that song since I was a little girl, so I'm going to give you a special prize," Nadine said. She loved being able to randomly give prizes to people who were not expecting to win; it was a genuine bright spot that never failed to lift her spirits. "You're my tourist of the day! What that means is that you can come by the station — we're just south of the ferry lanes, just ask if you can't find us — and pick up a coupon for two free ice cream cones from Sandy's Dee-lights. Sound good?"

"That sounds great!"

"If you're happy, I'm happy, Tony. I'll get that song on for you ASAP, and be sure to come by and get your coupon before five."

"Okay! I'm making my way over to, uh, the, uh..."

"Sholeh Village for the whale-watching?"

"That's it!"

"Well, then, you're in for two treats today, Tony. I'll move your song up to make sure it plays on your way out there, all right?"

"All right!"

"Tony, I am going to send you away with good memories of Squire's Isle if it's the last thing I do. Keep it tuned to KELF, and I'll get some 'bright red Georgia clay on your shoes'," she said, quoting a line from the song.

"Well, all right."

She thanked him for calling and went on to Line Two. "KELF, you're talking to Nadine."

A woman meekly asked, "You have a winner for the trivia yet?"

"I don't! You wanna make a guess? Who said that his band was bigger than Jesus?"

"I *think* it was John Lennon..."

"That's right!" Nadine hit a button that caused a noisemaker to sound loudly. "Oh, no, there's confetti all over my booth!" she exclaimed. "What's your name?"

"Sara."

"Well, Sara, are you a local or a tourist?"

"Born and raised here on the island."

"Well, that is fantastic! So you've been to Gail's before, I assume."

"I have."

"Good! You know what you're in for. Get something really good, and think of me when you're eating, all right?"

"Okay!"

Nadine chuckled. "Okay, I'm going to send you to the secretary now. She'll get some information from you, and then you can pick up the coupons anytime before five this evening. Sound good?"

"Sounds great!"

"Glad to hear it. Sara, who is hooking you up with a free dinner?"

"The Pixie," Sara answered with a touch of laughter in her voice.

"That's right, your Pixie Godmother never lets her children go hungry. Keep listening to 1220 KELF, and you have yourself a great dinner."

"All right."

"Bye-bye, Sara."

There were still two minutes left on the Boss' song, so Nadine decided to answer Line Three. "KELF, this is the Pixie."

A man asked, "You have a winner yet?"

"Oh, sorry, we just got one."

"Ah, nuts." The caller sounded disappointed. "Thanks anyway!"

"You got a song you want to hear?" Nadine asked.

"*Norwegian Wood* by the Beatles."

"Oh, no, you're a real Beatles fan, huh? You probably knew the answer right off."

"Yeah, I did."

"Aw, well, better luck next time! I promise you at least one more easy Beatles trivia sometime this week, okay?"

"I'll train my dialing finger."

"Don't give me *too* much information, honey," Nadine laughed. "I'll get your song on for you as soon as I can, all right?"

"Okay!"

Nadine disconnected the call, saw the phone lights were dim at last, and rolled her chair around to face the stack of CDs next to her. She ran her fingers down the spines and pulled discs of the Beatles and Lobo. As she was searching for Cher, there was a tap on the glass behind her. She turned her head; through the picture window, she could see Miranda Powell, the station manager, standing in the bullpen. Nadine waved in acknowledgment, and Miranda motioned for her to come out. There was not enough time before the end of the song for a conference, so Nadine pointed at the CD and held up two fingers to indicate two minutes. Miranda nodded and crossed her arms over her chest, clearly prepared to wait.

Nadine leaned forward, bracing her elbows on the table and wondering what Miranda wanted. The woman was the "messenger" who usually passed down bad news from the station's owner; she was mostly hands-off when it came to the talent, so it would have to be something of semi-importance to get her to interrupt a show. All Nadine could think of was there had been a complaint. "I said Jesus on the air," she muttered to herself. "The Satanists must be demanding equal time."

When the song ended, Nadine hit a switch to transfer the feed back to her mic. "Hey, everyone out there, be you tourist or native, whale-watcher or sight-seer, friend or foe — I'm Nadine Butler, the Pixie, and we have a winn-ah for the dinn-ah at Gail's." She hit the replay button and the recorded call with Sara's voice began issuing from the tape deck.

She set the requested Lobo song to play as soon as the winning call ended and stood up. Hanging her headphones on the edge of the desk, she went to the door and opened it. "I've got three minutes and some change," she told Miranda. "What's up?"

"You're not in trouble," Miranda said immediately.

"Uh-oh," Nadine said. She could feel her bright mood in danger of fading. She braced herself for the worst as she slumped against the door and shook her head. "Now I'm *really* worried. What's wrong?"

Miranda reluctantly said, "Hoagie...he has a conflict this weekend. I'm sorry."

"Oh, God," Nadine groaned. "Can that man *ever* fulfill an obligation? What is it this ti—" She froze when she remembered the commercial the station had been playing endlessly that week. "Oh, no. Not the fair. Please, Miranda, do not do this to me. Please!"

To her credit, Miranda looked uneasy at making the request. She lifted her hand in a conciliatory gesture and said, "I'm sorry, Nadine, but Hoagie can't host it this year. You're the best

option for replacing him. You're the most popular DJ we have and you...I'm sorry, but you *are* single."

Ah, Nadine thought, *that old chestnut. Miranda thinks I'm single and therefore, I have no life.* "Hoagie is single," Nadine argued. "So is Leah."

"Hoagie has plans on the mainland this weekend that he can't back out of," Miranda said, "or so he claims. And I'm not sure I could trust Leah for this. It *is* a family-oriented sort of thing." She hesitated and then said, "To be honest with you, Nadine, I would hate to think of you sitting at home by yourself this weekend."

Nadine sagged in defeat. Miranda was, in her own misguided way, just trying to be nice. She shrugged in resignation but asked anyway, "Can I say 'no' without it affecting my job here?"

"Well, we won't fire you, if that's what you mean," Miranda replied, smiling broadly, "but you'd really be helping us out. Most of the people going to see Hoagie would prefer to see you, anyway. It wouldn't affect ticket sales; we'd probably get even more ticket sales because of the switch. You'd be saving the day, Dean."

Oh, *not the nickname!* Nadine thought. *That's really playing dirty.* She closed her eyes and reluctantly accepted that her weekend off was a lost cause. Waving her hands, she muttered, "All right, yeah. Fine. But remember this the next time we talk about raises, all right?"

"You got it. Thank you, Nadine. You're the best." Miranda pulled a folded piece of paper from her pocket and thrust it at Nadine. "Since the fair is this weekend, I'm going to need you to announce the change as soon as possible."

"Make Hoagie do it during his show. Make him explain why he's backing out."

"Don't make Hoagie the bad guy, Dean."

"Stop calling me Dean," Nadine said. She was not really angry, just frustrated. She snatched the paper away from Miranda and said, "This is the last time this quarter, all right? The last time I host one of these stupid galas, the last concert, the last last-minute switch. Deal? From now on, when I have a weekend off..."

"It will actually be a weekend off," Miranda said, nodding. "I got it. You're a dear for putting up with it this time."

Nadine sighed and waved the woman off. She went back into her booth, reading over the copy as she sat down and replaced the headphones. She flipped a switch and tried not to let out an annoyed sigh into the microphone. "That was Lobo with *Me and You and a Dog Named Boo* and those St. Paul wheat fields. Ah, gotta love that song! Just makes you want to hop in the car, pick a direction, and keep on driving. Don't try it here, though; can't drive too far on an island unless you're going around in circles.

"Anyway, enough of my nonsense. Or maybe more of my nonsense because I just got handed a note," Nadine crinkled the paper between her fingers so the crisp sound would be heard over the mic, "that says I am going to be the hostess with the most-est at this year's Squire Days. That's right, this weekend's Renaissance Faire will be emceed by yours truly. I'll be out there broadcasting live for most of the weekend, so why don't you come by and see me, okay? We'd love to see you all out there in your nice tight tights and big fluffy dresses! Coming up, we've still got the Eagles and a few more requests from those tourists, bless their pointy little heads. Keep listening to your favorite Pixie on 1220 KELF AM."

She pulled the headphones away and glanced at the phone lines. Sure enough, almost thirty seconds after she went to commercial, Line Three lit up. She glanced through the glass, saw that Miranda was gone, and answered the call. "KELF, this is the Pixie."

"So it *is* you," a quiet female voice said. "Not some...I don't know, lying body snatcher or anything?"

Nadine winced. *Well, isn't this going to be awkward?* "Hi, Kate," she said, trying to sound apologetic. "Look, there was..."

"You're working this weekend? *All* weekend?"

"That's what it looks like," Nadine said. "Only a couple of hours each day, but...yeah, it might as well be all weekend. Ruins our plans, at any rate." She checked the counter. There was a minute and forty-five seconds left on the commercial. "I...I don't really have time to have this argument..."

"It's not an argument," Kate replied. Her reasonable tone made the back of Nadine's neck prickle in alarm. "I just want to make sure I have all the information so we can have a fully

informed fight when we get home," Kate went on. "So you're working all weekend? And when you're not working, you'll probably be too tired to do anything else. That's the situation?"

"I know, I know," Nadine sighed. "It was my idea, you cancelled a bunch of stuff to clear the weekend so we could go, and now I'm renegeing and..."

"Okay," Kate interrupted. "That's all I needed to know. Have a good rest of the show."

Kate hung up abruptly, and Nadine resisted the urge to throttle her mic. She mimicked Miranda's voice, giving her a nasal quality the real woman did not actually possess. "You *are* single. You *are* the most popular DJ here. You *are* the biggest pushover on staff." Nadine knew she could tell Miranda and her co-workers that she was seeing someone and just leave it at that, ignoring gender and the whole furor it would cause to know her significant other was a woman. But she had been around long enough to know that her lover's identity would not stay secret for long. It was easier to just say she was single...in theory, at least.

Nadine was torn. On the one hand, it would solve a lot of problems if she just said she was with someone, if she admitted she had plans over the weekend and could not possibly fill in for Hoagie. The odds were that Miranda would back off without an interrogation. On the other hand, if Miranda pressed for information and Nadine was forced to out herself, that would cause a whole new can of worms to be opened. Her closet was the rock, her work was a hard place, and she was wedged firmly between them.

She sighed again, tucked a stray lock of hair behind the ear of her glasses, and hit the broadcast button. "Welcome back," she said, forcing her voice to its accustomed, cheerful tone. "You're still listening to KELF, I'm still Nadine Butler, and our songs still rock." She transferred directly to the next song in the play list and sat back in her chair. Looking at her watch, she groaned.

Three more hours on the air.

More than enough time to brace herself for a fight with her girlfriend.

At 4:58 p.m., Nadine switched off from commercial and said, "Well, folks, that's going to do it for my show today." She looked over her shoulder and saw Hoagie making his way through the bullpen. "Joe 'Hoagie' Hogan is making his way to the booth right this minute, so he'll be with y'all right after Jackson Browne. This is Nadine Butler, your KELF Pixie, saying good-bye for another day. Thanks for letting me spend the afternoon with you. And remember to tune in tomorrow; I'll be lonely if you don't."

She switched on Jackson Browne's *The Load-Out* and stood up. It was a nice, slow song, a perfect capper to her show. Plus, when partnered with the song *Stay* as it usually was, the song was long enough to give her time to get out and let Hoagie into the booth for his show. She looped her scarf around her neck and put her play list into a desk drawer so it would not get in Hoagie's way.

Hoagie Hogan sidled into the booth. He was a full foot taller than Nadine and probably more than a foot thicker. He always wore jeans and flannel shirts. His curly blond hair hugged his head tightly as if afraid of the long fall if he went bald. The man shed his denim jacket and tossed it over the back of her chair.

Nadine rounded the table and let him take her place in the nerve center. Bending over, she opened the fridge that was tucked beneath the desk. After locating the last can of Pepsi near the back, she straightened, leveled a glare at him, and said coldly, "Joseph."

"Joseph? You sound like my mother when she's about to let me have it. What'd I do?" Hoagie asked, having the nerve to look somewhat aggrieved behind a day's worth of beard stubble.

Nadine was unmoved. "You cancelled the Renaissance Faire."

"Oh," he said, shrugging casually. "Yep, I did."

She resisted the urge to chuck her Pepsi can at him only by reminding herself that it was the last one. "You know what this does to my schedule?" she asked.

He scoffed. "What schedule? Come on, Nadine, we both know you're the most popular DJ here. I'm just giving the people what they want."

Nadine sighed, straightened up, and popped open her Pepsi can. "Popular or not, you owe me."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll find some way to pay you back."

Nadine squinted at him suspiciously. "It worries me, the way you said that."

He waved her away. As she slipped out of the booth, she heard him trim off the end of *Stay* and say on the air, "Welcome, welcome, welcome, I am Joe Hogan, you can call me Hoagie. I'll be here with you until you're sick of me."

"Too late," Nadine muttered.

She walked to her desk and took a seat, looking over the memos Billy had left. She managed to get the stack of incoming mail sorted and a handful of it read before she finished her drink. Crushing the empty can and slipping it into her coat pocket, she looped her leather satchel's strap over her head and across her body, then went down the narrow staircase to the ground floor.

The building's design was staggered so that the second story looked down over the first. The receptionist was on the ground floor, separating the "celebrities" of KELF Radio from the outside world by means of a huge circular desk. Nadine rounded the edge of this barricade, giving a friendly waggle of her fingers to Sue, the secretary on duty.

"I loved your show today, Nadine," Sue said, exactly the same as every day.

Nadine still appreciated the appreciation. "Thank you, Sue. See you tomorrow."

As she stepped outside, a brisk wind blew off the harbor and hit her head on. She paused, her body bent against the wind, and fumbled with the buttons on her jacket. The lank dark hair that had been mashed by headphones all day was stirred by the chill wind and began lashing at her face, though her eyes were protected by her glasses. She turned and walked over to her bicycle, holding her coat shut with both hands.

By the time Nadine undid the lock and chain and threw her leg over the seat, the wind had died down enough for her to find her balance. Riding toward Spring Street, she could see the line of cars in the ferry lanes and wondered how many of the people waiting there had called in song requests.

She turned onto Spring Street; from here, it was nearly a straight shot to her apartment, but it took about five minutes longer than the alternate, winding route. However, the fewer turns she had to make, the more time she had to think. The more time she had to think, the easier the upcoming fight with Kate would go. An added bonus was that her route took her past the newspaper offices where Kate worked. Speeding by, she straightened her back and peered through a window. Kate's desk, near the back of the brightly lit room, was already vacant.

Probably already at the apartment, stewing, picking her words carefully. Nadine sighed. She would just have to make Kate see that there was no way around what had happened. It wasn't like she was scrapping their plans because she'd changed her mind. It was work. She would just have to make Kate understand that.

She had met Kate three years earlier when the woman had been doing a fluff piece for the newspaper — Celebrities of Squire's Isle — and rather than interview the mayor, Nadine had been tapped. Coming from a raven-haired beauty like Kate, the request had been a hard one to turn down. Their first interview had gone well and transformed into dinner; dinner had gone even better and transformed into a night of sex.

They had been together ever since, two relatively visible women in a small town, both still closeted and butting heads about it. Kate was firmly in the closet and willing to stay there as long as she could. Nadine was wishy-washy on the subject. On the one hand, she would love to be out, would love to tell people that she was in a relationship for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the fact she could finally tell Miranda that she could not do things like the Renaissance Faire because she had plans with her girlfriend.

Nadine rounded the corner to her apartment building and stopped her bike in the courtyard. The Blair Idyll Apartments was shaped like a U, three sections surrounding a small courtyard with a neatly tended garden. Nadine tended the flowers herself in return for a break on her rent. As she walked her bike up the concrete walkway, she took a moment to look over the planting beds, which had been mulched over for winter.

She pushed her bike into the foyer. Her apartment was on the ground floor in the center section of the building, to the left of the entrance. She only had one neighbor who lived in the apartment directly across from her. A flight of stairs that started just outside her door led to the second floor, which had an identical floor plan and an open-air landing. Nadine remembered when she and Kate started sleeping together, they had been forced to sneak around as much as possible in order not to alert their respective neighbors. When Nadine's second-floor neighbor moved out, they had struck on the brilliant idea of Kate moving into the postage-stamp apartment

above Nadine's. That way, they effectively lived together without raising any eyebrows or having to use stealth tactics like they were secret agents.

After chaining her bike to the stair railing, Nadine went into her apartment. "Kate?" she called. She withdrew the crushed soda can from her pocket and dumped her scarf and coat on a convenient chair. Her apartment was not exactly messy, but it was small enough to look cluttered. A couch and two armchairs dominated the living room, facing the little television that stood on a small oak end table. One wall was filled with framed photographs, every one a cherished memory — whale-watching trips, Kate on the beach, her mother circa 1960 in a tremendously ugly hat. Nadine took two steps to the kitchen and tossed the crushed soda can into a recycling bin next to the fridge and moved through the living room to the hallway.

The living room and combination kitchen/dining room made up the front half of the apartment. A bedroom, bathroom, and den made up the other half and were connected to one another by a thin corridor that ran between these rooms and the living room. The bathroom and den were deserted. Her bedroom, bed-free since she moved in and more of a storage area where she stacked her excess junk, was also empty. After searching the entire tiny apartment, she knew Kate must be upstairs in her own apartment.

Which meant Kate was too mad to pick a fight right now.

Wonderful. She felt relieved that the fight had been postponed, giving her a little more peace before the explosions started going off, but she kind of wished Kate had been there, just to be done with it.

Nadine dropped onto the couch, which doubled as her bed due to the cluttered bedroom, and found the remote amidst the clutter on the coffee table. She turned the TV on to the news, laid the remote on her stomach, and let the impossibly pretty anchors talk her to sleep.

Some time later, Nadine woke to the feeling of someone massaging her feet. She was momentarily disoriented, not remembering taking off her shoes or even laying down for that matter. However, the fingers working against her socks were so familiar that she kept her eyes closed for a few minutes and enjoyed the sensation. Finally, she sighed, pushed loose strands of black hair out of her face, realized her glasses were gone, and opened her eyes, struggling a moment to focus.

Kate was sitting on the other end of the couch with Nadine's feet on her lap, absently rubbing them while she watched a program with the volume turned down. Nadine scrubbed at her eyes, looked at the TV, and murmured, "What are you watching?"

"News. Late news," Kate answered. "You've been asleep about an hour."

"Mmm," Nadine hummed noncommittally. She knew the fight was still coming, but if she chose her words carefully, there was a chance she might be able to postpone it some more. Forget getting it over with, she thought. She liked peace and quiet. She liked watching TV and getting her feet rubbed. Nadine twisted to see the screen better but kept her feet planted on Kate's lap. "Anything interesting in the world?" she asked.

"Fire in Seattle, fire department got it under control...nothing big."

Nadine nodded.

After a brief silence, Kate said, "Squire Days, huh?"

Nadine groaned. *So much for putting it off...*

"I thought Hoagie was going to do that." Kate kept her gaze fixed on the television as she spoke, her voice remained steady and controlled, but Nadine knew the woman. She was just putting up a façade to keep from showing how hurt and angry she was really feeling.

"He said he would, but he had to back out. Family commitments, I guess. I didn't really ask."

Kate moved her hand to one of Nadine's ankle and squeezed it lightly. "You had commitments, too, you know. It was your idea."

"I know, hon." Nadine grimaced. They had had plans to drive to the mainland, see a couple of shows in Seattle, and have a real date for a change. To actually walk down the street and hold hands with each other...she had been looking forward to it for weeks, and so had Kate. "I'm sorry," she said contritely. "I know you had work and I know you had to cancel just for this weekend. I'll make it up to you."

Kate's hands moved to Nadine's calf and gently probed the muscle through the denim. "Really?" Her tone was quiet, playful and coy.

Nadine smiled, lifted her free foot, and pressed her toes gently against Kate's chin.

Kate laughed and tried to squirm away but managed only to lie down, her back against the sofa arm opposite Nadine's position. Nadine spread her legs apart, reached out, and gripped Kate's wrists, pulling the woman forward and on top of her. Kate chuckled as they embraced and she settled over Nadine's body. Their mouths met slowly, with the ease of familiarity. Kate's lips parted and deepened the kiss at just the right moment, and she moaned as Nadine fumbled with the buttons on her blouse.

"Just how do you plan to make it up to me?" Kate asked, undoing the button on Nadine's pants.

It took Nadine a moment to change her mental gears from sex to actual conversation. She stammered, "How...um, w-what do you want?"

"Will you dress up for the Faire? Will you dress up like a wench?"

"If it pleases milady," Nadine said with a sly grin.

Kate's answering grin was wicked. She slipped her hand into Nadine's pants, her fingers gliding lower and making Nadine gasp and curl her toes.

Afterward, naked and wrapped in each other's arms with an old quilt draped over their bodies, Nadine put her glasses back on and used the remote to turn off the TV. Settling down again, she combed her fingers through Kate's long, dark hair and stared at the window. The blinds were drawn, blocking what they had just done from the outside world. Nadine frowned. She felt trapped. Not because of Kate, but because she could not flaunt Kate; because they had to make sure the windows were closed before they made love; because they had to pretend they were just friends whenever they were out in public. She tilted her head and gave voice to what she had been thinking about for a while. "Maybe I should come out."

Kate did not register shock, nor did she blink her hazel eyes. Her gaze remained focused on the wall. When she spoke, she sounded calm. "You don't think it would affect your show?"

Nadine shrugged. It was their most-quoted reason for not coming out. Nadine worried about people refusing to listen to a gay disc jockey while Kate's fear was that the newspaper editor would suddenly start calling for the cancellation of her column. "I'd like to say no," Nadine finally said, "but truthfully? Hell...I have no idea." She checked her watch and patted Kate's arm. "Dinner?"

"I ate before I came downstairs." Kate curled closer and kissed the back of Nadine's neck. "Sleep upstairs with me tonight."

"I have to get up early," Nadine said. She hated to kick Kate out after sex, but if they slept in the same bed, she would not get any sleep at all. "I should stay down here."

"You sure?" Kate asked. "A warm bed instead of a couch...a warm me..." She slipped her hand around Nadine's waist and cupped her breast.

"I'd love to, but no, honey."

"All right," Kate said, nodding. She shifted off the couch to gather her clothes. Nadine watched as Kate dressed, keeping her gaze fixed on Kate's breasts until the shirt went on, looking at her ass until the tight jeans were pulled up to cover it. Despite the fact they had just had sex, Nadine felt another rush of desire from simply watching Kate's body. She gave herself a mental shake and told herself that sleeping alone was her idea.

Kate glanced around and stuffed her underwear into the back pocket of her jeans. She bent down and brushed her cheek across Nadine's. "Okay. See you tomorrow?"

"Mmm-hmm." Nadine stroked Kate's cheek with the backs of her fingers and went on, "This is our best fight ever."

Kate chuckled and touched Nadine's hair. "Sleep tight."

Nadine waited for Kate to leave before she got off the couch. As soon as Kate was gone, she felt lonely. Her nudity had been part of the afterglow of lovemaking, but now it was just making her cold. She rooted around in the bag next to her armchair until she found one of Kate's baseball jerseys, old and washed to a comfortable softness. She was petite enough and Kate lanky enough that the jersey reached to mid-thigh on her, leaving her decently covered. She buttoned it as she walked into the kitchen in search of sustenance. After scrounging around in the fridge for something to eat, she found her supplies were severely lacking.

She was about to call Kate and ask if her invitation was still open when there was a knock on the door. Nadine paused, aware of how naked she was under the jersey and equally aware that her underwear was draped over the top of the television set. She went to the door and called, "Who is it?"

"It's Kate," came the muffled answer.

Nadine opened the door, letting Kate step into the apartment. She was carrying a covered dish. Holding it up, Kate explained, "Last night's meat loaf. I looked in your fridge before you woke up; you don't have anything to eat for dinner."

Nadine was touched to the point of being speechless. After a moment, she smiled and took the dish out of Kate's hands. "Thank you."

"No sweat," Kate assured her. She kissed Nadine's cheek and gave her the once-over. "You look really hot in my jersey." She touched the white-and-blue shirt's hem and bit her bottom lip. Ducking her head and looking at Nadine through her eyelashes, she continued, "You sure you don't want to come up?"

"Less sure than I was earlier," Nadine admitted. "But yeah."

"Okay. Don't stay up too late. Good night, sweetheart."

"Good night," Nadine said. She watched Kate go out of the apartment and head toward the staircase before kicking the door shut and carrying her dinner into the kitchen. As she sliced off a piece of meatloaf and put it into the microwave, she smiled at the thought of Kate coming back downstairs for her. "I knew you didn't have any food," she had said. It was obvious that Kate cared about her and that was a warming thought.

Still, we've been together for three years. Nadine expected to feel something other than sweetness and the physical satisfaction of occasional — okay, pretty frequent — romps in the sack. If they eliminated the sex, what would they have? *A good friendship. Leave the sex in and we have a really great friendship.*

Nadine snickered and popped open the microwave. As she carried her food to the dining room table, she pushed her worries out of her mind. So what if all they had was a good friendship and really great sex? Relationships had been built on less, right?

Besides, she thought bitterly as she dug into her reheated dinner, it's not like I have a ton of other prospects beating a path to my door.