

T-Fury

By R. A. Conti

1.

The woman stood alone at the high table. Stephan stopped when he noticed her. "Excuse me, is that a T-Fury skirt?" he asked.

"Yes it is," she replied, smiling. "My daughter has several, but this one's my favorite." The skirt was dark blue with stylized stars, planets, and little rocket ships. Although the print pattern looked busy and playful, the sheer fabric draped softly over her abdomen, thighs, and legs in a sexy but nerdy way. It immediately became Stephan's favorite as well.

"You don't see those a lot," he commented as he eyed her.

"You mean on a woman my age in a place like this?" All the other women wore tight skirts and tops that exaggerated their physical features.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Stephan asked.

"Yes," the woman replied. She noted the disappointment on his face. "I was waiting for someone to notice my skirt."

"That would be me."

She offered her hand for him to shake. "My name's Andromeda." Her name surprised him. She noticed his reaction. "I could show you my birth certificate," she suggested with a wry smile on her face.

"It's a beautiful name. Are you a heavenly being?" He tried to look into her eyes but glanced down at the skirt again.

"What do you mean? Oh." She realized what he meant and smiled.

"A galaxy?" he clarified his question.

"Yes, I am. And what are you?" she teased.

He had to think fast. "I'm an astronomer, looking at the most beautiful galaxy I've ever seen." What the hell, he thought, flirting was fun. He might as well go all in.

"Well, mister astronomer."

"Stephan."

"Would you like to go from astronomer to astronaut, and explore this galaxy?" He hoped she meant what he wanted her to mean.

"Well, my rocket ship is in the shop right now, so I'm not able to do much exploring," Stephan joked.

"You're in luck, I have mine. Shall we take off?" Andromeda grabbed his hand and started toward the door. The cool night air freshened them up when they got outside.

"Okay, here's the deal. Everybody calls me Andy. I'm divorced. I have two daughters, Jessica and Emma. One is in college the other is a junior in high school. I've been looking to meet somebody different and interesting."

"Just different and interesting?" he asked. She looked puzzled. "Most women would say tall, dark, and handsome."

"Oh, right. I met him. Married him. Divorced him. He was tall dark and handsome but not much else," she explained.

"I'm sorry."

She waited for him to say more. When he didn't, she went on. "Here's where you're supposed to say something like 'He must have been crazy,' or 'He was a lucky man,' or something like that."

Stephan smiled and looked down at her skirt again. "I'm the lucky man." She blushed and squeezed his arm. It seemed he got beneath her flirting repartee and touched something inside her. "Is there someplace quiet nearby where we can sit and talk?" he asked.

"Indeed, there is." Andy took his arm and started walking down the street.

"Who says indeed anymore?" Stephan teased. She smiled again. He liked her smile. "So, what does Andy do when she's not dazzling astronomers?"

"I run a small software firm. We write the software that runs the software."

"You mean like machine language?"

"Kind of. Are you an IT person?"

He nodded. "I was on track to become a highly-paid IT person. But I watched my colleagues burn out one by one. I didn't want that to happen to me."

"What did you do?"

"I quit. And then I bought a small pet store."

"You're joking."

"No. It's not like those huge pet warehouses. It's an old-fashioned place. I have a few birds, some tropical fish, and an occasional hamster."

"No dogs or cats?"

"No. I don't handle them. I just refer people to rescue shelters."

"It sounds wonderful."

"It is. I've been happy there. And I'm making a profit. Of course, every once in a while I refuse to sell one of my fish because I've named him or her and we've bonded, but mostly I let them go when I have to."

"I like what you just said."

"You like tropical fish?" he teased.

"About being happy. No one says that anymore."

"Would you say it about yourself?" he asked. She was quiet.

"I haven't asked myself that."

"Do you have an answer?"

"Um... honestly, I'd have to say no." Her smile was gone.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought I was successful. I was proud of what I'd done. My company sells a good product, but I've come to realize something."

"Which is...?"

"The only way to have a career is to give up your soul." She frowned and looked at him; he gazed into her eyes and saw hurt there.

"And you'd like to get it back?" he asked. She nodded. "Is this how you were planning to do it?" He was referring to her T-Fury skirt. She smiled and nodded again.

"Yes, but I wasn't sure it was gonna work." Andromeda seemed like a strong, self-assured businesswoman who would know something was going to work before she even tried it. They sat quietly.

"This is happening very fast," he said.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"We're connecting."

“Does that bother you?”

“No. But this can’t be real. You can’t be real. I’m just having a wonderful dream.”

“I’m very real,” Andy replied. She looked at him. He did not reply. “I could show you how real.” He gave her a puzzled but interested look. She felt delighted she surprised him.

“Would you like to see my daughter’s collection of T-Fury skirts? She has some leggings, too.” Stephan sat there, unable to answer. There was a long pause. “If you don’t want to...,” she added, shyly.

“Are you absolutely certain this isn’t a dream?” he asked, feigning seriousness.

“Yes. Do you want me to put it in writing?” She mimed reaching into her purse for a pen and paper.

“That’s okay..., about those skirts.”

“I might have one that fits you since you like them so much,” she teased.

“Do you have a dressing room where I could try one on?”

“Matter of fact, I do.”

2.

“I’ve never connected with anyone so fast. I’m terrified.”

His comment shocked her. “You’re scared of me?” Andy asked.

“No, I’m scared of us.”

Were they already an ‘us’?

“Thanks for saying it. Me too.”

“I guess that means we’re on the right track.” He looked at her. They had just had sex. She leaned over and kissed him.

“Stop talking,” she said. He assumed she wanted to make love again.

“I’m afraid that if I stop talking, this dream’s gonna end.”

“Not a chance.” Andy pulled him close and kissed him. “I think it’s just beginning.”

3.

“Mom! Mom!” Jessica shrieked. “Why is there a naked dude in the shower? I thought it was you, so I walked right into the bathroom.”

“Oh, that’s Stephan. He spent the night.”

“Here?” Jessica’s shock delighted her mother.

Andy smiled. “Yup.”

“With you?”

“Who the heck else?”

“That’s awesome, Mom. Can I meet him?”

“Sure. That is if he didn’t have a heart attack when you burst into the room. Weren’t you supposed to be away for a few days?”

“Yeah. Weather sucked. Too risky to go scuba diving.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not,” Jessica teased, delighted she had caught her mother with a man.

4.

Jessica and Stephan were chatting over breakfast. “Yeah, your mom and I met last night,” Stephan explained. Andy kept looking for hints Stephan was uncomfortable with her daughter. He seemed genuinely at ease.

“Well, I have to go and open my shop,” he said as he rose from the table.

“Shop?” Jessica asked.

“He owns a pet shop,” Andy said.

Jessica frowned. “Oh? Where do your pets come from?” she asked.

“Well, all the fish are tank-raised. I won’t handle anything that’s taken from the wild. My birds are from an excellent breeder. I’ve been to his aviary. He’s got the happiest birds I’ve ever seen.” He was saying all the right things. Jessica felt pleased.

“That’s good,” she nodded, and then added, “Very good.”

“Jessica wants to be a biologist who restores damaged ecosystems,” Andy said.

It was Stephan’s turn to frown. “Well, unfortunately, there’s no shortage of those.” Jessica approved of him immediately.

5.

“Mom, where did you find his guy?” Jessica asked after Stephan left. Andromeda told Jessica how they met. “So you went to a club wearing my T-Fury skirt hoping to pick up a guy? Wasn’t that a little risky?”

“Yeah, and it worked,” Andy bragged. She was proud of her boldness. That would show Jessica she was not the only desirable woman in the household. “The skirt grabbed him, but the truth is we connected while we talked.”

“I’m glad. I like him. When’s the next date?”

“He asked me to drop by his pet shop if I can get away for a couple of hours.”

“Mom, make the time. I think he’s worth it,” Jessica urged.

“You like him, huh?” Andy asked. Jessica smiled and nodded. “I do, too.”

“Oh, what a surprise,” Jessica teased. You only slept with him on your first date.”

“Technically, it wasn’t the first date. It wasn’t a date at all.” She was having fun shocking her daughter.

“So you slept with him before your first date?” Jessica asked. Andromeda smiled and nodded. “I’ve done that a few times, too,” Jessica confessed, just to shock her mother. “Sometimes there never was a first date. You know how it is.”

“Yeah. Men!” They both giggled and then left for the day.

6.

“Noah’s Ark? Does that make you Noah?” Andy asked, grinning. Stephan held the door for her as she walked in.

“Thanks for dropping by.” Even though they hit it off last night, he wondered whether she would visit his shop.

“Cute place. You’re right, it does have the feel of an old-fashioned pet store,” she said, looking around.

“I wanted a place where a kid could come in and buy a goldfish in a bag. And then buy a bowl and some rocks. And then take everything home and have something alive to relate to. Something that share’s his or her evolution, the same life-force.”

“Wow, you’re a regular philosopher.”

“Not really. But I do have strong feelings about how a kid should grow up.”

“And how is that?”

“Less digital, more natural. I guess that’s how I would sum it up.”

“Great slogan for a bumper sticker,” she said. He grimaced. “Sorry, I’m not making fun of you. I think it’s wonderful.”

He showed her the fish tanks, bird cages, food, and other pet essentials. It was all thoroughly accessible. It did not have that big chain-store feeling of vastness and impersonality.

“We have pets because they are a reflection of our personalities; so why buy our pet supplies from the same kind of warehouses where we buy our electronic toys? Warehouses don’t have personalities. And, frankly, pets are not gadgets or toys.”

“I can see why you’re happy here. It feels right.”

“Thanks. Interest you in goldfish? You might like Sandra, here. She’s a charmer. I’ll give you a very special price,” he said, pointing to a tank that contained at least twenty goldfish. Andy had no idea which one was Sandra, but it didn’t matter. She realized he was happy and envied him.

“Gee, I would hate to come between you two. It seems like you have something special,” she teased.

“Well, it wouldn’t be so bad if you’d let me visit her once in a while,” he suggested. She thought about it.

“So whose fish would she be? Yours or mine?” she asked.

“I was hoping she would be ours,” he said. She felt delighted he signaled he wanted to see more of her.

“I don’t know. It feels right,” she said, “But it’s almost too perfect.” She did not mean the goldfish.

“You feel that way, too?” he asked. She nodded. “Now you know why I kept saying it felt like a dream.” He paused, not sure if he should add anything. But he could not resist. “There’s nobody else I’d rather share a dream with,” he added, softly.

“But the reality is..., well..., reality,” she said. He was not certain she preferred reality to a dream.

“Ah, reality; does anybody know what it is?” he asked.

“There’s that philosopher again,” she teased. He grinned. “Next you’re gonna say ‘What does it all mean?’” she added, seriously.

“Not a question you’ve asked yourself lately?”

“It doesn’t mean anything at all,” she answered, and hoped he would not think she was a pessimist. It seemed she was now talking about philosophy.

“Do you mean that darkly? Like life is meaningless and we should live in despair?” It was not a question he would normally ask a woman he just met, but Andy was no ordinary woman.

She smiled at him. “No, I mean it in what you might call a light way. What’s the point of asking? Just live. Celebrate.” There was a long pause. It was a good answer. She realized something inside her had changed. He was different and he made her feel different, too.

“Speaking of celebrating, do you want this little goldfish or not?”

“I’ll take her. Do you deliver?” she teased.

“Depends. Will I get a tip?”

“Oh, yeah.”

7.

“I need to tell you the truth about me,” Andy whispered to Stephan. He was lying next to her. She sounded nervous. In the few weeks they had been together, they had fallen into an intimacy deeper than he had ever known with any other woman. He wondered what she could possibly have left to share with him.

“I’m dead,” she said, solemnly. “I’ve been dead for many years.”

“I don’t understand,” he said, alarmed. Andy was the most alive woman he had ever met. She had a passion for life he had never seen in anyone else.

“I have a son. He’s fifteen. He was born severely deformed and has been living in an institution his whole life.” Stephan listened patiently. He tried not to react to what she said. He wanted to hear her out.

“It was my fault.” She was close to crying. He touched her face hoping to soothe and calm her. Having a handicapped child was no big deal. Hiding him, or hiding from him, was. “I found out I was pregnant right after my husband left. I hoped my pregnancy would somehow bring him back, but it didn’t.” She stopped and fought to hold back tears so she could finish the story.

“I went into a deep depression and my psychiatrist gave me antidepressants. She told me they were safe for fetuses.” She paused again, closer to tears, and whispered, “One of them wasn’t.” She cried for a moment and then continued. “Joseph was severely deformed at birth. His hands and legs were useless. He couldn’t make any noises with his mouth. But his internal organs were okay. He could live a long time with proper care.”

She looked at Stephan to see if he seemed shocked or disgusted. She would not have blamed him if he got up and left. The pained expression on his face surprised her. He was not feeling pain for Joseph’s deformity; it was sympathy for her suffering.

“I stopped going to see him around his second birthday. I couldn’t look at him. Every time I saw him I knew his deformity was my fault. I had been selfish; I had put my anguish about my divorce and depression before my pregnancy. He ought to be a normal fifteen-year-old boy. But he’s in a motorized cart that carries him around.

“He’s smart. His brain is normal. It took them a while to figure out how to teach him; but once they developed a technique, he started learning stuff. He can read and write. He uses a stylus and keyboard to type out words.” The worst of her anguish had passed, but she was still wary of Stephan’s reaction. How much more would he listen before he became disgusted with her and left, forever?

“He had excellent people taking care of him. I convinced myself he didn’t need a mom. I told Jessica and Emma to tell him I was dead.” Stephan pulled her closer and kissed her. She started to cry. She had never experienced such acceptance before.

“Jessica went to see him last week. He told her point-blank that he knew I was alive and wanted to see me. Jessica doesn’t know how he found out about me. No one ever told him. He just knew. I have to go and beg his forgiveness. I don’t know how I’m going to do it.”

“I’ll go with you if you want.”

“No, Emma and I will visit him. But could you stay with me at the motel? I’m going to need you.” She looked into his eyes, hoping he still wanted to be with her. “I’ve never told anyone else about this.” He assumed she meant past boyfriends.

“You weren’t ready to tell them?” he asked.

“They weren’t ready to hear this. My relationships would get to the point where there should be no more secrets. I would look at my boyfriends and realize that, once I told them, they would never see me the same way again. So I dumped them.”

“I don’t see you the same way, either. I see you as a tortured but brave woman who has the strength to ask forgiveness. I admire you.” Her eyes widened and she stared at him in disbelief.

“So now you know that I’m not just the cutie in the T-Fury skirt that you flirted with at a club one night, and then went home with her. I got some serious shit going on,” she said and tried to smile through her tears. He just hugged her.

8.

Joseph smiled at Emma when they walked into his room. Then he looked at his mother who seemed terrified. She had wondered whether he just wanted to tell her how much he hated her for abandoning him.

He started typing and letters appeared on the computer screen above his head. He spelled out ‘Mom.’ She started to cry and rushed to hug him. “Joseph, I’m so sorry. I was wrong. I should not have abandoned you. You have every right to hate me.”

He typed out, ‘I don’t hate you.’

They began a tentative conversation. They told each other a little about themselves and their lives. After some chitchat, Andy apologized for not being able to take care of him at home.

‘This is my home. Why would I want to live with you? My friends are here. We play chess and watch movies,’ he typed.

“So you’re not bothered by your handicap?” she asked, surprised.

‘What handicap? You’re the handicapped ones; you are all exactly alike. I’m unique. There is no one else on Earth like me.’ His statement stunned Andy. Was he just being kind or did he genuinely feel that way?

“Is it okay if I come to visit you?” she asked. He nodded. “I haven’t played chess in years; maybe you could teach me?” His face lit up and he nodded again.

“I’m sorry, Joseph. I wasn’t ashamed of you or anything like that. I was ashamed of myself. I should have been thinking of you when I was pregnant, but things were really bad. I put myself and my emotional needs ahead of just being a good mom.”

She held his hand and looked deeply into his eyes. She saw herself in there. He did not blame or hate her. “Will you forgive me?” she whispered to him. He nodded. “I don’t deserve a son like you.”

He smiled and typed, ‘You’re right, you don’t.’

9.

“I heard you had an old-fashioned pet store, but I had no idea it would be this charming,” the woman said as she came in the door. Stephan was cleaning one of the tanks in the back. She stood with her back to him, admiring one of his special birds. She turned.

“Alexa?” he said, stunned. How the hell had she found him?

“Yes. In the flesh. Which is all yours, by the way.”

“What?”

“Don’t I get a kiss, for old times’ sake?” She came over and gave him a token kiss on the cheek. “So how are you?”

“Um, what brings you here?” *Why the hell have you come back into my life?* He thought.

“Just moved here. New job downtown. I heard about this place and I wanted to check it out.” *And check you out,* she thought.

“So you’re living here now?” he asked, still in shock. She nodded. “With your husband?” She shook her head.

“We divorced about a year ago. Kids were in college. We decided we didn’t need to be together anymore. Then I started looking for you.”

“Looking for me? Why?” She had started to alarm him.

“You’re asking me why?” she said, and her facial expression changed from businesslike to sultry. “You don’t remember why? What we had, what we were with each other; that was the best time in my life. I was stupid to walk away from it.”

“But you did walk away. Is this a visit for old times’ sake?” he asked, trying to take control of the conversation.

“No. It’s not about old times. It’s about new times. Picking up where we left off.”

“But that was twenty years ago!”

“I never stopped loving you. I realized that after I was already gone. I made a stupid mistake which I’ve regretted since then. Now I’m here to fix it,” she explained as if it was simple and he would see how logical it was.

He began to realize she was serious. “Fix it? How?”

“I want you. I want you back. I want you, now!”

“That’s not possible,” he said, bluntly, and then backed away from her.

“I’ll make it possible.” She moved to kiss him but he put out his arm to stop her.

“Didn’t you assume I would be married, with kids of my own?”

“I don’t care whether you marry me. I want you to fuck me like you did before.” She tried again to kiss him.

“But that was twenty years ago!” he repeated, louder than the first time.

“So what? Some things never change.” She reached for his crotch.

“Yes. I’m afraid they do!” he said as he backed away.

“You mean you don’t love me anymore?” she asked in mock disbelief.

“That’s right,” he answered sternly.

“But what about our love?” she asked, pouting.

“It ended. You ended it. I moved on.”

“I need you. Are you married?”

“No. But I am with someone.”

“So I have a chance?” Her face brightened at the prospect of a challenge.

“No you don’t,” he said, coldly.

“You mean you would choose someone else over me?” she said, pouting.

“Yes.” He tried to sound as convincing as possible.

“I don’t understand how you could say that after all we were together.”

“But we’re different people now.”

“You may think you are, but I know you’re not. Neither am I. My fire is still burning. It never went out. Are you telling me this isn’t the day you’ve dreamed about for the past twenty years?”

“I never dreamed about it. I never even thought about it,” he protested. He decided it was time for her to leave. He started pushing her toward the door. She started to unbutton her jacket.

“I’d be happy to refresh your memory,” she said.

“Please don’t do that.”

“Why? Are you afraid you won’t be able to resist me when you see me naked? You never could before.” He saw she had no blouse under the jacket, just a revealing low-cut bra.

“Alexa, please leave. I have a store to run.” *And a life to live— without you!*

“Okay, I’ll leave, but only if you promise to have a drink with me.”

“No. Just go.”

“Well, then I’ll finish taking my clothes off. You got a back room? You don’t want your customers seeing a naked woman. It might be bad for business.”

“Please. Just. Leave. Now!” *She’s insane!* He thought.

“Only if you’ll promise to meet me at six at the bar down the street.”

“No.”

“All right. Have it your way. I’ll just come back here every day until you fuck me.”

“What?”

“Fuck me! Remember? We used to go at it like bunnies. I get hot just thinking about all the sex we had.”

“Did you come here because you’re horny?”

“Oh, no, Stephan. I didn’t come just to fuck you. I came to get you back.” He pushed her toward the door. “Ok, I’ll leave now, but you better meet me at six.”

10.

He called Andy at work. “An old friend just came by. Well, she wasn’t just a friend. She was the love of my life— twenty years ago.”

“That must have been special,” Andy said, wondering why he called her about this.

“It was terrible.”

“Who was she?”

“Her name is Alexa. She and I were inseparable when we were in college.”

“Hot stuff, huh?” She still could not understand why he called her.

“I think there’s something wrong with her. She wants to pick up where we left off. The only way I could get rid of her was to promise to meet her for a drink. I don’t want to, but she threatened to come back to the store if I didn’t.” He did not mention how she wanted him to fuck her.

Andy finally understood his distress. “Do you think having a drink with her will get rid of her?”

“Honestly, I’m afraid not.”

“Did you tell her about me?”

“Of course. It didn’t matter to her. She just kept pressuring me.”

“What if I come along?”

“No way! I don’t want to drag you into this.”

“So meet her, and just get rid of her.”

“If I can get rid of her,” he said grimly, and then hung up.

11.

“So, did you tell your girlfriend about me?” Alexa asked. He nodded. “Was she jealous?” He shook his head. “Oh? Then let’s do something to make her jealous.” They were in a booth at the back of the bar where it was dark and people could kiss if they wanted to and nobody would notice. She leaned toward him. He pulled back.

“No. I agreed to have a drink with you, and then I’m leaving.” *Have a nice life*, he thought. *Get out of mine*.

“You can’t do that.”

“I will be doing that,” he said, coldly.

“There’s something you don’t know.”

“Then tell me quick so I can leave.”

“After we split up, I found out I was pregnant. You have a son. His name is Anthony,” she said, hoping the news would shock him.

“I don’t believe you. And may I remind you that we didn’t split up; you ran out on me. Why didn’t you tell me back then?”

“I knew I had fucked up when I left you. I thought you would think I was trying to trick you into getting back together. I didn’t think you’d believe me.”

“I don’t believe you now,” he replied.

“Would you believe a DNA test?”

“I’m not giving you any of my DNA.”

“Kiss me.”

“What? No!”

“Kiss me, right here. Not a big sloppy kiss. Just on my lips. Maybe you’ll remember how my kisses use to excite you.”

“I’m leaving. Please stop bothering me. I don’t want to see you again.” He got up and left. She did not follow him. She had other plans.

12.

“A son?” Andy said. He nodded. “Do you believe her?” They were having dinner at her place. She was eating. He was not. She could see how distraught he was.

“No,” he said, looking down at his mashed potatoes and peas.

Andy finished chewing. “So why would she bring this up now? The kid’s all grown up. Her ex was his daddy, not you. All you did was provide the sperm.” She put another forkful in her mouth. As she chewed she thought about what he told her.

“I told her I didn’t believe her. I told her never to come back.”

“But you think she will?”

“I know she will. I don’t think she’s done,” he said, glumly. She felt sorry for him.

13.

The next day Alexa came into the shop with Anthony in tow. “This is your son,” she proclaimed. Anthony looked embarrassed. Stephan did not greet him and avoided eye contact. “You and I made him,” she said.

“I still don’t believe you,” he said. Stephan avoided looking at Anthony but also felt sorry for him. *This must be awkward, to say the least*, he thought.

“So you don’t believe he’s your son?” Alexa challenged him.

“He’s your son, not mine.” He said it quietly, so he could control his anger.

“You wouldn’t like us all to be one big happy family?”

“I don’t need a happy family.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this; rejecting your own son! And you’re rejecting me!”

“I never rejected you. You rejected me. That was twenty years ago. We both should have gotten over it by now.”

“Well, I haven’t. I still love you,” she insisted like a broken record.

“No. You only think you do.”

“How can you say that? We were happy together.” She tried to plead with him, but not appear desperate. Anthony watched in silence.

“If that was true, why did you leave?”

“I was fucked up.”

“I think you still are.”

Anthony wished he could be somewhere far away.

“No, I’m not! Don’t say that! I know my own feelings.” She paused, trying to find a compelling argument that would win him over. “I know your feelings. Deep down inside you still love me. I know it!” She glanced at Anthony who again looked away.

Stephan did not know how he could get rid of her. Then Anthony spoke up. “Mom, why don’t we leave him so he can think about all this? It’s a lot to take in all at once.”

“What a good idea!” Alexa replied. She turned abruptly and walked out with Anthony behind her. Stephan hoped he would never see her again, but he also felt this was not over.

14.

He heard the door open and someone called out his name. It was Anthony. Stephan immediately became cautious. Anthony had not said much when he and Alexa were in the store. He had no reason to believe Anthony was like her. Nevertheless, maybe he had come to confront Stephan.

“Can I talk to you?” the boy asked as they shook hands. “I wanted to apologize for my mother and tell you what happened.” Stephan relaxed a little. “She’s been bipolar for several years. She won’t take her meds. She drove my father away. She found about you from the college alumni directory about six months ago and became obsessed with seeing you again. I tried to tell her you wouldn’t want anything to do with her after all these years, but she insisted she could get you back.

“She hoped to guilt-trip you by using me. I didn’t want any of this, and I thought I talked her out of it. But one day she left. I found out she had rented a hotel room here. I knew what she was up to, so I followed her, but that played right into her scheme. I tried to talk her out of seeing you, but she demanded I come with her. I had to let it play out, so I agreed.

“I have tried several times to institutionalize her but she wouldn’t sign the papers. Now the psychiatrists have proof that her fantasies are not just fantasies. This was harmless, but others could be dangerous. She could get an idea in her head, then walk off and disappear, and we would never see her again. Now I can put her in an institution that’s not just a warehouse. She’ll have a job and friends. She will stay on her meds, and she will be safe.”

“You must feel terrible about this.”

“I do; she’s my mom and I love her. But I have no choice. I have to see that she’s taken care of. Anyway, you helped a lot, even though you didn’t know what was happening.”

“I could write a statement for the doctors if that would be helpful.”

“It might. Thanks.” He turned to leave.

“Anthony, wait. There’s something I wanted to tell you. She was telling the truth about how much we were in love. She was the most incredible woman in the world. I was crazy about her. I would have done anything for her. We thought we couldn’t live without each other. Then one day she just left. She took a big part of me with her. I literally cried for months after she was gone. I looked for her and tried to figure out why she ran away, but I never found a reason. Now I think she was having mental problems even back then. I would have welcomed her back. I’m sorry I can’t do that now. Sorry for her,” Stephan said, and then paused to look at Anthony.

“She might never again find the kind of love we had,” Stephan continued. “But I’ve found a woman who’s as incredible as your mom was.” He hoped what he had said had not overwhelmed the boy. “And I need to apologize to you. When I insisted I was not your father it wasn’t because of you. Your dad was your only real father. He provided his love. That’s the most important thing. All I did was provide the sperm. That’s all I meant.”

“I’m glad you said that,” Anthony replied. He looked into Stephan’s eyes and added, “Thanks for your understanding.” He turned to leave. Just as he was going out the door, he paused and said, “And thanks for the sperm.” Anthony smiled and was gone.

15.

“Oh, hi, Stephan. My mom’s not here,” Jessica said.

“That’s okay. She wasn’t expecting me. Do you know when she’ll be back?”

“I think she’ll be gone all weekend. She mentioned something about an old girlfriend coming to visit. I think they went down the shore together. You know how it is. Old friend, old times; that sort of stuff.” Stephan sensed Jessica was teasing him playfully about being old and nostalgic. He decided to tease back.

“Did she take that T-Fury skirt?” Stephan asked. Jessica grinned.

“No. She said she only wears that for you. When she wears it at all.”

“You mean when I let her before I take it off her, don’t you?” he said. Jessica grinned again.

“She likes you. I’ve never seen her this happy with anyone.” Stephan sensed the conversation had shifted from playful to serious. Jessica gave him an opening to share his feelings for Andromeda.

“You know I feel the same way about her, don’t you?” he asked.

Jessica smiled and nodded. “It’s been obvious for some time now.”

“I’m glad,” he said, and then paused. “Does she know how I feel?”

“I can assure you that, yes, she certainly does.”

“Tell her I dropped by,” Stephan said abruptly and then left. Jessica wondered if she had somehow embarrassed him.

16.

“That was sweet,” she said. They had been fooling around. It was not foreplay because they had not planned to make love. It was merely playing. There was an easiness and familiarity with what they did. They had all the time in the world. She opened eventually. He entered her languorously and then slowly and softly made love to her. He moved off her after he finished and they both were on their backs, looking up at the ceiling.

“I owe you an explanation,” she began.

“For what?”

“About where I was last weekend.”

“It’s none of my business.”

“In a way, it is. This is a part of my life you should know about.” He remained quiet. “I was with someone else. He and I go back a long, long way.” She paused so she could gather the courage to begin her story.

“His name is Eric. Our lives have been intertwined since middle school. He was the first boy I ever loved. His parents pressured us to break up. I’m talking extreme, nasty, and heavy mean pressure. The more they pressed, the closer we became. We eventually forged a powerful bond that cannot be broken.

“I can’t imagine my life without him. He is me, and I am him,” she said. “I don’t know how else to say it. Without him, I’d be somebody different. You probably wouldn’t like me. I would never have put on that T-Fury skirt. I would have been wearing the same clothes as all the other desperate women in the club that night and you would have walked right by without even noticing me.”

Neither of them said anything for a time. Andromeda thought this would be the end with Stephan. He would just get up and walk out of her life.

Instead he asked, “Are you in love with him?”

“I’m in love with you. But I do love him. I always have and I always will. That’s just the way it is, and I won’t change it; not for you, not for anybody else. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I think it’s beautiful. Look, he could easily be a she, maybe your oldest girlfriend and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

She felt stunned that he saw it that way. “Well, yes, but there’s one big difference. I wouldn’t be having sex with my oldest girlfriend.” He nodded. “So, you don’t have a problem with this?” she asked, incredulous. “I thought you would feel threatened.” He shook his head. “Everybody except my mom and dad gave us all kinds of shit. You’re the only other person that hasn’t.”

She looked at him as if she was seeing the real Stephan for the first time. She never dreamed she would find a man who would accept and support her unique intimacy with Eric. She had kept it a secret from all her other boyfriends. She was not even sure why she had told him. It was just something she felt she had to do. For the first time, she realized Stephan loved all of her. He was willing to accept all of her. She started to cry.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes. You know how I said I couldn’t imagine my life without Eric?” she said. He nodded. “I just realized I can’t imagine my life without you, either.” He kissed her. They lay together without saying another word and eventually drifted off to sleep.

17.

“I’m your new lab partner,” Andromeda said. Eric did not even look up when she spoke. Her voice grated on him.

“Don’t need a lab partner. I already know all this stuff backward and forward,” he protested. She stood there waiting for him to be a gentleman and invite her to sit down. He did not.

“Okay if I sit down?”

“Whatever,” he said gruffly. She sat down. He stared at the beakers and other lab supplies in front of him and ignored her.

“My name is Andromeda,” she said, trying to be friendly. He smirked but did not look at her.

“Really?” he mocked and then looked up.

“Yes, really.”

“You named for the galaxy?”

“Actually, no; the galaxy was named for me,” she said, smiling. It was the funniest reply he ever heard. At that moment his whole life changed. He did not realize it, but he immediately fell in love.

They became friends, but not best friends, at least not right away. As they matured into adolescence they grew closer and closer. They heard about sex from their friends and decided to try it with each other just to see what all the excitement was about.

They went up in the attic of the old mansion, found a cozy corner, cleaned it up, and put down a thick blanket. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. She started touching him everywhere on his body. Before, when they had touched each other, there were places they did not go. They did not know why, but it was no longer important.

They touched each other’s arms, hands, legs, even feet; but they did not stop there. She touched his ass and he touched her breasts. Then they touched each other’s crotches. Something happened at that moment. They made an instantaneous connection, deeper than they had already known. She pulled down her shorts and panties. He pulled down his shorts and boxers. They stood there with their sex organs exposed to each other for the first time.

He was erect. She reached out, unsure if she should touch it. He reached toward her breasts and knew nothing could keep him from touching them. They looked into each other’s eyes and knew what they would do next. She reached for her shorts. There was a condom in the pocket. She took it out and handed it to him. He unwrapped it and tentatively worked it onto his penis. It was shiny with lubricant and she reached up to touch it. She held it. He held her hand in his. Then he sat down next to her.

They both knew they were ready, although they did not yet know what they were ready for. They were about to find out. She laid down on her back. “I think we start like this,” she said as she opened her legs. He knelt between her thighs and aimed his penis at her vagina. They both held their breath. “I’m ready if you are,” she said.

He eased the head of his cock inside her. She remained absolutely still. He kept pushing in. Then he felt an obstacle and paused. “You have to push hard,” she said. He pushed and felt the obstacle give way. She said, “Ow!” and he immediately stopped.

“Oh God! Did I hurt you?” he asked.

“I’m okay. It’s supposed to hurt the first time. Don’t stop.” He pushed in all the way. Little sparks had lit her insides on fire. It was like no other feeling she had ever experienced. He hesitated, afraid he would hurt her again. “Do you know how to do it?” she said.

“I think so,” he answered.

“Go ahead.” He pulled his penis a short distance out and then pushed it back in. She grunted. He did it again. “I think you just keep going like that. It feels great,” she encouraged. That was all he needed. He made sure his knees were solidly on the floor and he could swing his groin back and forth as he fucked her.

He felt ready to come. “I think I’m gonna...,” he said, grunting.

“Good. Keep going.” He pumped faster, pushed deeper, and exploded into the condom. Then he remained on top of her. “I love you, Eric,” she said.

No one had ever said those words to him before. His parents believed words of love were unnecessary. They felt they showed their love for Eric, his brother, and sister, by giving them food, clothing, and shelter. He tried to reply but just stuttered. She stopped him.

“You don’t have to say it if you don’t want to.”

“But I do want to,” he replied. He had a hymen of his own, an emotional hymen. It was not like the wall in her vagina that was there to keep objects out. It was a wall to keep feelings in. She broke it.

He had felt her ‘I love you,’ in the deepest place inside him. He had never felt anything there before. He never even knew there was such a deep place. She had found it. He resolved to keep her there for the rest of his life.

They dressed. Andy left and went home. Eric stayed to straighten up. He had been inside her and felt her inside him. Their bodies had merged and they were no longer two but one. Even back in their separate homes, they felt each other.

18.

Andy and Eric liked sex, kept doing it, and his parents found out eventually. He was from a strict religious family and they were outraged and angry. They forbade him to have any contact with her. Eric and Andy did not stop and they got caught again. His parents called her parents. They were not angry. To her parents, they were just doing what kids have always done.

Eric’s parents tried to control his every movement, but he and Andromeda met at her house when her parents were at work. She assumed her parents knew, but they were discreet. Eric’s parents accused them of being irresponsible and immoral. They started a smear campaign to demonize Andy’s parents. They were afraid of what his parents might do, so they asked her not to see him anymore.

Eric and Andromeda did not stop; they were together less often. The fewer times they were alone, the more intense their trysts became. They thought of each other constantly even when they were apart.

Then Eric decided to run away. He asked her to go with him and she refused. They were too young. He asked whether he could live at her house. Her parents said it would be okay, but they warned him it might be temporary, at best. Since he was underage there could be legal problems when his parents found out. He changed his mind about running away.

Eric’s family finally moved to another town. By then Andromeda and Eric were old enough to drive so they met halfway between their towns. They would meet on weekends when they were supposed to be with friends or on school trips.

That is how their tradition of occasional clandestine meetings started. They had wonderful, intense, and ecstatic weekends making love and immersing themselves in each other. Long separations followed. Each time they were together they had to make it so intense that it could carry them through their time apart.

Eric got in a car accident on the way home from one of their trysts and landed in the hospital. Andy found out and panicked. Her parents tried to help her find a way to see him. Nothing worked out. It was months before they were together again.

The next time they saw each other they agreed what they had was so special they could never stop. They pledged to somehow stay together, no matter how difficult that would be, even if they saw each other only a couple of times a year.

They hoped that when they finally got to college they would be free, but that did not work. His parents sent him to a college so far away they would need airplanes to see each other.

As a last resort, his parents decided to get him married as soon as he finished college. They thought it would force an end to the affair. After the wedding, they manipulated every facet of his married life. It seemed like Eric and Andromeda could not go on. Then he managed to get a job that required him to travel. He found ways to come to her city so they could be together. They swore again never to let their powerful intimacy end.

It was certain that Andromeda's husband Kevin would find out. He did what any husband would have done; he forbade her to see Eric. But Eric had fought his parents, so they figured she could fight her husband, too. That is what she and Kevin fought about. Andy refused to stop seeing Eric. When he came to town, she defied her husband and they spent a weekend together. She got pregnant with Joseph. Kevin walked out.

She could have raised two daughters on her own, but he harassed her and forced her to hire lawyers to fight him all the time. He threatened to take their daughters away from her. Her life came apart and she became depressed.

So she and Eric still saw each other whenever they could because they were so special to each other. It reminded them of why they defied his parents and her husband. It was not just loving; it went deeper. It was a shared struggle. But they struggled for a reason; they wanted to be free, and to be together.

They had a bond. It was like a fire they kept burning all these years they would never allow to go out. It was them.

19.

"He is me and I am him," she explained to Stephan. "Our world comes into being when we meet and ends when we separate. We are the only people in it. We've kept it going for a long time, and we will keep it going as long as we can." She paused, assumed she had already said too much, and Stephan would get up and walk out. But he sat there. She thought she had not made herself painstakingly clear so she explained more.

"So when you get me you also get him. That's just the way it is and it's not going to change. He is so much a part of me that I would not be the person you're attracted to if it wasn't for him." Neither of them said anything for a time.

"So, would it be possible for me to meet him?" he asked, shocking her. Even her daughters had never met him.

"Did I just hear you right?" she asked, in disbelief. He nodded. "You don't have a problem with this?" He shook his head. "Everybody except my parents gave us all kinds of shit. You're the only person that hasn't."

"We're not kids anymore. We know how difficult life can be. If we were twenty I might be insanely jealous. But if he means so much to you that you've fought to be with him all your life, how could I not admire you both? I wouldn't dream of splitting you up. Instead, I'd like to meet him. Especially if it meant I would be getting to know you better."

"But you get this, right? We spend time together. We make love. Doesn't that bother you?"

"What, that you and he have sex? You bonded over sex. But I do have one question. If his wife died or divorced him, would you want to be with him?"

“When we were teenagers we assumed we would do the happily ever after thing, but now we’re much older and we know that happily ever after doesn’t exist. For us, it’s happily right now.”

“Is that a yes or a no?” he asked, pointedly.

“A year ago, I would have said yes. Then I met you, so now the answer is most definitely no.”

20.

“I need to be sure I have this right,” she said, as she poured his coffee. “You don’t feel I should belong only to you?”

“I think people should be together because they want to, and not because they have to. Not because they made vows or something like that. I get that you want to be with him. I get that you want to be with me. I also get that he and I are not competing for you.”

“There is one thing I need to make clear. I want to be with him sometimes, but I want to be with you all the time. I want to marry you.”

“Did you just propose?” he asked, astonished. She nodded. Stephan sat there drinking his coffee. She wondered if his silence meant he was thinking about everything so he could decide. He was quiet for a while.

“You wanna think it over, and get back to me?” she asked, tentatively.

“No,” he replied. *Does he mean, no, I don’t want to think it over, Andy asked herself, or, no I don’t want to marry you?* She was afraid to ask. He could have more time to decide, no matter how long it took.

“Let me tell you why,” he said. She thought he was about to blow her off. “You weren’t afraid to wear that odd skirt. You’re not afraid to love somebody just because of who he is and how he fits into your life. You’re not afraid of life like everyone else is. Why would I want to change that? It’s why I love you. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

21.

“Do you, Andromeda Jenkins, take Stephan Burko to be your lawfully wedded husband?” the Justice of the Peace asked. Andy stood there in her T-fury skirt, eagerly waiting to respond.

“Yes,” she said, gazing at Stephan.

He stood there in dark pants and his favorite T-Fury t-shirt, the one with the Monarch butterflies on it. He had wanted to marry her in the tights that matched her skirt. Jessica and Emma loved the idea, but Andromeda talked him out of it. She joked that she was the only heavenly being in the family. He reminded her that he was an astronaut. There was much of her galaxy yet to explore, and he looked forward to spending the rest of his life exploring it.

The Justice of the Peace repeated the question. “Yes,” Stephan replied. The brief ceremony ended and their new life together began. They both felt it would be a romantic adventure unlike any two lovers had ever shared.

It was.