

“Stay on the path when you get to the beach,” Iris cautioned. “The rocks get slippery when they’re wet, and they’re hard to see in this weather.” I promised to be careful, pulled on my sweatshirt, and headed out.

Moisture, increasingly salty as I approached the ocean, collected on my face. The fog thickened until I felt as if I were swimming, unable to see more than a few feet in any direction. No cars passed; I was the only one crazy enough to seek out the beach. Preoccupied with thoughts of Cheryl, I forgot Iris’ warning, stepped on a rock and slid, landing sharply on my butt and sending a shock up my spine. My unintended seat was large and flat so, removing my sneakers and socks, I propped my feet on the rock below mine and listened to the crash of the waves. My eyes stung and at first I blamed the salt hanging heavy in the air; then I felt the tears sliding down my skin.

Neither particularly sad or in pain, I wasn’t so much crying as leaking, but I couldn’t seem to stop. I have no idea how long I sat there, staring ahead into the impenetrable fog, my mind and emotions numb, before a large body settled next to me.

“You really need to learn to make more noise.”

“I’ll work on it.”

“What are you doing here, Riley?”

“I thought you might want some company. And the ladies were worried.”

“I didn’t mean to upset anyone.”

Riley ran a finger under my right eye, wiping away a stray tear. “Except yourself, apparently.”

“I’m just having a little pity party.”

“Not much of a party if you’re by yourself. Plus, misery loves company. Want to share?”

“Not really.” But I did, so after a bit I continued. “I’m tired of being uprooted. I’m not good at ‘going with the flow.’ Computers, I understand. They’re predictable. You put data in, you get data out. If the program and the data are good, the results are good. If the results aren’t right, you know you have to fix something.”