

One Degree of Separation



Karin Kallmaker

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karin kallmaker




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For Maria, who found my future in the
card catalogs at Berkeley Main

Fourteen and Fortunately no longer a Felony

This book would not be possible—indeed, information would not be ours for the asking—if not for the passion of librarians in preserving our freedom to read.

My eternal gratitude goes to M^J Lowe for her generous, humorous and tireless attempts to teach me the intricate necessities of library sciences and the tantalizing mysteries of information arts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karin Kallmaker's nearly thirty romances and fantasy science fiction novels include the award-winning *The Kiss That Counted*, *Just Like That*, *Maybe Next Time* and *Sugar* along with the bestselling *Substitute for Love* and the perennial classic *Painted Moon*. Short stories have appeared in anthologies from publishers like Alyson, Bold Strokes, Circlet and Haworth, as well as novellas and short stories with Bella Books. She began her writing career with the venerable Naiad Press and continues with Bella.

She and her partner are the mothers of two and live in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is descended from Lady Godiva, a fact which she'll share with anyone who will listen. She likes her Internet fast, her iPod loud and her chocolate real.

All of Karin's work can now be found at Bella Books. Details and background about her novels, and her other pen name, Laura Adams, can be found at www.kallmaker.com.

Chapter 1



Monday evening, June 2:

I will not damage the rude patrons or the annoying heterosexual coworker.

Trombone continues to throw up in my shoes. Professor Hill has chewed up the crotch of yet another pair of panties. It's been so long since anyone was down there I've probably turned to liverwurst.

I'm never going to move up if I don't get my M.L.S., so I'm going to get my M.L.S. It's not like it'll cut much into my social life.

HER is still the only woman I want. As usual, I feel stupid and pathetic for wanting HER.

Someone will die if my period doesn't start tomorrow.

“We have to have lunch. Today.” Marian knew that cement tone in Ellie’s voice.

“But I don’t know more than what I said,” Marian protested. She took her mug of hot tea out of the microwave and set it down on the table in the break room.

“You may not realize what you know.”

“You sound like an interrogator. I don’t have time for lunch today. Bill’s out sick.” Marian wanted to kick herself. She ought to have known that Ellie would go into hyper-hunt mode the moment she found out.

“I thought Bill the Boor’s being out would make you happy. So celebrate by having lunch with me.”

Marian steadied herself with a deep breath. “When Jersey stopped in this morning, she said that Amy said the woman was getting a stack pass at the Psych Library. So she’ll be here for a while.”

“Yeah, but I want first shot at her. C’mon, Marian. Fresh meat in the summer? That never happens! You and I have a chance for once. You know that Jersey left the library and told at least five student dykes. Amy told five faculty dykes after she told Jersey, you *know* she did. And all of them told five dykes. By tonight every dyke in Iowa City is going to know.”

Though she spoke through gritted teeth, Marian thought she managed to sound almost normal. “Dinner. I can meet you for dinner.”

Clearly surprised, Ellie replied, “Well, okay. That’ll do, I guess. Where?”

“You decide. I can’t make decisions today.”

“Oh.” Ellie clicked her tongue against her teeth, a sound Marian found as annoying on the phone as she did in person. “I see. Amani’s?”

Amani’s chocolate cake was exactly what Marian needed. “At seven,” she confirmed. Eric wandered into the staff room and looked hopefully at the phone. “Break’s over. Gotta go.”

Back at the reference desk, Marian surreptitiously unwrapped a Dove dark chocolate bite. On a day like today it was medicinal. Besides, it was heart healthy and she had a link to the research study to prove it.

She had just finished savoring the last bitter aftertaste when a patron paused at the desk. She pushed the chocolate’s wrapper into the back pocket of her tailored khaki shorts and smiled pleasantly. “May I help you locate a resource?”

The youth’s slouch and greasy hair was at odds with a shy smile. “Could you help me, I guess, I want to please know how would I address a letter to the Queen. Of England. Please.”

Books and covers, Marian thought. “We have several texts on etiquette, but a simple Web search might be fastest. Did you

want just that question answered or are you interested in the topic of social etiquette with monarchs?”

“It’s for a school sociology project. My final.”

Given the date, Marian thought he’d left his research a little late. High schools were nearly out. “Then for thorough research I think you’ll want the text.”

Marian led the boy to an open terminal. “Have you used the public library system before?” The boy cleared his throat, but Marian didn’t know quite what to make of the noise that came out. Now she recognized him. He worked afternoons at the Java House.

“No? Here’s the catalog browser and you can use the Internet browser as well. It’s of course free and there’s no enforced time limit. Starting tomorrow, new software will limit you to two hours of Internet access per day. Try a catalog search for etiquette and I think we’ll see some useful guides. Sorry about the mouse. Just click three times.” Tech Services was taking its time getting a new one.

Even though the day was not going well, the orderly precision of the Dewey Decimal System was comforting as always to Marian. She patiently explained how the cataloging system worked and led him to the nonfiction shelves.

“So all these books in this area could be helpful because they’re numbered the same?” The boy looked a bit like he’d found the Mother Lode. Marian was gratified to have been the one to have shown him the Dewey magic, but she was simultaneously peeved that he hadn’t been taught in school. As pleasant as teaching the system could be, it was not the be-all and end-all of her career choice.

“Precisely, and related subjects, like cultural standards, are adjacent. The very last Dewey entry, by the way, is the nine hundred ninety-nine series—extraterrestrial.”

“Cool.”

She was very pleased he hadn’t grabbed the book she’d pointed out initially and bolted. “If you find your question hasn’t been completely answered, feel free to return to the reference desk. Good luck with your paper,” she concluded cheerily.

Safely back at the desk, Marian congratulated herself for not killing anyone so far.

“I can’t find the phone book I need.”

It was an effort, but Marian plastered a smile on her face. Over the patron’s shoulder she saw Eric, travel mug in hand, veer abruptly toward the magazines, leaving her to deal with the woman she privately thought of as the Lead Bitch from the Seventh Dimension of Bitch Universe. “How pleasant to see you again. What area were you looking for?”

Seventh Dimension Bitch tossed her fluffy blonde hair over her shoulder. There was something in the way she did it that made Marian absolutely certain that she should feel inadequate about her own short, dark, unremarkable hair. The woman had all the attitude of Trombone, but likely none of the purring. “Dallas, of course.”

“Of course,” Marian echoed. “I’m sorry, but the Iowa City Public Library no longer carries phone books for areas outside of the state. But you can use several different sources on the Internet. I’d be happy—”

“Never mind! You people never have what I want.” The departing flounce ruffled several papers onto the floor.

After tidying, Marian reached surreptitiously for another square of chocolate. Eric, the chickenshit, was back. Under her breath she said, “How long do you think it would take for someone to die from being repeatedly stapled?”

“It’s not worth it. I don’t want to visit you in jail.”

“But I look good in orange.”

“You look like a cadaver in orange.”

Marian became aware of the tinny treble from a pair of headphones, but no one in sight had a pair on. She’d have to hunt for the culprit.

A cell phone shrilled from the direction of adult nonfiction, sending razors up her spine. “I’m at the library, so I can’t talk long,” a man’s voice boomed.

“I’ll go,” Eric said.

“No, I got it. Days like today these cards save lives.”

She slipped the cell-phone user the first card, which politely asked the patron to end the call or to step outside, and nodded

pleasantly at the man's annoyed face. Had he no clue at all that everyone in the vicinity could hear his opinion of last night's date? She waited until he shuffled slowly toward the exit, then let her ears guide her toward the still audible static and bass of headphones.

The young woman read the card in surprise but mouthed an apology and turned the volume down sufficiently so that Marian could no longer hear anything.

Fair enough, Marian thought. She gave the patron a thumbs-up and went back to the desk. She had another hour of desk time before she could retire to the shared workspace in the back to review new acquisitions. No one had had to be gutted and grilled. It was a relief.

Eric wasn't there, but Seventh Dimension Bitch was.

It took a very deep breath to find even a businesslike smile. She dealt with the next series of statements about the library system's inadequacies without losing her cool, though she felt like a cartoon character with steam coming out of her ears.

Please, she thought, let my period start now. Or someone is going to die.

Eric had moved all the staplers to his end of the desk.

"I want to know absolutely everything Jersey said." Ellie wasted no time taking a long sip from the Manhattan she'd ordered.

Marian squinted at the menu, looking for something light as preparation to diving face first into the Chocolate Thunder cake. "Why can't you call Jersey yourself? It's not like you don't have her number."

"Jersey isn't reliable on the details, you know that."

"I think she is. It's Sandy who said Jersey couldn't remember the right name during, but I don't see how that affects her recall when she's out of bed."

"When it comes to fresh meat in the dating market, I need accuracy, that's all. I tried Amy, but she wasn't home. Besides . . ." Ellie sighed. "Jersey has been looking too good to me lately, and she's with Terry. I shouldn't flirt with her as much as I do."

Marian looked over the menu in alarm. “You wouldn’t, would you?”

“What? Sleep with Jersey?”

“Yeah. That would be just . . . *weird*.”

“Frankly, my dear, it can be kind of kinky to think about. It’s not like Sandy spilled the whole Jersey story, but I do know a bit about what she’s like.”

“You could really be with an ex’s ex?”

Ellie stirred her Manhattan. “In this town how can you avoid it? Well, *you* avoid it by not dating at all.”

“Next thing you know you’ll tell me you’ve slept with both women in a couple.”

Ellie got her you-have-no-idea-the-things-I’ve-done smirk. “I have the sense at least not to tell.”

“You haven’t.”

“Not saying. But believe me, about now I’m desperate enough to do it again.”

“Ellie!”

“Forget I said that.” Ellie did not look in the least bit remorseful.

“You’ll get a reputation.”

“Your inner prude is showing. I already have a reputation.” Marian wasn’t fooled by Ellie’s nonchalant air. “You and I are the only single women over thirty-five in this town. That is, besides Sandy, and she’s my ex now even if we’re still living together. So why should I forego the willing but perhaps entangled ones?”

It’s not right, Marian wanted to say. Yes, Inner Prude was clear about that. Inner Historian, keeper of the Iowa City dance card, wanted to know who. Inner Slut wanted to know if it had been good. “Maybe I’m not meant to live in the modern era.”

“Maybe you need to put sex into perspective. It doesn’t have to be the ultimate exercise of love. Love doesn’t even have to enter into the picture.”

“But shouldn’t it?”

“Only in a Hallmark card. What has a desire for monogamy done for either of us? I date too much and you don’t date at all.” Ellie yanked at the front of her blouse. “I think I’ve gained weight. Great. Just great.”

Marian knew her cue. She said heartily, “You look tasty, as always. Femme on a Triscuit, positively edible.” They’d been best friends for more than half their lives, and such reassurance was second nature to Marian. Ellie had the looks and figure that were universally described as attractive by men and women alike. She had a flashy style and brash confidence about her looks that had always eluded Marian. Regardless, she needed to be reminded of her assets, just as Marian occasionally needed to be told she had a brain.

Maybe, Marian thought, I could just have chocolate cake for dinner. And another slice for dessert.

“Sorry. Sharing the house with Sandy is starting to get to me. Celibacy is starting to get to me. I’ve even been thinking about Sandy again, and that would *so* give her the wrong idea.”

“Well, I’m not sleeping with you.” Damn, with her period so close it was actually tempting. Useless hormones.

“All the more reason for you and me to find out who this new woman is and get busy. You know Carrie will sniff her out in less than three days with that voodoo thing she does.”

“It’s not voodoo, it’s Wicca, and you can’t use Wicca that way.”

“How would you know?”

“I’m a librarian. Besides, Carrie doesn’t go after just anybody. It’s just that when she does she usually succeeds.” Marian closed the menu. “Chicken medallions sound good. Light.”

“One of these days I am not going to let you win an argument with that chintzy librarian credential.”

Marian allowed herself a small smile. “Hey, you can disdain my master’s in history all you like, but I must inform you that you’re talking to a future Master of Library and Information Science.”

“Since when?”

“Since when I sign the check and fill out the paperwork. And get a reference from Mary Jane.”

“Girlfriend!” Ellie lifted her drink and clinked it to Marian’s water glass. “Congrats.”

Grinning, Marian thought it wise to admonish Ellie further. “So you’ll have to be careful when you call my

bluff. If I'm right, you'll never hear the end—"

"Shut up." Ellie frowned at the menu. "I love this place but I can't afford it. Neither of my careers is paying well enough right now. I'm behind in billing insurance companies for the physical therapy work. So I took on Jenny's guest bathroom plumbing for the cash. End result is I have no time to bill insurance. Would you be willing to split dinner?"

"Can we get a salad, too?"

"Spinach?"

"I will not share my cake."

"I'm not sharing my drink, so we're even." Ellie studied her manicure for a moment, frowning. "Frankly, sleeping with both women in a couple is damned appealing right now. Preferably at the same time, on a great big bed with every imaginable assistive device, thank you."

"Don't dangle images like that in front of me today." Inner Slut pouted at Marian's refusal to consider the fantasy. Not here, she soothed. You know we can't have that particular fantasy here.

The restaurant door opened, letting in a brief whiff of early evening humidity. Marian blinked. "Amy and Hemma just walked in."

Ellie turned around to wave. "Speaking of couples I'd sleep with, as if that would ever happen. Monogamy is such a bore. At least Amy can tell me about the new babe. You're no help."

Inadequate yet again, Marian thought. While Ellie was twisted around to wave at Amy, Marian snagged Ellie's cocktail and managed several swallows before she returned it to its place atop the petite napkin.

Hemma was wearing an aqua linen blouse Marian hadn't seen before. "That's a great color on you," Marian told her after their hello.

"You are so good for my ego, thank you. Tell me they have chocolate cake tonight." Hemma's deep black eyes sparkled in the low light.

Horrified, Marian said, "I haven't asked. You don't suppose—"

"They have cake, I can see a slice on the tray." Amy slipped

a bracing arm around Hemma's waist. "Cake is essential tonight."

Ellie grinned. "Tell me about it. Marian's got PMS so bad she can't even scam with me about that new woman."

Marian felt a blush start under her hairline. She prayed it didn't show in the low light. "I'm not in the mood to scam."

Hemma smiled in her understanding way. "You're coming to dinner Thursday as usual?"

"I'm there unless you've finally decided to change the locks after all these years."

Hemma patted Marian's shoulder. "You could get in anyway. You know which windows don't latch."

After searching her friends' faces for any sign that she wasn't welcome, Marian made her hypersensitive PMS self relax. Their almost weekly ritual of Thursday night dinner was of such long standing that it had survived Robyn Vaughn's arrival in Marian's life and Robyn Vaughn's departure. But there was always a chance that they had tired of her company, or that they'd figured out how much the ritual meant to Marian.

Amy was finishing her detailed description of the woman she'd seen getting a stack pass. "Not quite your height. Closer to Marian's than yours."

"That short?" Ellie glanced at Marian as if she'd never considered Marian's height before.

"I am not short," Marian protested. "I am exactly average and I've got the link—"

"To the research study that proves it, I know." She shot Marian a suspicious look as she peered into her nearly empty cocktail glass.

Marian gave Amy her full attention. "Sorry, I wasn't listening. Is this new woman going to upset the entire dating pool?"

"Well, I noticed her and I generally don't," Amy admitted.

"Better not," Hemma warned.

"Nobody compares to you, my love." Amy's hand slipped downward to cup Hemma's hip. "Let's go get our table, because I'm starved."

With a throaty laugh Hemma pressed her hip into Amy's hand. Her hand lovingly covered Amy's. "I know."

Marian blushed furiously. Ellie gave her a startled look. Anything was better than the truth, Marian thought desperately.

“Okay, I swiped some of your drink.”

Ellie’s indignation was sufficient to divert to safe topics, even if it was a recitation of the many burdens Ellie suffered being Marian’s best friend. Marian let the various accustomed criticisms wash over her. Ellie had been her friend too long for it to have any sting, even when PMS made Marian certain the world could read her mind and every last secret. When dessert finally arrived, she lost herself in the chocolate cake. It was, after all, cheaper than therapy.

Tuesday evening, June 3:

Bleeding, no. Cat vomit, yes. The vet says Trombone’s got nerves. I’d like to puke on everyone who gives me nerves.

When I am reincarnated I want to come back as a lesbian’s cat.

Had Amani’s with Ellie who is dead set to land a new dyke in town. HER looked great tonight. Dinner Thursday. I-CARE on Saturday.

Jumping up and down has not made my period start. Tomorrow I am going to wear my new white shorts and not have a tampon on hand. It could work.

“So what’s the deal, Trombone?” Marian scraped the last of the cat upchuck out of the heel of her favorite clogs. “Is it something I said?”

The tip of Trombone’s tail moved just enough to agree.

“You smell Amani’s on me, and I didn’t bring you any, and then I ignored you to write in my journal, is that it? Hill, breathe someplace else.” Marian pushed Professor Hill’s snout the other direction. “Between your breath and Trombone’s puke, it’s aromatic enough in here.”

Hill good-naturedly rolled over, covering the remainder of the small kitchen floor with his body and long collie tail.

“You’re jealous of Hill’s tail, aren’t you, Trombone?” Sighing, Marian finished mucking out her shoe and poured her last glass of water for the day. She ought to have exercised.

Looking out the kitchen window into the backyard, she saw

the sweep of headlights as Hemma and Amy pulled into the alley access behind their house.

“Make you a deal, body. You start bleeding and I’ll start exercising.” She snapped off the kitchen light on her way through to the tiny dining room she rarely used. Hill scurried out to the screened porch while Marian checked that the outer door was locked. Satisfied there were no intruders, Hill scampered past her knees to chase Trombone upstairs.

“Hill, you’re just going to end up with a scratched nose!” Hill had yet to learn the politics of living with a cat. Marian locked the front door behind her and successfully avoided confronting the clutter in the living room by turning out the light. She’d clean next year, maybe.

Trombone, perched on the highest shelf of the tall bookcase at the top of the stairs, watched Marian thump her way up and ignored Hill’s antic attempts to reach her. “You brought that creature into my house,” the Russian Blue seemed to say, her tail wrapped tightly around her.

Marian paused as she did every night to touch her mother’s quilt, which hung on the high wall of the stairwell. “When you pay the mortgage, my dear Trombone, you can decide who lives here. Hill won’t be a puppy forever. He’s only two. Another couple of years.”

Trombone looked at the wall.

“Someday, Hill, you’re going to bring that bookcase down on your head. Sit! Stay!” Marian held her finger inches from Hill’s nose until he settled. “Oh, good boy! Good boy!”

Trombone’s sigh was audible.

Marian paused a moment to regard the empty shelves. Their barren state was something she’d ignored successfully for some time. Well, it would be a place to put her textbooks. It felt weird to think of herself as a student again.

She brushed her teeth to the accompaniment of Hill’s happy, going-to-bed panting. She knew that when she was nearly asleep Trombone would join them, taking, as usual, the center of the bed. It was genetically impossible for a cat to sleep anywhere else, especially if other beings wanted the bed as well.

Ordinary pajamas, she told herself. Some boxer shorts and

a cotton tank—that's all that was called for on a warm summer night. It wasn't as if there was anyone to impress. No one had seen her in pajamas since Robyn, and Robyn hadn't liked her in pajamas. Robyn had preferred her—no, stop right there, she scolded herself. Robyn was a lying, cheating bitch of a destructive thief.

Cotton boxers and an equally soft tank was what the night called for, and that was all. Inner Slut pouted and whispered outrageous fantasies. I'm in control here, Marian thought weakly. I won't give in. But her hand passed over the comfortable cotton in the drawer, and reached instead for the sensuous silk of the nightshirt and boxer set that had never been designed for sleep.

She smoothed the thin black silk over her hips and couldn't quite look at herself in the mirror as she washed her face. She ignored the tingle down her spine that the cool fabric always triggered. With the lights out, moonlight spilled dimly through the open blinds of the spare room.

Close the blinds, she told herself. Close them, go to your room and get over it.

She sat down in the chair at the window. Count to twenty. If it's still dark in twenty, leave. Get over it.

The night was warm and heavy. Her body ached to be touched. Hormones, she told herself. You were even thinking about Ellie at dinner. It's just those stupid hormones making you this way.

She counted to a hundred twice, then soft light blossomed in the bedroom opposite where she sat.

Amy came to the window and pushed it half closed, then lowered the shade to match. There was a flash of aqua behind her, then the shade pressed against the glass. Two bodies, backlit by the bank of candles on their dresser, merged into one.

Don't do this, Marian told herself, even as she peered through the night. This is pathetic.

The aqua shirt floated to the floor. Two bare midriffs were visible as slacks were unzipped. It was easy to tell the slightly darker tone of Hemma's Middle Eastern skin from Amy's Irish paleness. Amy's hands on Hemma's waist.

Not Marian, but Amy lowering Hemma to the bed. Amy,

stroking Hemma's back. Amy easing Hemma's bra from her shoulders. It was Amy's fingertips gently rousing Hemma's nipples to hard points of dusty rose and Amy's tongue teasing them further.

Amy and Hemma had a rhythm, a natural pace that spoke of ease and long practice, but it was never the same way twice. Some nights they were hurried, others languid. It could take minutes, or it could take hours.

Hemma had her hands in Amy's hair, pushing her down toward her hips. Amy resisted for a moment, said something. Hemma responded by opening her legs farther and tipping her hips up. Then it was Amy tasting Hemma. Marian swallowed hard and ached to feel the hot silk of Hemma's desire on her tongue. Hemma was frantic tonight, arching against Amy, exposing every inch of herself to Amy's seeking mouth.

Pathetic. Marian dashed away tears. How much of her life had she wasted wanting what she couldn't have?

Across the distance separating the two houses Marian could hear Hemma's moan. She had to close her eyes as she imagined that sound being one she had wrought. Her hands swept to her breasts, teasing her nipples through the thin fabric. Hormones . . . God, she wanted to be touched tonight. She imagined Hemma caressing her, whispering in her ear whatever magic she whispered to Amy, whatever promises that made Amy gasp for breath.

Hemma's sharp, low cry made her look again. Hemma wrapped her legs around Amy's hips, rising to meet her. Her face swam into Marian's feverish view. Beautiful with abandon, Hemma bit her lower lip, then her mouth curved with pleasure. Amy kissed her and they thrust together, inching their way across the bed. Amy was whispering in Hemma's ear and Hemma's moans sharpened to short cries of climax.

Marian gripped the sill, dizzy. She hated this feeling, and loved it. She told herself she wouldn't watch ever again but always did. Hemma's head hung off the bed, showing the elegant line of her throat, her lush breasts, her spread legs where Amy knelt. Bending over her, Amy said something low and urgent,

then Hemma's rising wail flowed across the night, wrapping itself into the private places of Marian's heart.

Loving HER. Wanting HER. Days, weeks, years of wishing for something she would never have. Before Robyn, during Robyn, after Robyn, the ache never eased. Robyn had left two years ago after destroying everything that had mattered—except for Marian's heart. Hemma had always been and would always be the one who possessed it, whether she knew it or not.

She closed her eyes and pictured the perfect beach, the perfect sunset, the perfect woman by her side. One who could hold her, one who liked to be held. One who told her what was good about her more often than what was bad. She hungered for the velvet fullness of Hemma's lips against her skin.

Hemma's cries faded under Amy's deeper groans. Amy wouldn't stop until Hemma was taken care of. Wonderful Amy, tall, slender, intellectual, witty, all things that Marian envied. Amy gave Hemma everything she needed. Amy was a good lover, a good friend, and Hemma looked at Amy with stars in her eyes that never wavered.

Amy cried out as Hemma's nails raked over her back, then they were rolling over and Hemma, her face glowing with desire, pressed her hand between Amy's legs and watched her lover's every nuance of expression. She said something fiercely and Amy's loud, fervent, "Yes, baby, yes," was what Marian longed to say.

You're such a loser, she told herself. Go get laid, have a fling. She should make up a T-shirt for the I-CARE breakfast that screamed, "Forget the U-Haul, Just Fuck Me!"

She wiped away a tear. She'd feel better in a couple of days. She always felt better. She didn't have needs. She'd have dinner on Thursday and bask in Hemma's affection and Amy's friendship. It would be okay. Her hands swept over her breasts again, imagining the Hemma of her fantasies teasing her for hours. It was Hemma's hands that opened her thighs and touched her. She could hear Hemma's knowing laugh at what she found, and the low promise that all that heat, all that wet, would not go to waste.

Hemma's laughter drew her attention to the window again.

Light but sultry, it accompanied the act of tossing a towel on the floor.

Spreading another on the bed, she pressed Amy down, straddling Amy's hips. She flowed up and down Amy's body, so sensual, so sexual, so captivating.

Marian could not stop watching and imagining, even knowing that it would never be her with Hemma. She should join Ellie in her dyke hunts. Practice whatever voodoo it was that got nearly every woman in town onto that couch of Carrie's. Move away, start a new life, move on.

Right. That would fix everything, she thought bitterly. She'd only let Robyn into her life and her bed as a cure for Hemma, and look where that had gotten her. Her unwilling gaze turned from the window to the box in the corner where the Robyn Ruins were sealed. Someday she would look inside again and maybe then her desire to commit murder would finally wane.

Tomorrow, she thought. I'll think about all of that tomorrow when I can't hear HER in my head. When I can't hear Robyn either.

She knew that tomorrow night she'd look in on Hemma's life again. The pain of not having Hemma's body was one she'd learned to bear. She could live without sex, yes, she could. It was harder to see them watch television with teacups on their stomachs, or argue fiercely about something in the newspaper, or read aloud to each other from books. Sex was easy. Robyn proved that. Intimacy, real intimacy, was something Marian had never known.

She wanted to make cornbread on cold nights and dash through the house naked for ice cream and spoons after sex. To lounge outside on a summer evening with only crickets for entertainment. To share the last piece of pie by passing the tin and a fork back and forth.

Amy was rolling Hemma across the bed. Hemma shrieked as they slipped off the edge where Marian could no longer see them. Their voices rose together in harmonic laughter.