

the fire and Cassidy's heart hammered in her ears.

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The gathering broke up as happily stuffed youngsters started to fall asleep in soft laps. Brenna saw Ryan curling into his mother's body, and suddenly imagined herself doing the same. *You're nuts.* She blushed.

"Mom?"

Brenna turned to find James behind her. "Going to bed?" she asked, cocking her head to the side.

"Yeah, you?"

She nodded. "After a bit." She put her arm around his shoulder and squeezed, briefly tucking her head against his. "Did you have fun today?"

He nodded, catching her right hand lightly. "I saw you getting this wrapped up. What happened?"

"Burn from the lunch fire," she said. "Doesn't hurt anymore, though."

"You should be more careful."

That's pretty good advice for more than just fires, she thought ruefully. She kissed his cheek and watched him walk away. She stood alone, an island in the sea of people moving toward their tents.

Another island emerged nearby. Thomas and Cassidy talked quietly, Ryan between them. The five year old did not seem happy to be spending the night in the boys' tent. Brenna listened but resisted stepping in.

"I've got cookies," Thomas offered, finally hitting on Ryan's weakness. The boy's eyes lit up and he looked less upset and more intrigued. "Cookies? For Fred, too?"

Brenna could see Cassidy, also quiet, was grinning too.

"Who?" Thomas looked at Cassidy, then back at Ryan.

"My monster, Fred," the boy explained with an air of "you should know that."

Brenna chuckled softly as Thomas recovered admirably. He stood, held out a hand, and assured Ryan seriously, "I have cookies for Fred, too. Come on."

Ryan trailed after Thomas and soon Brenna and Cassidy were the only ones not inside their tent. Brenna fidgeted with her bandaged hand. The taller woman strode toward her, blue eyes soft and full lips beckoning. Brenna lifted her hand. Whether the gesture was to ward off Cassidy or pull her close, she could not decide.

Cassidy decided for her, grasping the bandaged hand carefully. With a quiet, even voice, she said, "I'll rewrap it for you, if you want."

Want? Brenna inhaled. Heat from their connection seared her. *What do*

I want? She nodded, unable to break free of the other woman's gaze. "All right."

At the tent, Brenna entered first and lit the lantern. They circled on their sleeping bags and Cassidy reached for the first aid kit as Brenna unwrapped her hand.

The silence became oppressive. They both felt the need to fill it.

"I wanted to—"

"Could I ask you—?" Cassidy shook her head. "You go first." Examining the red splotches on Brenna's hand, she applied the cooling cream. She wrapped it loosely to let the skin breathe.

Brenna swallowed, alternately watching her hand in Cassidy's and the other woman's bent head. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry."

"It was my fault. I shouldn't have... I misread—"

Brenna's voice was soft, afraid of the admission she was making but unwilling to have a lie between them. "No, you didn't."

Cassidy's motion stopped and without moving her head, their eyes met, and Brenna read the astonishment clearly. A cool collectedness emerged which Brenna recognized as Hanssen. "Don't. I need Cassidy here right now," she begged. "No confusion."

Cassidy shook herself and the composure washed away. "... I'm sorry. I...just... I don't know what to say to you."

"I don't know what to say either," Brenna admitted. "I didn't plan this."

"I'll go."

Brenna shook her head. "No, we just need to slow down."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't want to lose our friendship."

Cassidy exhaled sharply. "Thank God. I don't think I could stand it if you made me leave."

Brenna acknowledged that admission with a nod, though it was far more impassioned than she wanted to deal with at the moment. "I've never done anything like...that," she said, her voice barely audible.

Brenna was looking down at her hands in her lap, fidgeting with them again. Cassidy recognized the habit from earlier in the day. This time she did not resist reaching out. She wanted to touch this woman. And Brenna wanted it, too. "Would you do it again?" Cassidy asked.

The faint smile on Cassidy's lips drew Brenna's gaze like a magnet. Before she could demur, Brenna's hands were covered and pinned to the sleeping bag between them. Cassidy leaned forward, closing the gap between their

bodies. At the same moment gentle fingers slipped over Brenna's left cheek and into her hair, and Cassidy's full lips touched hers.

The earlier kiss had shocked her into a gasping puddle of mixed sensations, but Brenna now surfaced past the shock into a place of hypersensitivity. She noted the texture, the scent, and the feel of the adoration passing from those lips to hers. She slid her hand from beneath Cassidy's and gave in to the need to touch in return. She cupped the other woman's pale cheek, brushing her thumb over the satin skin, holding her still, even as they both trembled.

When the kiss broke, Brenna's head dropped forward. Cassidy's lips trailed across her forehead. "I didn't even used to like you," Brenna admitted on a deep breath, inhaling the delicate lavender again.

Cassidy's laugh, soft and lilting, washed over Brenna in absolution. The long fingers in Brenna's hair caressed the nape of her neck, spreading a delicious tingling. Brenna lifted her head. Mesmerized by her own hand lifting to Cassidy's cheek, she stroked the smooth planes. *A woman's face. This woman.*

"You are..." She couldn't find words. Cassidy turned her face into the touch and closed her eyes. A lump welled up in Brenna's throat. "It scares me that I don't understand where this is all coming from," she managed.

"You snuck inside me, too." Cassidy's hand dragged slowly from the back of Brenna's neck onto her cheek, over the arch of her nose and down over her lips, where the other woman's breath warmed them.

Brenna leaned forward to seek another kiss from the soft mouth. Cassidy's arms went around her shoulders, hugging her close, and gradually their bodies bore them down to the sleeping bags together, breasts pillowing against one another. When Cassidy's knee unexpectedly slipped between Brenna's thighs and made her groin clench, Brenna broke their kiss. "I... I can't..."

One arm instantly moved away, though Cassidy's other hand remained gentle on Brenna's lower back. Soft fingertips covered Brenna's lips. "Then I won't."

Brenna started to ease away, aware of her body's reluctance to part. Cassidy did not force her, but the gentle strokes on her back convinced her to remain partially on the leaner, longer body. She rested her head in the curve of Cassidy's shoulder, watching the pulse tick in her throat. Under her ear, Brenna was lulled by the gradually slowing tempo of Cassidy's heart. She felt the body under her shift. Cassidy reached above their heads and lowered the lantern's flame until they were enveloped in the night's shadows.

Gingerly she moved her hand against Cassidy's stomach, nearly jumping away

when the muscles clenched in response.

"I promise I won't."

Cassidy's whispered words sifted through the hair on top of her head. The tension took some time to melt away, and Brenna was unsure what the morning would bring, but her eyes could stay open no longer, and she slept.

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Arms wrapped around Brenna, Cassidy stirred between wakefulness and sleep in a hazy, half-dream state. She heard a commotion outside. A glance at Brenna's face made her pause as she brushed her fingers against the woman's tousled hair, noticing up close the light freckles across Brenna's cheeks. *God, she is beautiful.*

Reaching over her head, Cassidy turned up the lantern flame, their conversation echoing in her mind. She sat up and wrapped her arms around her bent knees, considering everything.

Okay. So the kiss was consensual. She sighed, rubbing her face briskly. *What do we do now?*

The noises outside came closer, and as only a mother could, she recognized the plaintive voice of her own son whispering anxiously to someone else. With a sigh she set aside her own problems for the time being, opened the tent flap and looked outside.

The lantern light filtered outside just enough that she identified her son being led along by James. "What's up?" Looking up at the teen, she found herself suddenly transfixed by how much he looked like his mother — from the shape of his chin to the slope of his nose.

"He won't go to sleep." James' voice clearly displayed his agitation and his exhaustion.

"All right." Cassidy held out a hand to her son. "Come on, buddy. You can sleep in here."

"Thanks," James said in relief.

She held her son still with one hand and stood, exiting the tent. She could see James was uncomfortable. "I'm really sorry he bothered you."

"Well... I... It..." He stumbled to a halt. "When I couldn't wake Thomas to deal with it, I figured I better get you."

"Come to me anytime, all right?" she said. She accepted then that her feelings for Brenna were more than lust. Apparently they included insuring that her boys were all right too.

James frowned, and shrugged. "Yeah. Whatever."

Cassidy watched him walk back the way he had come. Turning to Ryan,