

PROLOGUE

May 22, 2016

THALIA WAKES UP from a deep sleep to the sound of her phone ringing. She untangles herself from Amara and answers her phone.

“Hello? I’m sorry, could you repeat that? Oh, no! Yes, yes, of course. I’m at the marina in slip B-12, the *Achilles Heal*. That’s H-E-A-L. Not H-E-E-L. It’s a play on words. Okay, I’m sorry. I’m just a little rattled. Thank you. I’ll see you soon.”

“Thalia, what is it? You’re shaking. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m sorry sweetheart. I need to pull myself together. Tom Carsen, the Williams County Sheriff is on his way over here. There’s been some sort of accident with one of my clients.”

Thalia checks the time on her phone. Five a.m. *I guess I might as well take a shower and get ready for the day. It’ll take an hour for the Sheriff to get here.*

While Thalia is getting ready, Amara puts on the coffee and takes the dogs out to do their business. When she returns, she finds Thalia sitting on the front deck staring off into the distance, a steaming mug of coffee poised at her lips. “Baby, are you okay?”

“Can you put the puppies in bedroom? I don’t want the Sheriff to have to contend with them.”

“Sure, sweetie. I’ll be right back. C’mon puppies. Let’s go inside.”

Just as Amara is returning to the front deck, her own cup of coffee in hand, Thalia sees the Sheriff arrive in the parking lot. Thalia feels her heart rate increase as she sees two figures in uniform walking toward the slip.

“Thalia Chase?” The older gentleman, with a weather-worn but kind face, and a bit of a middle-aged paunch partially obscuring his utility belt, extends his hand.

Thalia takes his hand and gives it a firm shake. “Yes, I’m Thalia Chase. And this is...Amara.”

“Nice to meet you ma’am.” He points to the androgynous, compact red-head with deep, penetrating green eyes, standing to his left and slightly behind him. “This is Deputy Sheriff Walsh.”

Thalia takes her hand. “Deputy, yes, we met at the 5k run for Child Abuse a couple of weeks ago. Good to see you again. Have a seat. Can we get you anything? Coffee, juice, water?”

“No thank you, ma’am. We’re fine.”

“Call me Thalia, please. Ma’am sounds so old.” Thalia sits but Amara continues to stand.

“Certainly,” the Sheriff says as he sits down and motions for his Deputy to do the same.

“I’m sorry, Sheriff. I don’t mean to be rude. But your call this morning has really rattled me. Can we please get to it?”

“No need to apologize ma’—er—Thalia. I understand. I’m afraid there’s no easy way to tell you this.” He glances up at Amara for a moment.

“I’m going to go inside and give you some privacy.”

DARLA BAKER

Thalia reaches out for Amara's arm as she's turning to leave. "No, please stay. Have a seat. It's okay if she stays, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's fine. As I said, there's no easy way to say this. We're investigating a possible suicide at Seventy Six Falls.

CHAPTER ONE

PRESENT DAY (MARCH 23, 2016)

THALIA SITS DOWN at her desk and scans her inbox. She finds an email intended for her *Ask Thalia* blog.

Dear Thalia:

I was born with ambiguous genitalia, what is known as intersex. I was too young to remember, but I'm told I had some operations to make me a female and I was raised as a female. I don't particularly feel either male or female, but I've fallen in love with a beautiful woman, my soul mate, and I want to marry her. I'm afraid to tell anyone. It'll be like coming out as a lesbian, even though that isn't really accurate. I also live in Williams County where the county clerk made headlines for refusing same sex couples marriage licenses. I don't think I could face the ridicule for trying to marry the love of my life. What should I do?

*Sincerely,
Stuck*

René stands up as Thalia enters the office. “Stop right there.”

“What? Why?”

“Just do it.”

“Okay, sis, what are you up to?”

“Now, turn around. Slowly.”

“I am not moving until you tell me what you're up to.”

“Stop giving me lip and just do it.”

“All right, all right. If it'll shut you up and move this train forward. Okay. I've turned around. Happy now?”

“Yes.”

“So what was that all about?”

“I just wanted to get a good look at how well you wear morning sex.”

“How did you kno—“

“Busted! You’ve been sauntering in here every morning for over a week with that shit-eating grin on your face, and glowing like you’re radioactive. I know afterglow when I see it.”

Thalia laughs. “If I’d known pregnant women could be so insatiable, I’d have seduced them years ago.”

“You’re shameless! So, are you ready for today’s schedule?”

“Let’s hear it.”

“You have Robin and Charley at ten, and Erica at two.”

“I’m meeting Amara at the *Achilles Heal* after Erica. She’s opening up the houseboat for the season, thank God. The back and forth between Lexington and Nancy sucks.”

“I’ll bet. Robin and Charley should be here soon. I’ll let you know when they arrive.”

“Thanks, sis. I’m gonna go answer some *Ask Thalia* emails.”



Thalia’s finishing up an *Ask Thalia* email response when she hears the ding of the chat. Charley’s father died about five months ago, last October. His religious beliefs put a terrible strain on their ten year relationship and they’d lived apart for a short time. But they’re back under one roof again and Charley has been faithfully attending the coming out group as well as couples counseling.

Thalia opens her office door to invite the couple in. *This is not good*. Robin’s arms are folded tight, her knees are bouncing and she couldn’t get any farther away from Charley without leaving the office entirely. “Come on in and have a seat.”

“Robin, the cane is gone! That’s good, right?”

“Yes. The last round of steroids seems to have put me back into remission. I’ve been doing some walking to regain the strength and tone in my leg muscles.”

“Good news then. So, what’s going on with you two? It’s so frosty in here, I think I’m going to need my coat.”

Robin and Charley glare at each other. Finally, Robin opens up. “Charley cheated on me.”

Thalia moves her attention from Robin to Charley. She’s looking down into her lap, hands folded, legs uncrossed. “Charley?”

Charley doesn’t move, doesn’t respond.

“Charley, during Monday’s group session you had an amazing breakthrough. Not only did you announce to the group for the first time that you are a lesbian, but you provided some incredible insight to a new group member. Help me out here. What’s going on?”

After a long pause in which nobody moved and nobody blinked, Robin finally offers additional details. “It was on Saturday, before Monday’s group session. I asked *my wife* out on a date. We went out to dinner and then to a lesbian bar in Lexington. I was feeling great.

We hadn't been out like that in years. Charley would never go to a lesbian bar. We didn't go to bars often, not really our scene. But when we did, it'd have to be straight bars and we'd have to pretend to be *friends*. And the worst part, I'd have to sit there and watch as slimy men hit on Charley. She'd decline their advances, thankfully. But not without a little flirtatious banter to ensure they didn't catch on to our relationship. Not fun."

Thalia's watching Charley. Still no movement, no change in posture. "No, that doesn't sound like fun. So, if bars were never your scene, why now?"

"It was Charley's idea, and she was very enthusiastic about it. I was thrilled. Do you have any idea how long I've waited to be able to be myself in a public setting with Charley? Thalia, I was thrilled! I was going to dance and grind and kiss and caress and make out with her, do everything I've been burning inside to do with her in public for years. *Forever!* I was a little worried about how steady I'd be on my feet. I'd only stopped using the cane a couple of days before. But honestly, falling on my ass and making a fool of myself would have been a small price to pay for this opportunity to finally be all the way out of the closet with the love of my life, my soul mate."

Still no movement from Charley. "Okay, so I have the picture of what you were expecting, or hoping, the evening would offer you. How did we get from this fantasy to the reality of Charley with another woman? And Charley, feel free to chime in here."

"Charley isn't going to say anything. You should know her by now."

"Robin, that's a bit unfair. Charley has made tremendous progress in the past five months, not just in here but also in group. Let's continue."

"It was going great. We had a couple of beers, we'd danced a few songs. I thought we were having a great time. And then this *baby dyke* plops down at our table and decides Charley is her new best friend. Initially I was polite, making conversation, I bought her a beer. She asked Charley to dance. I'm not the jealous type and Charley is certainly free to make up her own mind. Charley accepted the invitation and they headed out onto the dance floor."

Thalia notices Robin has started to ball her hands up in a fist and is holding her breath. "Robin, breathe. Take a couple of deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, count to ten as you exhale. Good. I admire your lack of jealousy. But to be clear, sharing your wife with another woman, even for an innocent dance, isn't something you are required to feel good about and permit in your marriage. I'm not suggesting it is wrong. Those boundaries are for you to determine together. But your body language suggests you were not comfortable with the arrangement."

"That's an understatement! I was furious with Charley for dancing with her. And it's not because I was jealous or possessive. This was *my* chance. *I* wanted this with Charley. Me, only me. I'd waited years for this. That *girl*, she hadn't paid the dues. She hadn't been patient with Charley all those years. She hadn't *earned* that dance. *I* had. And then, the unthinkable happened. That-*girl*-kissed her. And Charley didn't stop her. Next thing I know, they're leaving the bar together and I'm left with a warm beer and a broken heart. Thank God for the bartender. I couldn't hold myself together. I was out of control sobbing, wailing really. The

bartender took me back into her office and let me ride it out. Finally, when I was recovered enough, I drove myself home.”

“Charley, anything you’d like to add?”

“I didn’t cheat on you.”

Robin starts to speak, “What?!? I saw you kiss her with my own—“

Thalia interrupts, “Robin, let Charley finish. Charley, continue.”

“I didn’t cheat on you. Kissing doesn't count as cheating.”

“Doesn’t count?! What the hell, Charley! Of course it counts. We’re married. Just how far did you go with that baby dyke anyway?”

“It doesn't matter.”

"Of course it matters. How far?"

"The kiss was enough."

"Enough? What do you mean? You left with her. Are you expecting me to believe the kiss I saw was all that happened between you?"

Charley is shouting now. "I don't care what you believe. It's the truth. We went out to her car and she drove me to her place." Her voice cracks as she chokes out the next words. "I couldn't get out of the car. It was like I was paralyzed. I started crying and Cheryl—that's her name—pulled me into a hug and just held me. No advances, no kissing. She just held me and let me cry. I finally calmed down and asked her to drive me home."

"I—I don't understand. When you got home you went straight to bed in the guest room. I—I just assumed—"

"Robin, I’m a lesbian." The confession seems to hit Robin like a punch to the gut.

Robin jerks her body sideways on the sofa to face Charley. “What did you just say?” Robin's red-stained eyes are rapidly blinking at Charley.

Charley reaches over Robin and pulls two tissues out of the box on the table beside the sofa. She hands one to Robin and keeps the other for herself. She takes Robin’s free hand into hers and, surprisingly, Robin doesn’t pull away. “I said I'm a lesbian. I am. No more doubts. And I want to spend the rest of my life with you. After I kissed Cheryl, I wanted her. I mean I really wanted her. But then sitting in the car, all I could think about was you. It's hard, you know, to make myself feel the guilt for all the years I've tortured you.”

Thalia just watches, silent, as this tender interaction unfolds before her.

Robin clears her throat, struggling to produce any sound at all. “Oh, Charley. What are you saying? Does this mean what I think? I don’t even know what to think or how I feel. I mean, you cheated on me. I should feel horrible and angry, shouldn’t I? Well, shouldn’t I, Thalia?”

“You feel what you feel, Robin. Tell us.”

“My mind’s a jumble.” Robin shakes her head as if, by the gesture, the feelings would sort themselves out.

“Name the first thing that comes to your mind.”

“Relief. For the first time in months, hell, maybe even years, I feel like I can breathe. Like maybe my world won’t come crashing down around me. That I’m not crazy and I’ve not

been crazy for the past ten years.”

“You do realize, however, that your wife of ten years kissed another girl in order to come to this conclusion? How do you feel about that?”

Thalia sees Charley repositioning herself on the sofa, fidgeting really. “Charley, do you have something to say?”

“Why are you trying to screw this up?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Robin feels exactly as she should feel. I needed Cheryl. I had to know for sure.”

Robin rubs her thumb over Charley’s hand. “And do you? Do you know for sure?”

“Oh, yes, baby. When I got back to the house I wanted to burst in and tell you everything. But I knew you’d be mad and I...I was a coward.”

“Let’s take a step back for a moment. Charley, you said that you had to ‘use Cheryl’. It’s not my place to judge. But it is my place to make sure that you deal with any unresolved feelings of guilt. And right now you are both feeling...well...high on this revelation. But, Robin, I’m concerned that when this high wears off, you will experience feelings of anger and betrayal. And, Charley, it’s possible you’ll feel remorse for how your actions affect Robin and Cheryl for that matter. We need to talk this out. Otherwise, these emotions buried under the surface will bubble up and threaten the fragile progress we’ve made.”

“I hear what you’re saying. But right now, I just want to take Charley home and make love to her. If this is a dream or temporary insanity or, whatever, I want to hold onto it and feel the joy for as long as I can.”

“I understand the urge, Robin. I really do. But I would advise against it. We’ll continue next week. By then, you’ll both have had time to let this sit. Reflect. Feel. Let’s not rush anything.”

“Sure. Whatever you say. You’re the therapist.” Charley blows out a frustrated breath as she stands to leave, pulling Robin up with her.

“Okay, then. I’ll see you next week.”



Thalia and René return from lunch at the Mexican restaurant. Amazingly, Thalia didn’t spill any salsa on her shirt today.

“Thanks for buying my lunch,” René says as she holds the door open for Thalia.

“Oh, that reminds me. Here’s the receipt. It was a business lunch.”

“How do you figure? I don’t recall discussing one thing about business.”

“Well, since Amara and I got together, I’m not spending my lunchtime in search of any sweet darlin’s. So if I’m not playing, I must be working. And if I’m working, it’s business. And if it’s business, it’s deductible.”

“Oh, I’d love to be a fly on the wall of your IRS audit when you explain that one.”

“Trust me. If I’m ever audited, you won’t need to be a fly on the wall. You’ll be right there with me.”

“Dream on. Now go. Get out of my sight so I can get some work done. Erica will be here soon.”

Thalia rolls her eyes at René. “Yes ma’am. You are so bossy.”

“Did you just roll your eyes at me? You need a boss. Go!”

Thalia heads into her office and plops down into her comfy chair and shuts her eyes to meditate before Erica arrives. When Erica first came to Thalia for help, she thought she might be transgendered. Once Erica was finally able to talk to her mother about her feelings, her mother revealed she was actually intersex and had been assigned the female gender shortly after birth through a series of operations she doesn’t even remember having. The revelation was comforting but also made her angry. Her mother explained that her father left because he couldn’t handle the implications of the birth defect. The truth doesn’t change the fact that Erica has been living as a female and yet feeling as ambiguous and confused about her gender as her body had indicated at birth.

Thalia eases out of her meditation as she hears Erica enter the reception area. She goes to the door and motions for Erica to come into her office.

“May I get you anything to drink?”

Erica takes a seat on the sofa. “No, I’m fine, thanks.”

“When we met last week you were planning to propose to Sharon. How did that go?”

A grin erupts on Erica’s face. “We’re engaged!”

“Oh, Erica, I’m so happy for you! So tell me all about it.”

“I took her to the Lexington Diner for dinner. It’s the one owned by a lesbian couple, you know? And we had our first date there. I didn’t even wait for the waitress to take our drink orders. I pulled out the box with the ring, opened it and handed it to her. I’m such a dork.”

“You’re not a dork. So? Then what?”

“Sharon snatched the box from my hand, started giggling and put it on her finger while she shouted ‘YES, YES, YES’ until everyone in the restaurant was staring at us. I wanted to crawl under the table. Thank God there are safe places for us to go. I’d have been scared shitless in a *normal* restaurant.”

“Oh, Erica, I’m so happy for you. So, have you set a date?”

“Not yet.”

“Marriage is a big step. I’m glad you aren’t rushing. What do you think about some couples counseling? Your intersex adds additional stress on the relationship.”

“I know. But we’re in *love*. I don’t want to mess that up.

Thalia lets a small laugh escape her lips. “Have a little bit of faith in me. If I made a habit of sucking the love out of relationships, I wouldn’t stay in business long, now would I?”

“Yeah...no...you’re right. Couples counseling is scary, though. What if we start talking and one of us finds something out about the other that we can’t live with? I don’t think I could take it if we broke up?”

“As your therapist, I would say that it is better to discover such things before the marriage. Right now you're blinded by love. But trust me, all relationships are vulnerable. You are both so young and have more to deal with than many couples do starting out.” Erica takes in a deep breath and Thalia notices her bottom lip start to quiver.

“Erica, it’s okay. Take a couple of deep breaths. I get that you’re afraid of what we might uncover. But, have a little faith in your judgment. You and Sharon have been dating for, what, around two years, right?”

“Two years, three months, and seven days. But who’s counting?” Erica says with a grin.

Thalia laughs. “Right. That’s a significant amount of time. From what I can tell, you two are good with each other. So, really, relax. Couples counseling will only make you stronger through this. It won’t tear you apart.”

“Yeah, I hear what you’re saying. I’ll talk to her. Now, can we get back to the fun stuff?”

Thalia feels a wide grin consume her face. *Ahh, young love.* “Of course.”

“Sharon wants to get married in the church where she grew up. But it’s not exactly friendly, if you know what I mean. And the clerk in Williams County, where we’ll get the marriage license, is that crazy chick, Karen Dolt. Do you know who she is?”

Thalia lets out an exasperated sigh. “Yes. She’s been making the news for refusing same-sex couples marriage licenses. You know, you don’t have to go to the Williams County Clerk to get your license. Any county clerk can issue the license and it’s good anywhere in the state.”

“Yeah, I know. But there’s no way Sharon will allow a bully to force us to go to another county. She says that dumbass Karen Dolt should do her fucking job.”

“Well, I don’t disagree. On the other hand, sometimes you have to pick your battles.”

“Yeah...but you know the saying. ‘Happy wife, happy life.’” Erica says with a soft chuckle.

“Okay, as a therapist, I’m not especially fond of the saying.”

Erica brings her hands to her face and nervously rubs her eyes. “Thalia, I’m scared.”

Thalia leans forward in her chair. “Talk to me.”

“Who am I? I’m a freak with manufactured female parts controlled by a genderless mind. None of this is my fault. It was practically a coin toss that made me female instead of male. Would I be feeling like this now if they’d made a different choice? Or better yet, no choice at all? What does Sharon see?”

“Of course, this is not your fault. And it’s not your parents fault or even your doctor’s fault. Even if we could, assigning blame won’t help. Your parents were in a difficult position, relying on the doctors’ advice. And your doctors were following the prevailing wisdom of the time, however erroneous it was.”

Thalia leans back in her chair. “A big part of our work here is working through the feelings you have about the way you were treated as a child. We can’t change the past. But if we don’t examine it and put it in its proper place, it *will* scar your present. And neither of us

want that.”

“No, you’re right. I just meant that it’s not like anyone can judge me. I have medical records to prove that I could have just as easily been a man as a woman.”

“Yes, that’s true. But people who want to judge will find a way to judge. Who are you? That’s what we’re here to figure out. And being secure in yourself will prepare you to deal with those who will judge you. As for Sharon, and what she wants, that’s where couples counseling will help. Trust her. She said ‘yes’ after all.” Thalia smiles. “She clearly wants to marry you regardless of your gender. She’s pretty special. You’re pretty special.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever you say.”

“Okay, check in with René on the way out and let her know that Sharon will be joining you next week.”



The 1984 silver Chevy Corvette takes the corner into the parking lot of the Lakeside Bar & Grill on two wheels. Thalia flies into a parking spot and jumps out of the car as she rushes into the restaurant completely out of breath. It’s only seven-thirty, but she hasn’t been late in a long time. *I’m going to catch hell for this.*

She slides into the empty seat and takes a sip of the lemon drop martini already waiting for her. “Okay, lay it on me.”

“What?” Annie offers.

“You haven’t started fishing in my pond again have you?” Janice adds.

“Of course not. Let’s just say pregnancy is very good for Amara’s libido and leave it at that.” Thalia smirks. “Where’s Sammy?”

Annie answers. “She went with Gina to pick up a new pack of puppies for service dog training. This thing with Gina seems to be getting serious.”

“Yeah, it does. Sammy says it’s going well with Lauren, too. She told me last week she’ll probably stop seeing her soon. At least not as often.

“Is that wise?” Janice asks.

“I’m sure it’s fine. Lauren will take good care of our Sammy. So, who’s ready for the start of lake season? I’ve just spent the past four hours getting the Achilles Heal ready. Well, when I wasn’t taking care of Amara.” Thalia waggles her eyebrows.

Annie smacks her on the shoulder. “I swear, I don’t know which is worse, listening to you go on about your darlin’s or listening to this T.M.I. with Amara. Does she know how you talk about her?”

“Of course, she knows. I wouldn’t say anything that would hurt her. Besides, I consider it my duty as a sex therapist to model a healthy sex life.”

“Oh, puh-leeze. My sex life is so much healthier than yours. Especially since you got with Amara. I’ll bet you’ve even retired your toys.” Janice retorts.

“Not only have I not retired my toys. We’ve added some new items to our toy chest.”

“Oh, do tell.” Annie can barely contain her excitement.

“I will not. Not after that TMI comment you made.”

“That’s not fair.”

“That’ll teach you to mouth off at me.”

“Somehow I doubt she’s learned her lesson. So come on. Spill it. You know I’m always looking for new toys.”

“Nah. I’d rather keep this between me and Amara.”

“You suck.”

“Yes, I do. And I lick too.” Thalia laughs.

Janice throws her napkin at Thalia. “Let’s order another round.”

The waitress brings over another round of drinks, and Thalia catches Janice checking her out.

“What?”

“She’s straight.”

“How do you know? And besides, no girl is completely straight.”

Annie and Thalia say in unison. “Really? Jinx.”

“And how did you come to this conclusion? And make it good. Remember, you’re talking to a sex therapist and a gynecologist.”

“Well, for one, look at where we are. You know what I’m talking about, Thalia. Don’t try to deny it. I’ll bet you’ve been with as many supposedly straight girls as I have. This area isn’t exactly P-Town, you know? If it weren’t for the curious girls, er, women, I’d have to travel across several counties. Or worse, go on the internet! Bleh! I swear I don’t know how people do that match dot com crap. Or worse, eHarmony dot com. That dude gives me the creeps.”

“Be nice. I have clients who use those services and are very happy.”

“Good for them. It’s not my thing.”

“And what, collecting toaster ovens *is* your thing?”

“I’ll say it again. And, Annie, feel free to chime in here and defend me. You may not have as many toaster ovens as I do. But that’s only because, one, I’m still in the game, and you’ve cashed in your chips. And, two, I’ve always been better at it than you.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“All right, you two. Put it back in your pants. You’ve both collected your fair share of toaster ovens. That’s not scientific proof that we’re all curious. I’ve never been with a woman. Never even had the desire. You talk about the gold star lesbian, Thalia. What do you call me? A gold star heterosexual?”

“I call you deprived,” Janice says.

“Once again, be nice. Okay, how ‘bout this. Put your money where your mouth—“ Thalia coughs. “Let me rephrase that. We saw you ogling the new straight waitress. If you can get her to go out on a date with you, I’ll give use exclusive use of Lil’ Graces for a month.”

“Deal. And, not that I’m going to lose, what do you want if you win?”

“I want to add a bathroom in the loft. If I win, you do the job for materials only. Free labor.”

“That’s hardly a fair bet. But, I’m not going to lose.” Thalia and Janice shake on the bet.

“Sometimes I wonder why I even hang out with you two.”

“Because you love us.” Thalia pulls Annie into a rough embrace.

“Okay, I need to get out of here and back to my beautiful and insatiable lover.” Thalia throws some cash on the table, hugs Janice and Annie and exits the restaurant.



Janice watches Thalia and Annie exit the restaurant. She moves over to the bar, her attention on the new waitress.

"Can I get you anything else?"

Janice looks up and flashes a dazzling crooked smile. "I'll take another beer."

"Coming right up." The waitress winks.

Janice strategically grazes her hand as she sets the beer onto the napkin. "What time do you get off?"

She doesn't pull her hand back. *A good sign.*

"I have an hour left on my shift. What do you have in mind?"

"It's supposed to be a full moon tonight. Want to drive down to Cumberland Falls, check out the moon bow? I haven't seen it in years."

"Umm, sure. Why not?"

"Excellent. You better take this beer back and bring me a water instead. I'll meet you outside in an hour. Hey, by the way, what's your name?"

"Cherry."

"Like the fruit?"

"Yes. Exactly like the fruit," she says waggling her eyebrows.

"Okay, 'Cherry like the fruit', I'll see you in an hour."

Janice and Cherry drive the thirty miles out to the falls chatting about nothing in particular, just small talk to fill the void of uncomfortable silence.

"So, Cherry, you know I'm a lesbian right?"

"Yes," she says smacking Janice on the arm. "Everyone at the bar knows your reputation."

Janice squirms a little bit in her seat. "I'm not sure exactly how to take that."

"I'm here aren't I? That should give you a clue."

"So, what's your story?"

"I'm single. I'm lonely. And I liked your offer. Do you need to know anything else?"

I feel like I've just won the grand prize at the county fair. "No, I think that just about covers it."

Janice parks the SUV and they start to head toward the falls. "It's a lovely night."

"I'm a little bit chilly."

Janice pulls a jacket out of the back seat. "Here. Put this on."

"Thanks."

The jacket has her construction company logo on the back. "You can keep this one. I have several."

She reaches for Cherry's hand and guides her down toward the falls to get into position for the best view of the moon bow.

Cherry says, "I wish I had my camera. The moon bow is so beautiful and yet I never take the time to come down here."

"They might have a disposable camera in the gift shop."

"I'll just use my phone."

"Sure?"

Cherry nods. "What a perfect night for this. It's so clear."

Janice motions for Cherry to sit next to her on a nice flat rock in perfect view of the moon bow. "I have a confession."

"You're straight?" Cherry laughs.

Janice gives her thigh a playful slap. "Yeah, right. No, Thalia and I have a bet going. She bet that I couldn't get you out on a date. Are you mad?"

"Depends. What prompted the bet?"

"She caught me giving you the googly eyes."

"And?"

"And she said you're straight and I said no girl is completely straight. And then—"

Cherry laughs. "And then the bet."

"Exactly. So do you consider yourself straight?" Janice says with twinge of anticipation in her voice.

"What are you hoping for?"

"Well, if I'm right, then you are either aware that you aren't completely straight or you're about to make that discovery." Janice smirks.

"So if I say I'm flexible?"

"Then we're going to have a lot of fun."

Cherry leans into Janice and places a soft kiss on her lips. "Your place or mine?"

Janice takes Cherry's hand and pulls her up from the rock. "Neither. Let's get a room at the lodge."

"Perfect. I don't have to be at work tomorrow until four."

"My day starts a little earlier. But I'll make a quick phone call. Let's go."

Janice inserts the key card and opens the door and enters a time warp. "Wow! Did we just step back into the seventies?"

"At least its clean and doesn't smell of cigarettes. I'd like to take a shower. Join me?"

"Make it a bath and you're on."

Cherry places the mat on the floor and begins filling the tub. Janice grabs two towels and washcloths and then turns to find Cherry modeling Victoria's secret.

Janice takes in the expanse of her tanned and toned flesh, the curve of her hips and her small breasts. She takes a step back and lands a bit awkwardly onto the toilet seat. "What are you doing to me?"

Cherry steps forward and pulls Janice's shirt off. "That should be obvious," she says as she leans down and pulls Janice's lower lip into her mouth.

Reluctantly, Janice breaks the contact to finish undressing. Cherry seductively removes her remaining clothing. Janice eases down into the water and scoots back to make room for Cherry.

Cherry maneuvers herself down into the tub between Janice's legs. "Could you maybe put your leg over the side of the tub. I don't quite have enough room."

Janice grunts as she tries to make more space for her. She catches her toe on the spout as she's swinging her leg over the edge. "Shit! That hurt. I don't think this is working out quite like we'd hoped."

"No, it isn't," Cherry says as she steps out of the tub and onto the mat, her eyes focused on the floor.

Janice joins her on the mat and lifts up her chin. "Hey, it's okay. Hotel tubs just suck. Let's get in the shower."

Janice lets the water out of the tub and then steps into the shower. When Cherry joins her she quickly jumps back out. "Ahh, that's too hot! Fix it."

Janice adjusts the temperature and Cherry steps back into the spray. "Okay, that's better. Now, where were we?"

"I was just about to run this soap over your beautiful skin." Janice takes the soap and works a lather into the washcloth. She starts at her neck and works her way down one arm and then the other. She runs the washcloth across her breasts and watches as the nipples harden. She feels her own nipples respond to the sight.

"Turn around."

Cherry complies and allows the water to drench her short, golden curls. Janice presses into Cherry and runs the washcloth down her belly and between her legs. Janice reaches to apply more soap to the washcloth. It slips out of her hand and hits her other big toe. "Ouch!"

Cherry giggles. "This seems a lot sexier in the movies than it does in real life."

"You've got that right. Let's get this shower finished while we're still in one piece."

"Good idea."

Janice drops her towel on the floor and climbs between the sheets. She pats the bed next to her, motioning Cherry to join her. Cherry snuggles up close to Janice and their legs

entwine. Cherry uses her thigh to apply sensuous friction to Janice's warm, wet center. Janice cups Cherry's face in her hands and pulls her into a soft kiss. She allows a hand to travel down to Cherry's breast, feeling goosebumps along the path. Janice notices that Cherry's thigh is covered in goose bumps. She looks down to find her entire body is covered in goose bumps.

"Those are not from arousal, are they?"

"I'm freezing! Aren't you?"

"Now that you mention it. Let me check the thermostat." Janice climbs out of bed and over to the thermostat on the wall near the door. "Sixty-five. No wonder we're cold." She sets it to seventy-two and hurries back to the bed where she snuggles under the covers with Cherry.

"I'm sorry, Janice. I'm going to have to put my underwear and shirt back on until it warms up in here. The warmth of the shower made it feel a lot warmer in here."

"Me too. This isn't happening tonight, is it?" Janice gestures her hands back and forth between them.

"I'm not really feeling it. Let's just get some sleep. What do you say?"

"I'm really good at this, you know?"

Cherry pats Janice on the arm. "I'm sure you are. It's just not in the cards tonight. Perhaps another time."

"Perhaps." Janice turns out the bedside light and rolls over to go to sleep. "Night."

"G'night."

As the sun peeks through the crack in the drapes, Janice feels a soft hand on her skin working its way toward her now erect nipples. A finger circles around one nipple, then the other. "Mmm, someone is waking up ready for action," Janice says as she slowly opens her eyes to find Cherry on her side propped up on her elbow.

Cherry lifts Janice's shirt to expose her breasts to her the tip of her tongue poised to apply a teasing touch.

Janice lets out a moan. "Someone is a morning lover, I see."

"It looks that way."

Janice reaches down and removes Cherry's underwear. "You're not going to need these for what I have in mind."

"Do tell."

"Why tell you when showing you is so much more fun," Janice says as she guides Cherry to straddle her center over Janice's mouth.

Cherry grabs the headboard and lowers herself onto Janice's waiting tongue. As Janice grabs her cheeks to increase the pressure, Cherry begins to writhe. "I...see...what...you...mean."

CHAPTER TWO

NOW THAT THE *Achilles Heal* is open for the season, Thalia can kayak right off the back of the houseboat. This means less time launching and more time kayaking. It is a beautiful spring morning. The sky is blue. The wind has picked up and it is unseasonably warm. Still, she wears her long pants and long-sleeved rash guard.

When Thalia left this morning, Amara was still in bed cuddling with the puppies. The days are still short so the sun is just now coming up on the horizon. And the fog hasn't lifted. It's the perfect backdrop for kayaking.

Thalia quickly gets into her paddling rhythm and soon she's making progress up fishing creek at about ten miles per hour. Her teeter table is back at her house. If she's going to spend this much time with Amara on the houseboat, she's going to have to consider either moving it here or getting a second one. Thinking about the teeter table causes a memory of her first time making love with Amara to flash before her eyes. All those years with Diane and she never felt the connection with her that she did with Amara from the first moment.

It isn't anyone's fault. We want to be connected with another. "Till death us do part" is often the white lie we must tell ourselves in order to compel us to learn about ourselves and relationships all in preparation for "the one." Not many people have the luxury of meeting their soul mate right out of the gate. And honestly, she's not sure that would even be wise. We're all a work in progress. We need those practice runs to prepare us and to give us clarity when we do finally meet our soul mate. So many people feel ashamed of their past break-ups. Of course, if you were mean, hateful, or disrespectful, then you do owe amends. But there's no shame in loving someone for a season. All expressions of love fills the well of love in the universe.

Thalia's musings take her mind to Robin and Charley. She went into Wednesday's session knowing that Charley had experienced an epiphany regarding her sexuality from the group session on Monday. But she had no idea that it was an experience with another lesbian that brought her there. Thalia's been working with Robin and Charley for almost a year now. And to be honest, it isn't really out of character for Charley to need this sort of hands-on affirmation. She's worried more about Robin's immediate acceptance, wondering if it might be a bit more denial than Robin's willing to admit. It's going to be important to push Robin to explore her feelings. Otherwise, if it is denial, it will eventually wear off. And when it does, the raw emotion that is exposed will explode with destructive force into their relationship. They've come too far to let that happen.

Erica and Sharon...they're the exception that proves the rule...finding your soul mate

on the first try. Erica's had a rough life. All teenagers and young adults experience some level of identity crisis. But as an intersex who underwent gender reassignment surgery before she was even aware of her surroundings, her struggle is in the extreme. Doctors are just now beginning to learn to leave well enough alone until the child is able to express his or her gender naturally. From a scientific perspective, intersex is fascinating and offers an incredible opportunity to study the development of gender identity in terms of nature versus nurture. Recent evidence clearly shows nature plays a much bigger role than nurture. And this is particularly difficult for the radical religious right to swallow, particularly idiots like Karen Dolt. Thalia hopes she can persuade Erica and Sharon to go somewhere else to get their marriage license.

Thalia suddenly becomes aware of her surroundings. She's traveled farther than she intended this early in the season. She can already feel the burn in her muscles. *I'm going to feel this later today.* She turns around and heads back toward the marina.



Thalia pulls her kayak onto the back of the houseboat and steps into the bedroom. "Have I told you lately how much I love being able to kayak right off the back of the houseboat? No hauling or launching required."

Thalia looks up to see Amara laying on the bed crying, her round belly obscuring the view. "Sweetie, what's wrong?"

"Cleopatra has failed me!"

"Umm, who is Cleopatra, and how has she failed you?"

Amara pulls her hands out from under the covers and pushes a button which causes the dark blue object to spring to life, jump out of her hand, and wiggle toward Thalia in an enthusiastic invitation to play. She picks it up, marveling at how soft and comfortable it is in her hand. "Cleopatra, I presume?"

Amara's tears fade into a smile as she watches Thalia glide the toy across her legs and giggle as it tickles her with its powerful vibrations. "It has thirty different settings. Just click the button and you'll see what else it can do."

Thalia does as instructed. "Why Cleopatra?"

"It sort of looks like a snake, doesn't it?"

"I think it looks more like a sperm. But she's your toy. You can name her whatever you want." Thalia chuckles. "I'm thrilled you got a new toy. But why did you keep her from me? And why the tears?"

Amara works her way up against the headboard, rocking from side to side until she's sitting upright, pillows strategically placed and arms folded onto her slightly protruding belly.

“You are so patient and sweet with me. But my appetite for sex is going to wear you out. I thought if I could find a toy that would...you know...fill in the gaps in coverage...well, I wouldn't have to depend on you so much...to...satisfy...me.” Amara’s nose is turning red as tears threaten to disturb her eyes once again.

“Oh, baby, I'll service you whenever you want. You can even call me home from the office if you need to.”

Amara picks up a pillow and whacks Thalia with it as her tears accelerate into a full-fledged crying fit. “Service me! Is that how you see our lovemaking?”

“No, no, sweetie. I didn't mean it like that at all. I was just making a joke. I'm so sorry. I'm an insensitive idiot. What I mean is, I love what this pregnancy is doing to your libido. If this is what pregnancy does for your sex drive, you can be pregnant all the time.”

“What!? After I nearly lost you over this pregnancy, you have the nerve to say something like that to me?” Amara grabs Cleopatra out of Thalia's hand as she struggles to get off the bed and head to the bathroom. “Don't help me. I can do it myself. Go make yourself useful and put on the coffee.”

“But, sweetie. We still need to tal—”

“Don't ‘but, sweetie’ me. I advise you to keep your mouth shut and do as I ask before you do any more damage.”

Thalia slithers out of the bedroom and heads to the kitchen to put on the coffee as instructed. *Could I be any more lame? What the hell was I thinking trying to joke with a hormonal-crazed pregnant woman in her second trimester? I'm lucky I got out of there alive.*

Amara joins Thalia on the front deck, a cup of coffee and a bagel in her hands. “I'm sorry. I know I overreacted—”

“No, I'm sorry. I should know better than to joke about your feelings when you're clearly upset. So, do you want to finish telling me about Cleopatra?”

Amara looks up and down the dock to ensure their privacy. “She failed me.”

“You said that. But how?”

“She doesn't make me come.”

“Okaayy.” Thalia draws the word out. “Help me out here. I'm struggling really hard not to go into sex therapist mode with you. I'm pretty sure you don't want that. You don't have any problems when we make love...do you?”

“No. That's just it. That's why I was crying. I thought if Cleopatra could help me out and carry some of the burden, it would be good for both of us. But she’s not working. Amara’s voice cracks.

“Oh, honey. What ever gave you the idea that I'm burdened by our lovemaking? It isn't something I've said or done is it?”

Amara sniffs and wipes a tear rolling down her cheek. “No, it's not you. I just thought—”

Thalia reaches out and pulls Amara into a gentle embrace. She feels Amara relax into her

shoulder as she rubs her back in a soothing gesture. “You're in the second trimester. Trust me. I'm going to miss this sex drive of yours. I'm pretty sure the closer you get to your due date, the less energy you'll have for anything, including sex. Have you talked to Annie about it?”

“I'm too embarrassed.”

“You shouldn't be embarrassed to talk to your OB. And besides, she's well aware of your increases libido from our Wednesday night chats.”

“What? You tell the girls about our sex life?”

Thalia swallows hard. “Uh oh. Listen, baby, you know me. I'm harmless.”

“No, *baby*, you listen! I do not want our sex life to be the topic of conversation at your girl's night out. Are we clear?”

“But...what will I talk about?”

“You're a smart girl. Figure it out.” Amara points her index finger at Thalia. “And if I find out you've been talking...well...neither Cleopatra nor I will be inviting you to play for a long time Got it?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Okay, then. Let's get ready and get out of here before René thinks I've made you late having my way with you.”

“But, how would she know if I'm keeping my mouth shut?”

Amara whips around on her way toward the shower and flashes Thalia an evil grin.

Thalia breathes a sigh of relief.



Genevieve plops down onto the sofa and crosses her legs. She takes in a quick breath. “Thalia, I think I'm finished.”

“Finished with what?”

“I don't think I need therapy anymore.” Genevieve uncrosses her legs and shifts in her seat.

“Okay, that's fine. It's the goal of therapy after all to get you to a place where you no longer need it. So why are you fidgeting? What's up?”

“I don't know. I just thought maybe you would be upset with me.”

“No, not at all. If you're ready to stop therapy, that's great. Since we have our session today anyway, why don't we make the most of our time. How are things going with Dan?”

Genevieve came to see Thalia following a divorce. She started dating Dan about five months ago and it's been going well. She had some difficulty with sexual intimacy initially. But she and Thalia worked through those issues and she's enjoying a healthy relationship,

including a healthy sex life with Dan.

“Dan is getting along great with my mother and Alissa. We’re starting to talk a little bit about our future. I don’t know. I just— things are so going well. It’s a little scary, to be honest.”

“Tell me more about that.”

“Well, you know, it’s always scary when things are going well. I keep wondering when the other shoe is going to drop. When is he going to grow a second head or start screaming at me or—cheating on me.” Genevieve looks down and starts picking at her fingers.

“Cheating. Like Steve did.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yeah, exactly. I’m a little gun shy, if you know what I mean?”

“Yes, I do. So, he’s a widow, right?”

“Yes.”

“And I’m sure you had conversations with him about his wife and their life together. And you’ve talked to him about your relationship with Steve, right?”

“Yes, we’ve talked.

“Did he say anything about having cheated on his wife?”

“No. But it’s not like anyone would admit to such a thing.”

Thalia leans forward in her chair. “It sounds like you’re having some trust issues with him. Has he done or said something to warrant your mistrust?”

Genevieve quickly crosses her legs and folds her arms. “Are you just trying to prove to me that I still need therapy?”

Thalia leans back into her chair. “No, no, of course not. I just want to make absolutely certain that I’ve done my job. I want to make sure we’ve done the work we need to do in order for you to have a healthy relationship with Dan.”

Genevieve visibly relaxes. “Okay, so, yeah, I probably do have a bit of a trust issue with him. But I don’t think I need any more therapy in order to deal with it. I think I can handle it on my own. At least I’d like to try.” Genevieve takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m trying to convince myself it’s not that big a deal.”

“Hmm. Tell me more.”

“Well, he started working longer hours. He travels for his work. But he’s been traveling more frequently lately.”

“There could be perfectly logical explanations for those changes.”

“And then it could be my ex-husband all over again.”

“Have you shared your feelings about this with him?”

“No. I’m afraid.”

“It’s hard to heal from betrayal. Give yourself a break. And give yourself some time. This is the first significant relationship you’ve had since your divorce and I’m proud of the way you’ve handled it so far. You’ve taken it slowly and carefully. And you’ve considered your

daughter's well being. Things are going well. You don't need to sabotage the relationship to avoid being hurt again. You don't need to second-guess your judgment of his character."

Thalia leans forward. "Genevieve, look at me."

Genevieve raises her head and Thalia looks directly into her eyes. "Yes, he may cheat on you. But, guess what? He may not. There are no guarantees. The key is to communicate and listen and let yourself build trust."

"That's harder than it seems."

"No, it's actually quite hard. And it takes time."

"Thalia, I was hurt so badly."

"I know you were. But some people don't cheat. Do you want to know what I think?"

"Yes. God, yes."

Thalia laughs. "I think Dan is a good guy. I think you did the right thing coming to therapy following your divorce. You're a healthier and stronger person now than you were when we first started this journey together. You're not that person anymore, the person who was married to a cheater. The hardest person to learn to trust now is yourself. Trust your instincts. That's the most important thing you can do now."

"Whew! Wow. I didn't think of it that way."

Thalia gives Genevieve a quick smile before her expression turns serious once again. "Talk to Dan. Tell him about your fears. But don't accuse him. Tell him you need more conversation from him about his work, what he's doing and why he needs to travel more. Let him know it's your issue, not his. I bet you he'll surprise you."

"I'm sure you're right."

"So, what do you think? Should we continue therapy or are you ready to stop?"

"Maybe we should continue for a little while longer."

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea."

Thalia walks Genevieve out of her office. "I'll see you next Thursday. If you change your mind and decide to stop therapy, just give René a call and cancel. It'll be fine either way. You know I'm here if you need me."

"Yes, I do. Thank you."

Thalia sits down at René's desk and takes out her cell phone to call Amara. "Hey. I'm leaving the office now. Is there anything you need me to pick up on my way home?" *Home. When did Amara become my home? Who knows. But she is just that. She is my home.* "I think we should go out to the cabin tonight. What do you think? The teeter table's there." Thalia lets out an evil chuckle. "Yes. I know you can't use the table in your condition. But I can. I am not shameless. Okay, maybe I am. But you love me anyway. I'll be there in about a half hour to pick you up. We can grab a pizza and head out to the cabin. I'll see you in a few. I love you, too. Bye-bye."

CHAPTER THREE

THALIA RETURNS FROM lunch and steps into the waiting area. She notices René staring at the walls and comments, “Yeah, we should really give this room a make-over. This paneling is depressing. Just what a therapist needs, a depressing waiting area.”

“Oh no, you don’t. You’re not roping me into spending my free time redecorating this office. If you want to paint this place, you hire it done.”

“Well, at least I got your attention. You were a million miles away. What’s up?”

“Derek and I have set the date.”

Thalia pulls René into a tight hug. “Sis, that’s fantastic! So when’s the big day? What are the plans?”

“You know how much I love the Fourth of July?”

“Yes?”

“We’ve decided to get married on the Fourth of July. Well, not the fourth exactly. The fourth is on Monday this year, so we’re getting married on Saturday the second instead.” René’s voice ratchets up a notch. “We’re going to get married at Seventy Six Falls. You know, under the shelter? And during the reception, we’ll be able to see the Grider Hill fireworks. It’s going to be amazing! What do you think?”

“I think that sounds fantastic. If you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“You’ll be my maid of honor?”

“Yes. So long as I can wear my Skeletoes and don’t have to wear a dress.”

René whacks Thalia on the forearm. “No dress, but you are *not* wearing Skeletoes to my wedding. You’ll wear a nice shirt and pants and appropriate footwear. I’ll get with Amara to make sure you behave.”

“I’m just teasing. I’d love to be your maid of honor. So, who’s Derek’s best man?”

“Derek’s friend, Tommy. They’ve been friends since childhood.”

“And Derek’s parents and sister?”

“Tommy is going to bring them. It’s just going to be small. But I do have a favor to ask of you.”

“Sure, anything.”

“Your friend, Zane, she’s a pastor, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think she’d be willing to marry us?”

“I don’t know, probably. I’ll ask her.”

“Okay, thanks. Let me know as soon as you know, all right?”

“Will do. Okay, back to business. Erica is coming in. Is she bringing Sharon with her?”

“Yes. She called me this morning and said Sharon’s coming in with her to have a premarital session with you.

“Excellent. Let me know when they arrive.

“Sure.”

Thalia walks into her office and sits down at her desk. She starts to send an email to Zane but then decides a phone call would be better. She pulls out her cell phone and asks Siri to call Zane. After a few rings, she hear’s a familiar voice.

“Hello, Thalia.”

“Hey there, Zane. How’s my favorite lesbian pastor?”

“Didn’t you get enough of me yesterday?”

“Once a week for the show is just not enough.”

“Spill it. What do you want?”

“I told you my sister is getting married. Remember?”

“Yes.”

“Well, they’ve set a date. They’re getting married on July second, and she wanted me to ask if you’d be willing to officiate the wedding?”

“That’s a holiday weekend. Let me check my calendar.”

“Thanks. I hope you can make it. This could finally be your chance to come to the lake with the whole family. Hot dogs, hamburgers, boating, swimming, jet skiing, fireworks—it doesn’t get any better.”

“We could certainly use the distraction.

“So, that’s a ‘Yes?’”

“It’s a maybe. I’ll let you know. My calendar is free to officiate. We’ll see about the rest.”

“I’ll let René know. Thanks.”

Thalia hangs up the phone and hears a chat message come in from René letting her know that Erica and Sharon have arrived.



Thalia opens the door and finds Erica and Sharon standing in the waiting area. Sharon shakes her offered hand and follows Erica into the office. They sit next to each other on the sofa.

“Congratulations on the engagement. I’m so happy for you two. I’m sure Erica told you I wanted to meet with you together for premarital counseling.”

Sharon nods. “Yes. I think it’s a great idea and I’ve been looking forward to this session. I had suggested to Erica that we come in together as well.”

“Good, that’s good. Before we get started, do you have any specific concerns?”

“I have two really. Erica and I aren’t in agreement about getting our marriage license from our stupid county clerk, Karen Dolt. And I want to talk about...I’m not sure how to say it exactly...her gender.”

“Okay. Good topics. Erica, do you have anything to add?”

Sharon gently touches Erica’s thigh to stop the bouncing that began with the session.

“Um, not really.”

“Are you sure? You seem a bit anxious. You’re safe here. Whatever is on your mind, you can share.”

“I’m afraid to face Karen Dolt. I don’t think I could take it if she bullied me.”

“Yeah, so help me understand. You can get your marriage license from any county in Kentucky. I understand you live in Williams County. But why make getting a marriage license harder?”

Sharon opens her mouth to speak and then closes it. She turns to look at Erica and reaches out for her hand, and their fingers instantly entwine. Thalia can’t help but smile at the vision of young love before her.

“When the Supreme Court ruling came out and then Karen refused to honor her oath of office, there was a huge media frenzy. But what happened to her? Nothing! She’s still getting away with using her position to promote prejudice and hatred in Williams County. I can’t take it. Something has to be done! I’ve watched Erica go through so much—bullying, name calling, weird looks in the bathroom—Karen Dolt is a monster.”

“Agreed. But isn’t that all the more reason *not* to engage with her?”

“Erica was born intersex. Not male. Not female. The sex on her birth certificate is listed as ambiguous. The fight for marriage equality consistently ignored the fact that sex and gender is not binary. And people like Karen Dolt can’t deal with anything that isn’t explicitly addressed in their stupid bible. So they pretend it doesn’t exist and try shove everyone into neat little boy boxes and girl boxes where their narrow-minded rules fit nicely and relieve them of the inconvenience of having to think for themselves. We can’t pass up this opportunity to rub her nose in this little detail that doesn’t fit neatly into the boxes she and her evangelical bullshit religion have constructed.”

Thalia notices Erica is holding her breath but decides to continue with Sharon. “What makes you think this will be the light bulb moment for Karen?”

“Because this time we’ve got her. This time it’s not about same-sex marriage. Misinformed doctors turned her into a woman before she even had a chance to discover if it

was the right choice for her.”

Thalia shifts in her seat, crosses her legs and leans back into her chair. “I understand what you’re saying. But don’t you think you may be using Erica?”

Erica replies, “I don’t feel used exactly.”

“How do you feel?”

“Scared. I’m angry too. But I’m not ready to be some Norma Rae here. I don’t want to be a martyr.”

“Sweetie, I don’t want you to be a martyr either. But with your birth certificate she has to pay attention. She has to understand that this is more complicated than she’s willing to admit. Think about it. This opportunity to confront her in this particular way probably won’t come around again. Getting through to her will make all you’ve endured worth it, don’t you think?”

Erica lets go of Sharon’s hand and rubs her palms up and down her thighs. “Yeah, something good should come out of all I’ve been through.”

“You don’t sound very enthusiastic. Let’s set the marriage license aside for a moment. It’s difficult to make a marriage work under the most ideal circumstances. Your circumstances are far from ideal. Sharon, help me gain a better understanding of what we’re dealing with. In terms of sexual orientation, how do you identify? Right now, based on largely superficial clues, you are in a lesbian relationship.”

“I’ve had relationships with boys and girls, and now with an intersex. So I suppose in terms of conventional labels, I’m bisexual. But I don’t fall in love with equipment. I’m in love with Erica on the inside. The equipment we use to express our love is irrelevant. But Erica’s been talking about gender reassignment surgery and...that scares me.”

Thalia takes in a rapid breath and sits upright. “Erica, you’ve not mentioned surgery since our early sessions, before you knew that you were born intersex. What’s up?”

Erica ignores Thalia’s question and quickly turns to look at Sharon. “What? How am I just now hearing this from you? I thought you were with me on the surgery.”

“Calm down.” Sharon pats Erica on the forearm.

Erica jerks her arm away. “Don’t ask me to calm down. This is some serious shit.”

“Let me explain, please, before you get all bent out of shape. I love you. You know I love you, inside and out. You’ve just been through so much.”

“Exactly. And most of what I’ve been through is because I was, A, born intersex, and B, arbitrarily assigned the female sex shortly after birth. I’m not sure I want to have the surgery. But I thought you were behind whatever decision I make.”

“And I am. This is so hard to talk about.”

Thalia leans forward in her chair. “Sharon, whatever it is, let it out.”

“Oh, God, this is so hard—um...well...I’m going to sound so shallow. I just know it.”

Erica says, “For God’s sake, Sharon, spit it out. You’re making me nervous.”

Sharon takes a deep breath and blurts out her words in a monotone string. “You have a hard enough time now having an orgasm now and I’m afraid with more surgery you will

completely lose your ability to have an orgasm and I'll feel bad and you'll feel bad and I'd rather just leave well enough alone."

A blush spreads across Erica's face. "Wow!"

Thalia sits upright in her chair and rests her head on the back, looking up toward the ceiling trying to gather her thoughts. *These kids are facing so much. And they are just kids.* "Okay let me lay this out so we all know what we're dealing with. Erica you were born intersex and then surgically assigned the female sex. But your birth certificate still reads ambiguous presumably because your parents or doctors failed to complete some paperwork?"

Erica nods.

"Sharon, while you love Erica no matter the equipment, you see the birth certificate as an opportunity to make a human rights and political statement with your marriage. You also fear the loss of a healthy sex life if Erica endures more surgery."

Sharon nods.

"And, though you are undecided as to your gender identity, if you were to have the surgery and complete the necessary paperwork to have your birth certificate changed, you would lose the opportunity to make the human rights and political statement. And you may also lose your ability to achieve orgasm."

Erica nods.

"What I'm hearing is that the political statement matters more to Sharon than to you, Erica. And matching your sex to your gender identity is more important than sexual expression. But sexual expression is more important to Sharon. Does that about cover it?"

Both women respond, "Yes."

"Okay, we have a lot of work to do before you're ready to get married."

Sharon jumps up. "What? Thalia, I thought you were on our side."

"Please, sit down. I am on your side. I'm not questioning your love or commitment. But these are big issues to work through. And if we don't work through them, they will destroy your marriage before it even gets started."

Sharon sits down. "I'm sorry. I just love Erica so much."

Erica takes Sharon's hand between hers. "I love you too. So, so much. But Thalia is right. We have to work this out."

"Okay, now that we have that settled, let's work out a plan of attack. Erica, the first step is to explore your gender identity and make a definitive decision about the surgery. All of the other issues we discussed today hinge on that one detail. Whether or not you have the surgery, or get married before or after the surgery, those decisions can come later."

Sharon responds, "But what about college? Our housing will be substantially cheaper if we are married."

"I appreciate the financial benefits of marriage, and we'll work through this as quickly as we can. College can wait. These other issues cannot."

Sharon puffs out a burst of air, nods and lowers her chin. Erica takes her chin in her hand and raises it so they are looking into each other's eyes. "It'll be okay, baby. I promise."

"We've made terrific progress. Thank you for coming in, Sharon. I'll see you next week."



Thalia is the first to arrive at the Lakeside Bar and Grill. Sammy arrives next, sits down and orders a beer. “It's good to see you today. We missed you last week. What's been going on?”

Sammy replies, “Not too much. Work mostly.”

“How are things going with Gina?”

Sammy blushes. “You know I don't like to talk about my relationships.”

“Come on you can tell your best friend.”

Just as Sammy is about to speak, the waitress drops off the lemon drop martini for Thalia and beer for Sammy. Annie and Janice arrive as the waitress is quickly walking away.

Janice yells out, “Hey, Cherry, can you bring me a draft and a white wine for my friend here?”

The waitress waves her hand as she continues to walk away.

Janice continues, “So what'd I miss?”

Annie gestures to the group, “Back up a minute, sister. What'd we miss? That waitress, Cherry is it? She seemed a bit too anxious to get away from the table. Spill it.”

“You know you're right, Annie. Did you get an opportunity to test your theory?” Thalia waggles her eyebrows at Janice.

“Keep your voice down. I don't want to embarrass the poor girl. I'll tell you if you promise to be discreet.”

Thalia draws an X across her chest. “Cross my heart.”

Sammy asks, “Wait a minute. What'd I miss? What theory?”

Annie offers to explain, “Janice thinks there's no such thing as a straight girl. And Thalia basically asked Janice to put her money where her mouth is, pun intended.”

“That's disgusting,” Sammy says.

“I beg your pardon. We did not engage in anything disgusting.”

“You know what I mean. Using an innocent waitress for a bet.”

“She knew all about it before we...you know...got busy. Shh, here she comes.” Janice blushes.

They all hush while Cherry places the additional drinks on the table and takes their food order. When she leaves, Janice continues.

“I took her to see the moon bow at Cumberland Falls and we decided to get a room at the lodge and stay the night.”

“Sounds romantic,” Sammy says.

“Yeah, well, I thought so too. Things were heating up between us before we got to our room. But then it sort of went downhill.”

Annie wiggles in her seat. “Details. We need details. It’s sounding like Thalia won the bet.”

“Not so fast. We started out in the shower and it was just, I don’t know, awkward. So we moved to the bed and it didn’t really get any better. So we just slept together. As in, drooling, snoring, morning breath, slept together.”

Annie shouts, “So Thalia did win the bet!”

“Would you keep your voice down? Geez! You promised.”

“Sorry.”

“You should be. And, no, she did not win the bet. After a good night’s rest, things worked out quite nicely the next morning,” Janice says with a satisfied grin.

Thalia retorts, “If things went so well, why is she avoiding you?”

“Maybe she’s not as willing to kiss and tell as you.”

Thalia motions for Cherry to come over to the table.

Janice smacks Thalia on the shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Cherry, darlin’, could I get another lemon drop martini and another round for my friends.”

Cherry blushes. “I’ll bring them right over.”

Sammy chides, “Thalia, I swear. You are so rotten sometimes.”

“What’d I do? I just ordered another round of drinks.”

“Don’t play innocent. You know you nearly gave Janice a heart attack. Be nice.”

“All right, all right. I’ll behave. So, Sammy, you were going to tell us about Gina.”

“No. I told you I don’t like to talk about my relationships. I’m afraid I might jinx it.”

“Give us a little something,” Annie says.

“All right, all right. So, we’ve been seeing each other since last September and we wanted to take it slow. It hasn’t been easy. But Gina has been so patient. And...well”

“What? Don’t keep us in suspense,” Annie pushes.

“Just last week we said the *L* word!”

Thalia rubs Sammy’s back. “Oh, Sammy, we’re so happy for you.”

“I’m married. Thalia is practically down the aisle. Sammy’s made it to the *L* word stage with Gina. Looks like you’re behind in the race, Janice.”

“Don’t drag me into that race. I want no part of it.”

Thalia sees a shadow of sadness cross over Janice’s face.

“Speaking of the aisle, René and Derrick have set the date. They’re getting married at Seventy Six Falls on July second. My friend Zane is officiating.”

“Oh, what fun! I love weddings. And a Fourth of July wedding will be even more fun,” Annie offers.

“We’re all invited, aren’t we?” Sammy asks.

“Of course. And I’m the maid of honor. Dress is Fourth of July barbecue attire. But I’m not allowed to wear my Skeletoes. And on that note, I need to get head out. Janice, you get the damage.”

“Why me? I didn’t lose our bet.”

“No, you didn’t. But you were the last to arrive.”

“I miss the days when you breezed in here a half hour late.”

“No you don’t. And neither do I. We’re no longer competing for women and I wouldn’t trade Amara for all the darlin’s in the world.”

“Gag me.”

Thalia smacks Janice on the butt as they give each other hugs and head out of the restaurant.

CHAPTER FOUR

AMARA ARRIVES AT Annie's office, checks in and takes a seat. As she flips through a magazine, her mind goes back to that night so many months ago. She nearly lost Thalia over this baby. She didn't promise Thalia she'd never want children. No one can predict the future. But at the time, she did believe with all her heart that carrying this baby for her brother and his husband would not flip some switch on her biological clock. Now as her eyes wander over ads for maternity underwear, she's telling herself that seeing this baby for the first time is no big deal. She's been feeling it kick for months. How will seeing a baby-shaped blob on a computer screen make any difference? No, she's got this. Thalia doesn't want children, and neither does she.

She forces her attention back to her surroundings and looks up to find Angelos and Nikolas walking through the door and rises to greet them with a warm embrace. "I'm so glad you two were able to make it today. It's so exciting! Your first look at your little bundle of joy."

Nikolas replies, "You mean sleeping, eating, pooping machine that will deprive us of our sleep, savings and sanity for the next twenty or so years."

"Somebody's grumpy today."

Angelos responds, "Don't pay any attention to him. They lost a polo match and he blames his lack of concentration on the pregnancy. He's been doing some research that suggests that even father's experience mood-altering hormonal changes. Since this is his biological child, he's milking the hormone angle for all it's worth."

"Nikolas is right," Annie chimes in as she appears in the doorway leading to the examination rooms. "Not only have I read similar studies, but I've witnessed it first-hand. Sometimes I think the fathers suffer more from hormone changes than the mothers."

"Don't encourage him. I'm having a hard enough time living with him as it is. You should see all of the baby gear he's been buying off Amazon. We're on a first-name basis with the UPS delivery driver. There's so much stuff in the baby's room, there's no space left for the actual baby!"

"You're exaggerating and you know it."

"Am not."

"Are too."

Amara intervenes before the conversation devolves even further. “Would you two stop it. Listening to you two go on, I wonder who’s going to be the grown-up in the family.”

Annie motions for them to follow her. “Before we get started, do you want to know the sex if I’m able to see it on the ultrasound?”

The boys look at each other and then back to Annie.

Angelos responds first. “We haven’t talked about it. What do you think?”

“I definitely want to know.” Nikolas grins and pats Angelos on the forearm. “It’ll make shopping easier.”

“The daddy has spoken. Let’s do this.”

They wait outside while Amara changes into a hospital gown and positions her wobbly form onto the exam table.

Nikolas re-enters the room first, followed by Angelos and Annie.

“Stop chewing on your fingernails and move in closer. We’re all friends and family here. So, you’re twenty-eight weeks. Let’s take a peek at this baby, why don’t we?”

Annie opens Amara’s gown and squirts a generous dollop of goo onto Amara’s round belly causing Amara to flinch slightly. As the wand makes contact with Amara’s belly, Angelos and Nikolas lean closer toward the monitor. Annie maneuvers the wand into position and the first images appear on the screen.

“Okay, let me tell you what we’re seeing. This is the baby’s head. And what you see moving right here is the baby’s heart.” Annie makes some adjustments to the equipment and suddenly the room is filled with a rapid whooshing sound.

Angelos asks, “Is that our baby’s heart we’re hearing?”

“Yes it is. Wonderful isn’t it? You’re baby’s heart looks and sounds as it should at this stage.”

They both reach out and touch the tiny beating dot on the monitor, and then turn into each other’s arms. A streak of wetness forms on Angelos’ cheek as he gives Nikolas a gentle kiss. Nikolas reaches out with his thumb and lightly brushes the tears away. “I love you so much. Thank you.” He reaches out and takes Amara’s hand. “And thank you too.”

Amara squeezes his hand and then brushes away her own tears. “You’re welcome, Nikolas. And thank you. I can’t believe it’s really happening.”

“Well, believe it. Are you still ready to know the sex?”

Three voices say in unison, “Yes.”

Annie repositions the wand and the blob on the screen shifts around slightly. She then points to the screen with a steady finger. “Right here. This is your baby’s genitalia. I’m happy to inform you, you’re having a boy.”

Angelos and Nikolas stare into each other’s eyes, tears now flowing freely. Angelos asks, “What are we going to name him?”

“I’m sure our families will have something to say about it.”

“I hate to break up the party, but I need to finish my examination. Everything looks to be on track for your June fourteenth due date. Would you two mind stepping out?”

Angelos squeezes Amara’s hand. “Of course. Will you be at dinner tonight?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Okay, see you then.”

Angelos and Nikolas leave the room and Annie hands Amara a tissue and a wet towel to wipe the goo off her belly. She places her legs into the stirrups for the physical examination.

“Are you having any problems, or anything we need to discuss?”

Amara hesitates for a moment. “Umm...what’s your opinion on sex?”

“I’m pretty fond of it. After all, without it, I’d be out of business.” Annie chuckles. “I’m assuming you have a more specific question.”

“I...sort of...have this insatiable appetite for sex. I’m afraid it’s getting to be too much for Thalia.”

Annie stops what she’s doing and looks directly into Amara’s eyes. “Trust me. You don’t need to worry about Thalia. I’m sure she can handle it.”

“But what about the baby? Won’t so much sex do...I don’t know...*something* to the baby?”

“The baby is happy when you’re happy. You are happy, right?”

“Oh, God, yes. I never dreamed I could be so happy.”

“Well, then. Stop worrying. Everything is fine. The baby is healthy. You’re healthy.

Angelos and Nikolas are ecstatic. Thalia hasn’t had a meltdown.”

“No, you’re right. I guess if I’m worried, I should just talk to Thalia.”

“Now there’s a novel idea. Communicating in a lesbian relationship. Scandalous!” Annie helps Amara out of the stirrups and into an upright position. “You’re starting your third trimester. You’re blood pressure and blood glucose are perfect. You’re taking your prenatal vitamins, right?”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Good. Okay, I’ll see you in two weeks. Oh, wait. What about Lamaze classes? Who’s going to be your coach?”

“That’s a good question. I’d really like Thalia to be there. Do you think she’ll agree?”

Annie smiles, “Perhaps you should ask her instead of me.”

“Yeah, yeah. But you’ve known her longer. She wasn’t exactly thrilled with the pregnancy and she doesn’t *do* babies.”

“But she *loves* you. I’m certain of that.”

“She does. She’s been so patient and attentive and caring. I couldn’t ask for a better girlfriend. I love her, too.”

“I can see that. Any thoughts on having a child of your own? I know that was Thalia’s biggest concern.”

“No. I don’t want to have a child of my own.” Amara’s not entirely certain she’s telling Annie the truth. “I’m just thrilled I could do this for my brother.”

“It really is a generous thing you’re doing.” Annie pats Amara on the hand. “Okay, I’ll see you in a couple of weeks. Call me if you have any concerns. You take care of yourself and that baby boy.”

Amara beams as she rubs her belly and whispers, “Boy. It’s a boy. I can’t wait to tell Thalia.”



Amara walks into the houseboat beaming, with the ultrasound picture in her hand. “Thalia look. It’s a boy!”

Thalia takes the picture and wraps Amara into a tight embrace. “Oh, honey, that’s so sweet! I’m so proud of you for doing this. I’ll bet Angelos and Nikolas are ecstatic. Do you know what they’re going to name the baby?”

“No, not yet. But I’m sure it’ll be the main topic of conversation at dinner tonight. You’re still going, right?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss this dinner for anything.”

Amara starts chewing her bottom lip. “Annie asked me a question today and I didn’t know how to answer her.”

Thalia stops and holds a deep breath. Could this be the moment she’s been dreading. She turns to look into Amara’s eyes.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.

“What did Annie ask you?”

Amara puts her hands over her mouth, stifling a laugh. “Oh, God, no. Not that. I’m not interested in having a baby.”

Thalia lets out the breath. “Don’t scare me like that.”

“I may have to every once in a while just to see that look of terror on your face. She wants to know who’ll be my Lamaze coach and whose going to be in the birthing room. I’d really like you to be there. What do you think?” It’s Amara’s turn to hold her breath.

Thalia grabs the leashes off the counter and attaches them to the dogs’ collars. “I don’t know. Are you sure? I mean, shouldn’t Angelos and Nikolas be there?”

“In the birthing room, yes. According to Annie, there’s plenty of room for my entire big fat Greek family.” Amara laughs. “But for the coaching, I really want you by my side.”

“You know I love you. And I want to be there to make sure you’re all right.” Thalia pauses for a moment. “I’m going to take the dogs for a walk before we head to dinner. Let me give it some thought. I’ll let you know tonight.” Thalia takes in the hurt she sees in Amara’s eyes before she heads out the door with the dogs.



Before Thalia and Amara even enter the door leading into the kitchen, they can hear the heated debate going on inside.

Amara enters ahead of Thalia. “What’s this all about, mom?”

“Oh hello, dear. We just heard the news. You’re having a boy! We’re so excited and we’re talking over the names for our sweet little boy.”

“Don’t you think Angelos and Nikolas should name the baby?”

“You sound just like Angelos. This is our first grandchild. We have traditions we must follow.”

Amara’s father walks into the kitchen. “Sweetheart, I understand what you’re saying. But nothing about this situation is traditional. Our daughter is giving birth to our son’s child. He will have two fathers and his mother will be his Aunt.”

Thalia is blending into the background, not knowing what to do or say. But she feels the need to say something. “What’s for dinner?”

All eyes turn toward her, staring at her like she has three heads. “I was just trying to calm things down. All of this excitement can’t be good for the baby, can it?”

Lettie pats Thalia on the cheek. “Dear, this baby is already filled with excitement. He is Greek. He is a Liakos. Passion is in his blood. He will be a passionate child, just like his mother.”

“Umm, okay.” Thalia steps back slightly as she gives Amara a pleading look. Amara gives her a seductive smile in return. Thalia mouths *you are shameless* as she retreats toward the dining room.

Amara responds, “Let’s put this baby naming business to rest for now. We have plenty of time. Is there anything I can do to help with dinner?”

“No, dear. Go on into the dining room with Thalia and rest.”

With everyone finally around the dinner table for their usual Friday night moussaka, Thalia relaxes into the dinner now that the baby conversation has subsided.

Aunt Rhea turns to Amara and asks, “So, dear, are you able to get enough sex these days? Oh, the stories your mother told me when she was carrying you. She would go out to the barn to meet your father and—”

Lettie chastises, “Rhea, please, you’re embarrassing her—and Thalia from the color on her cheeks.”

“What? An old lady has to get her excitement somewhere.”

Thalia says under her breath, “What about the zucchini in the produce aisle?”

Amara kicks her under the table and she winces.

“What was that, dear?”

“Nothing.”

“Lettie is right. You do look a bit flushed. I believe I have my answer.” Rhea gives Thalia a wink.

Thalia abruptly changes the subject. “So, what is the Greek tradition for naming the firstborn male grandchild? Is it Junior?”

Lettie explains, “In the Greek tradition, the firstborn male child should have the name of the paternal grandfather. But in this case, we have two fathers. So do we use Angelo’s father’s name or Nikolas’ father’s name?”

“I see. I hate to point out the obvious. But Nikolas is the biological father. Wouldn’t it make sense to use his father’s name?”

Amara kicks Thalia under the table.

“Ouch! Again with the kicking. What was that for?”

Amara tries to shut her up with her eyes.

“Angelos, Nikolas, you’re being rather quiet on the subject. Am I missing something?”

“Nikolas and I don’t know that we want to follow the tradition.

Markos drops his clenched fist on the table, causing his utensils to bounce. “What? How can you even consider breaking with tradition? We are Greek. We must follow tradition.”

“Dad, Nik’s father is dead so it won’t matter to him either way. And, I don’t know. It just seems unfair to name our son after you. And—”

“And what?” Nikolas asks.

“Your father’s name was Nikolas.”

“So.”

“So, I just think a third generation is a bit much, that’s all.”

Nikolas tosses his napkin onto his plate and storms out of the room with Angelos trailing behind.

Amara chuckles. “Wow. It really is true that the father experiences hormonal outbursts during pregnancy.”

“You’re not helping,” Lettie replies.

Rhea and Thalia are clearing the table and serving coffee when Nikolas and Angelos return to the dining room.

Angelos announces, “We’ve made a decision. And we ask you to respect our decision.”

He pauses and glances around the room at the nodding heads.

“Our son will be Matthias Sideris-Liakos after Nik’s maternal grandfather. And we’re hyphenating our last names.”

Thalia looks around the room at the faces of the family hearing the name for the first time. She notes a mix of relief and something else. Resignation perhaps. In any case, the matter is settled and she doesn’t see any indication that anyone will voice opposition. *Good. This is good. I would be lucky to call this family my own.*

Amara reaches down to pat her belly and speaks into it in the sweetest baby voice. “What do you think of that, Matthias Sideris-Liakos?” She jumps and giggles. “If his kicks are any indication, I’d say he likes it. I’m glad that’s settled. Come here you two and say hello to your son.”