



Shattered

Karen Monroe

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Dedication

Mom, thanks for believing in me and allowing me the time to make my dreams come true. I love you!

Critique-Corner, I could say thank you a million times and it still wouldn't suffice. All of the hard work and effort has finally paid off. I owe all my accomplishment to you guys. Gail, Pam, and John you guys are the best!!

CHAPTER ONE

"You can't go to the Summit!" Marie screamed. "I got the damn people from Women's Health coming here next week!"

Steve moved the cell phone away from his throbbing ear, and raised his voice. "I told you I didn't want to do the damn thing."

Marie scoffed. "Look. Macmillan International is a recognized company, but I am trying to turn the image into a household name. This is what you said you wanted, Steven."

He winced. Steven. His sister must really have her panties in a knot. "Listen Steven, if you want to stop then say so, but don't have me scheduling shit you're going to drop. I have a reputation too, big brother."

"I will come back for the damn interview. If not, you can call in the SWAT team and come looking for me."

"You are so friggin' ungrateful. Whatever."

The sound of a harsh click ended the conversation, and Steve snapped the phone shut with a sigh. Marie hated being thwarted. The simple fact she'd tracked him down this late at night was proof enough. His responsible mind balked, and he almost turned the SUV around.

"No," Steve said aloud, willing his conscience to let go.

He was getting away and the hell with everyone.

Relaxing into the drive, he pressed a button on the radio to turn up the volume of the CD player. The smooth, winded pipes of Brandford Marsalis filled the large SUV, and he savored the calming music. In five hours, maybe less if he floored the pedal, Steve would be pulling up in a driveway far away from everyone and everything. He couldn't wait. First though, he needed some gas.

A huge, brightly lit sign stood like a sentry off the side of the freeway. Checking his mirrors, Steve was glad he'd decided to leave late. At eleven at night, there were few cars on the road. He moved swiftly from the fast lane to the exit lane, and a quick right brought him directly into the gas station. Steve wasn't familiar with the area, but he knew where he was.

The City of Industry was just what the name said. Steve wouldn't be surprised if he owned a thriving business here. The refinement and processing of oil was his main trade, but of late, he'd been steadily breaking into the market of computers. Most likely, he did own a business here, but since he owned so many, he didn't really know.

Maneuvering the SUV next to a gas pump, he waited patiently for an attendant. When a minute passed and no one knocked on his window, Steve looked around. The sign next to him clearly read "full service" but a closer look revealed "between the hours of 8 and 8."

Great.

Realizing he would have to get out and pump his own gas was kind of funny. How amusing was it that he, an oil magnate, had to fill his own tank. Laughing at the irony of

the situation, Steve opened the door and glanced around, hoping all the muggers and carjackers were in for the night. The last thing he wanted was a gun pointed in his face.

The station appeared deserted, but there were other businesses around. A fast food restaurant sat on an adjacent corner next to another gas station. A mini-mart, brightly lit, teemed with life. He shrugged, thinking it was probably safe.

Steve opened the gas tank and untwisted the cap. Grabbing the hose and swiping his credit card, he began pumping. He kept alert, checking for anything out of the ordinary. As his gaze moved around the empty lot, Steve blinked in shock. A woman stood at a phone booth near the street ... naked.

Well, not naked exactly. A jacket was wrapped around her body. But, from the long expanse of legs showing, he doubted she was wearing clothes—at least she wasn't wearing anything that should be described as clothes.

A hooker. She's probably on the phone calling her pimp.

Just then, the woman slammed the phone against the booth, stomping her feet. The sounds of her ridiculously high stilettos pounded against the pavement like loud cracks. After the smashing session, she looked around furtively, and walked toward the station.

Steve watched her approach with a mixture of carnal fascination and interest. He'd seen prostitutes before, but not the normal street-walking variety. He told himself that simple curiosity kept his gaze fastened to her, but he knew it wasn't true. Even from a distance, something about the woman beckoned to him.

She had a great pair of legs, and beautiful red hair. Well, not red exactly, Steve amended. It was almost burgundy, making him wonder if it came from a bottle. The long, straight tresses fell way past her shoulders—a definite eye catcher. His vision traveled down the length of her body, noting well-defined limbs, the muscles prominent and highlighted by five-inch heels.

Steve forced his mind away from the thought of those legs, and what they were probably trained to do to a man. Shaking his head to loosen the sudden erotic turn in his thoughts, he scolded himself mentally. He must really be on edge to be having ideas about a prostitute. Here she was, walking the streets at night.

Poor girl.

His eyes continued to follow her, watching as she frantically pounded on the windows and doors of the gas station. The attendant awoke rubbing his eyes, looked at her briefly, and waved her away with a nonchalant shrug. Again, Steve felt a buzz of sympathy. *What a rough life*, he thought.

He'd seen a documentary once on prostitutes. *Hookers on the Stroll*, he remembered the title. The special depicted a weary, depressing life for ladies of the night, and Steve shook his head in wonder.

The nozzle handle suddenly clicked, startling Steve from his depressing reverie. He put the woman, her legs, and her problems from his mind, and slid back into the driver's seat. Nothing he could do for her. Time to get back on the road.

The engine running smoothly, Steve's mind turned toward his retreat in the mountains. He was reaching to put the SUV in gear, when a quick rap sounded on the window.

Steve jumped. The woman stood at the side of his car, and for a moment, he thought of waving her away. But something in her eyes stopped him. She didn't look weary or worn out. She looked pissed off and ready to fight. The challenging gaze, daring him to

move an inch, paused Steve's hand mid air. Not sure if he should roll down the window, he studied her silently.

Prostitutes aren't dangerous, right?

Maybe she looked to ply her trade. Finally deciding to trust his instincts, he rolled down the window. He would let her down gently. No need to be rude about it.

"Hey ... I uh ... I'm not in to that sort of thing. Thanks though." He sounded pleasant, and hoped she wouldn't take the rebuff as an insult.

"What? Oh, shit! Look, the phone over there isn't working and that stupid man won't let me use his. Do you have a cell phone? I'll pay you. I just need to call a cab."

Of course he had a cell phone, he just got off the damn thing, but he wasn't about to hand it over. What if ... Oh, Lord! The woman just wanted to use the phone. Reaching across the seat, he grabbed the cell and handed it to her.

"Thanks. Uh ... here." She tossed a bill at him with a flick of her wrist.

Thinking she probably needed the money more, Steve tried to give it back, but she'd already stepped away from the car to dial into the keypad. He watched her pace in frustration as she clutched the jacket tightly around her body. Again, he wondered exactly what she had on.

She was young, probably no more than twenty-five or twenty-six. Yet, Steve figured, trailing his gaze across her legs. He would only be about ten years older than her.

She's not that young!

With her angular face and high cheekbones, she reminded him of a cat. The slanted, light colored eyes gave her a feline look, and overall she was really quite beautiful. It wasn't just her unusual features, but the all-knowing look of sensuality she possessed. She looked like she knew what to do with the equipment God gave her, and Lord help him if his cock didn't lengthen in response.

Damn.

She had a great pair of legs, long and highly toned. She was also an acrobat because she walked in those precariously high-heeled shoes like sandals. Steve felt the smaller brain in his pants give an active twitch of encouragement, but he stifled the reaction. His cock was a little too curious for comfort. He kept reminding his eager member that the woman was a hooker, and he definitely wasn't into that.

Her voice carried in the silence of the night, and he could hear her conversation as clearly as if she was sitting next to him.

"What do you mean it's too late? You're a cab company. Your job is to pick people up who need a ride." She paused for a second. "What! No! Wait a minute!" She tossed her hands up in frustration, and looked as if she was going to throw the phone at the nearest street sign. Apparently, she thought better of it because she turned and stomped toward him. "Thanks," she said, handing him the phone.

Something about this woman gnawed at Steve's gut. When she turned to walk off, a weary droop in her shoulders, she didn't look back at him once. Hell! She didn't even ask for a date. Steve was used to people asking for something. Yet this woman, who so obviously needed help, just turned around without a second glance.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Steve couldn't believe what he'd just blurted. What in the world was he thinking?

"Thanks for letting me use the phone." She turned around briefly, but continued walking. If anything, her pace began to quicken.

Steve watched her move further and further away and a rush of anxiety hit him right between the solar plexus. He should let her go. It wasn't his problem. She wasn't his problem. Yet the further she got, the more his angst increased. It felt wrong to let her walk off into the night, and his mind moved into action.

"Maybe I can give you a ride somewhere," he yelled, still unsure why he cared.

"Look. Mister," she said, turning around fully to face him. "I don't need a ride. I don't need anything. Okay?"

Steve should have been relieved. He could drive away without a trace of guilt. He'd tried to help her, and she'd refused. She also just dismissed him without a second thought. Instead of feeling thankful, he felt a slight tingling of annoyance.

"I can drop you off at a motel or something. There aren't any cabs and it's late. Don't be a fool. I told you, I don't want what you're selling. You're safe."

She stopped, and turned around, the heat emanating from her like a palpable blast to his face. Her foot tapped rapidly on the hard, gray pavement, and Steve marveled at her control in the shoes. After ten seconds passed, his patience almost reached an end.

"You promise not to try any funny stuff?" she finally said.

Steve wanted to laugh, the situation becoming more absurd by the second. "You have my word."

She took a deep breath, and slowly walked toward the vehicle. When the doors unlocked, the mechanism clicked, and the sound made her to stop. "Naw ... you know ... I'm okay. The club's not far."

Steve rolled his eyes, counted to three, and glared at her irritably. "Look lady, I have a long drive ahead of me. I am offering you a ride out of the kindness of my heart. If you don't want it, then fine," he said, making a great show of placing both hands on the wheel. He didn't want to leave her, but he would if she kept being difficult.

"Wait a minute ... okay. Remember, you promised."

"You have my word." Why did he give his word to a hooker? It didn't make sense.

By the time she climbed into the car, Steve already regretted his hasty decision. The long length of tanned, muscled thighs was a little disturbing to his peace of mind.

"When you go out the driveway, make a left at the corner. The club is five blocks down." Her toneless voice banished the leg thoughts, and Steve put the SUV in motion, heading out of the station.

He kept quiet and tried to remain focused on the road. It was difficult not to look at her, though. He cast a couple of shifty glances at the woman.

She stared straight ahead, as if watching for any sudden moves. Her hand was plastered to the door handle, ready to bolt if need be. Up close, he could clearly see her features. Her nose was pointy, but not long. She had the prerequisite Californian tan, but a slight flush tinged her cheeks. Steve reassessed his first impression—beautiful and captivating.

Nearing the end of the five-block journey, he noticed a flashing orange and pink neon sign: *Classy Lady*.

"Thanks, I really appreciate it."

She already had the door open before the wheels stopped rolling, and was out and walking toward the entrance. She didn't even turn to look at Steve in parting, and he watched her go with a faint sense of wonder.

Does she work here as well as prostitute?

He shook his head in amazement. *She must have a really tough life.* Steve's bursts of concern startled him. He was one who understood that the sun didn't shine the same on everyone. Some things happened for different people differently, no rhyme or reason for it. He grabbed the wheel to turn away from the woman, and the club, when loud arguing caused him to stop mid-motion. The redhead was in a fierce argument with two large men dressed entirely in black.

Steve willed himself to go. This wasn't his problem. He didn't need to get involved. He didn't have time to get involved. *Damn!* Though all that made sense, he pulled quickly into the nearest available space and silenced the engine. He couldn't just leave her there. What if something happened to her?

"You're not going in there!" One of the large men shouted. "You made your bed, Jordan. Now go home and lie in it."

"Dammit, Ric! I just want to get my shit. Okay?"

Steve watched the woman as he approached. The large man shouting at her was at least six feet tall and burly, yet she didn't back down.

"You can come and get it from the curb tomorrow," said the smaller of the two men.

She screamed furiously, pointing toward the door. "Go get Dan! Tell him I want to talk to him."

"He won't talk to you, Jordan. Get out of here before we throw your ass across the street." The smaller man stepped forward slightly, and Steve could taste the violence in the air.

"Look, maybe we should all just calm down," Steve said, entering the melee from the side.

The tall one smiled leeringly at his diminutive combatant, "So Jordan, I see you went and picked up a friend."

Steve felt his hackles rise, but tamped down on the urge to defend himself. "Why don't you go get this Dan person? Maybe he can straighten this out." He used the tone he normally reserved on recalcitrant employees and board members. Nine times out of ten, it usually worked to get things done. But the large muscular man grimaced, twisting his face into a mean frown.

"Why don't you both get the fuck outta here before I throw both your asses across the street?"

Steve's first thought was that the man needed some better lines. No one with an ounce of good sense would talk to him that way. His narrow gaze assessed the thick-necked thug. He doubted the guy could actually throw him anywhere. At six feet, four inches, two hundred thirty pounds, he wasn't easily tossed by anyone.

"How the high and mighty have fallen." The smaller man glared at the spitfire, but she merely raised her head, not willing to give an inch. Steve nearly smiled in appreciation, admiring her courage.

She turned on the short, stocky man with a mocking stare of innocence. "There is no sin except stupidity."

Steve blinked, a little taken back to hear her quote Oscar Wilde. He looked at her briefly. A hooker who could quote Wilde was something he never thought existed.

The taller of the two black-clad men didn't appear to understand the quote; his brows furrowed in confusion. But the word "stupid" was not lost on him. He took a menacing

step toward her, and Steve could tell from the look in his eyes things were about to get ugly.

Years of instinct made Steve step in front of her. "Don't even think about it." His tone was cold, and right to the point.

Steve only had a second to recognize the shocked expression on the bouncer's face, before a huge, meaty fist connected to the right side of his jaw. Well equipped to defend himself, having taken boxing lessons earlier in his youth, and Judo when he was an adult, he struck back quickly with a flash of hands. But with two against one, the odds weren't in his favor.

Steve connected a few punches, scoring a direct hit when he clobbered the short one. A large popping noise came from the left, and he turned to look toward the commotion before the world went black. Well, not black exactly, it was more like a flash of bright light that went out very quickly.

The taller one had just punched him dead in the eye, and he stumbled a bit, trying to catch his balance. Another popping sounded, and then there was silence.

"Hurry up! Come on before they come around."

The feisty little redhead pulled and tugged on his arm. Steve willingly followed, still a little dazed from the blow. "Wait a minute, I thought you wanted to go inside," he said, dragging her to a halt.

"Are you crazy? We've got to get out of here before someone calls the cops. Where did you park the truck?"

Steve shook his head at the question, more in an attempt to clear his mind than from lack of an answer. He stopped her incessant pulling, and turned her around to face him.

"Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on here?"

She sighed, "Yes, just as soon as we get out of here."

Steve shot a quick glance at the entrance, deciding she was probably right. A few people were already emerging from the club and pointing animated fingers in their direction. He looked around again, wondering for the millionth time how in the world he had gotten himself in this situation.

CHAPTER TWO

"Are you sure you're okay to drive?"

Steve rolled his eyes in her direction, wincing a little at the pain in his right socket, but refused to answer the question.

"Fine. I was just wondering if you were okay. Mic really gave you a shot. Your eye is already starting to swell."

"Thanks for your concern."

She flushed and turned to stare listlessly out the window. Steve felt an inkling of chagrin for his sarcastic remark. It's not really her fault. Well, at least not totally her fault, but he needed to blame somebody. He should have been halfway to the Summit by now, yet, here he was riding around with a strange woman with even stranger problems.

"What in the hell was that all about?" At her continued silence, Steve prompted further. "Look, I just got involved in a physical altercation with two thugs in front of a strip club. And, as we speak, I am driving around in the middle of the night with a stranger. The least you can do is answer my questions."

She huffed a bit, but answered nonetheless. "I got fired, and as you can tell I wasn't too happy about it."

Her tone and attitude were abrupt, but there was more to her than Steve had first imagined. His curiosity led him to ask the question he had been dying to know all night. "Do you work at the club as well uh ... as well as uh ... work on the streets?"

If possible, a deeper shade of crimson highlighted her face, and she turned on him rapidly. "I told you, I am not a prostitute," she said between tightly clenched teeth.

Steve didn't really believe her. What decent woman would be out on the street walking around at midnight in five-inch high heels no less, with barely any clothes on? "So what were you doing when I uh ... picked you up?"

She rolled her eyes and pressed her lips together, her fury a tangible thing. When she finally spoke, her voice was tight with anger. "My car broke down, and I was trying to call a cab, if you remember."

Steve inhaled a shallow breath, and silence enveloped the car. Deciding to let the matter drop, he moved on to the more pressing issue. "So what do you want to do now?"

"Look, why don't you just drop me off at the next corner? I don't want to be a bother to you anymore."

"Who said you were a bother?"

Tilting her head in his direction, her eyes narrowed, she gave him his answer without words.

Steve grimaced, and wondered why he said that. Somehow the lady's problems had intertwined with his, and he felt accountable for her safety. Strange feeling considering he was trying to escape responsibility. Maybe it was the legs. Steve had always been a leg man and this woman had a pair that could easily stop traffic. A forceful jolt of his cock reminded him something else had noticed as well.

"Why don't I just take you home? You can arrange to get your car tomorrow when the cab companies are open."

She snorted. "There's no way I am letting you take me home. Just drop me off. I'll be fine."

This is ridiculous! He was one to admire independence. Hell, he was one to encourage it, but this was taking it too damn far. "Look lady, I am not dropping you off on the corner. I really don't care about where you live. I just want to get you to your house so I can get back on my way."

Her head dropped to her chest, and Steve wished he could take back the hastily uttered words. His fingers flexed tightly around the wheel, and he searched for a suitable apology. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. It's just been a really long day."

"No, it's my fault. I'm the one who should be apologizing."

Steve took his eyes off the road to stare at her. Gone was the brash young woman who had nearly taken on two bouncers single-handed. She now looked tired and run down. He guessed there was little fight left in her. Hoping to defuse the sudden rise in tension, Steve reached a hand toward her, but at the last moment decided touching her would be a bad idea. "I'm the one who should be apologizing, Jordan."

"Alex, my name is Alex."

Steve's brows furrowed in confusion. "I thought your name was Jordan."

She sighed deeply, seemingly shaking herself from her melancholy in one fell swoop. "That's just my stage name."

Nodding in understanding, but not really sure of what she meant, he replied, "So, you're a performer?"

She looked at him with a deadly gaze that could have melted the glaciers of the Arctic. "I'm a stripper. You don't have to sugarcoat it. I know what I do for a living."

"I never actually met a stripper before." As soon as the words left his lips, Steve wished he could stick his size fourteen feet in his mouth. That was the lamest comment ever.

"Well, until I can find another gig, you haven't really met one."

Steve chuckled at her quip. He was starting to enjoy her company, but they had been driving around aimlessly for over ten minutes. No matter how much he was starting to like her, no matter how great her legs were, he needed to get back on the road. "So, do you want me to take you home?"

She hesitated slightly, but gave up her address without any further coaxing. She lived about thirty minutes from the club, and in the opposite direction of his original destination. Steve didn't know why he felt like his entire life was suddenly taking a detour, but as he merged onto the freeway, instinctively he knew that after this night, nothing would be the same.

* * * *

Alexandria Houston continued to steal glances at her unlikely rescuer. She didn't quite know what to make of him. He was rich. She knew this without asking. He had a smooth polished exterior that made him look as if he never sweated. His clothes were of a fine quality, and although he had just been involved in a scuffle, he looked fresh. His thick wavy hair was styled almost negligently, like he continually ran his fingers through it, and a strong jaw line matched a perfectly proportioned face, highlighting deep, chocolate brown eyes. Of course, he wasn't the type of handsome pictured on magazine

covers, but Alex would bet the money in her pocket that he had no problems with the ladies. He had a commanding presence that a younger man couldn't convey, and looked to be in his early to mid thirties. He was also extremely tall. Even in her tallest heels, he towered above her.

If Alex had met the man at the club while she was in her Jordan-mode, she would have been all over him, hoping he was a big tipper. If she had met him on the street in Alex-mode, she may have tried to engage him in a little conversation. He had an animal magnetism that was deeply attractive, and a blind fool wouldn't be able to resist. Alex wasn't a fool, and she definitely wasn't blind. If only she hadn't met him tonight.

When Alex danced, or even stepped into the club, she became a totally different person. What she liked to affectionately call Jordan-mode. Jordan was her sensuous being, an entity that allowed her to free her sexual nature without fear and shame. However, sitting next to this man in her Jordan-clothes, without the emotional shelter of the club made her uncomfortable.

Alex had long since given up tugging her jacket down to hide her long legs. Scrunching down into the seat hadn't helped either. It was little wonder he thought she was a prostitute. Sitting next to him nearly naked, she could understand why he thought she was a hooker.

The adrenaline high of the night was starting to wear away, and she could feel an uneasy sort of languidness spreading through her body. She would never work at the Classy Lady again, but she wasn't upset. It had been time to move on anyway. That jerk-off manager, Dan, had accelerated the process.

Mad because she wouldn't fuck him, he had fired her on the spot, forcing her to leave with little more than her jacket, car keys, and the clothes on her back. Since she had been ready to go on stage, she wore a hot pink spandex halter and skirt, which barely covered her butt, a g-string and five-inch heels, along with a borrowed jacket from Suzy.

The Horror Show she was starring in held more surprises. When she got to her car, the '98 Honda stubbornly refused to start. Since there weren't any working phones outside the club, she'd been forced to walk five blocks to the gas station on the corner to call a cab. Alex nearly reached her wit's end when she picked up the receiver and heard nothing but silence. When the ignorant man at the station refused to let her use his phone, she had been ready to scream. Alex didn't know what demons possessed her to approach the glistening green SUV, but she was glad she had. As she snuggled further into the plush leather interior, her thoughts wandered back to the mysterious man sitting next to her. He didn't seem interested in conversation, nor for that matter did he seem interested in her. His eyes were firmly fixed on the road, as if willing himself not to look at her. Hoping to alleviate some of his discomfort, she broke the silence. "We're almost there," she said.

He grunted in response, but cast a quick, cautious glance in her direction. "Why do you live so far from the club?"

Alex debated with the answer for a moment before settling on the truth. "It's better to live far away from a club. It's a safety issue."

He nodded. "How long have you been dancing?"

"Too long."

"Do you like it?"

That was a tough question, but one that people usually asked when they found out she was a stripper. She normally responded with smart remark, but tonight her brain was

too empty for the task. "I don't know anymore. Sometimes its cool, but other times." Her voice trailed off. "It gets old after a while."

"Why do you do it?"

"For money," she answered truthfully. Hoping he wouldn't get the wrong idea. She didn't know why, but his opinion mattered. "You gotta do what you gotta do sometimes."

It was an honest statement, and she hoped he understood. They lapsed back into silence, and Alex concentrated on the road signs whizzing by. When she had finally directed the last few turns, and he parked in front of her apartment, they sat quietly in the car.

"So, we're here," he said finally.

Maybe it was Alex's imagination, but her mystery man seemed just as reluctant as she was to end their association. She looked at him, wanting to express her thanks, but none of the right words came to her lips. "You're starting to get a real shiner. Do you want to come in? I could put some ice on it, or a steak." *How pathetic can I sound?*

"I don't want to inconvenience you," he said, looking at her with a strange light in his eyes.

Unexpectedly, a shaft of heat moved down her spine. "Please, it's the least I can do," she said, twitching her fingers. With only a second's further hesitation, he agreed.

Alex's small apartment complex was secured with a large gate guarding the front entrance, separating the quiet complex from the houses that lined the street. A small elementary school, with a high chain link fence, stood directly adjacent to the building. She had never found the apartment or the neighborhood lacking before, but standing next to the tall, handsome man, Alex felt a little uneasy. He was probably comparing her cozy quarters to the local trash dump. Regretting her hasty offer, she opened the gate and hurried him through.

Leading the way to her second floor apartment, she glanced at him shyly when they stood in front of the bluish-gray door. "It's a little messy. I hope you don't mind. I didn't have time to clean today."

"I don't mind," he replied, his voice quiet and hushed.

Alex turned, and looked back at him briefly, wondering what was going on behind those brown eyes.

The front door opened with slight clicks of the dead bolt and bottom locks, and Alex immediately felt the contentment that always filled her when she came home to the small, one bedroom apartment. She was happy to be inside, even if she did feel a little embarrassed.

Hanging her keys on a small hook near the door, she gestured toward the couch. "Have a seat. I just need to change clothes." She stared ruefully down at her nearly naked body, and smiled in relief when he nodded.

Putting her profession to work, Alex quickly stripped and grabbed some sweats and an extra large T-shirt. Giving silent thanks that her bathroom had a connecting door to the bedroom; she washed her face and brushed her teeth. When finished, she yanked her hair through a rubber band and into a graceless ponytail. Feeling marginally ready to face him, she opened the door to return to the living space.

The man stood near her couch, staring at the few photographs of her family and friends on the end table. Alex realized she didn't even know his name, but before she

could ask the question, he turned and spoke. "Is this your family?" he asked in a deep strong voice.

She breathed raggedly trying to steady her nerves. Why was she so nervous around him?

"Yes." She moved beside him and pointed to each picture. "That's my brother, Paul, my mom and dad, and my friend, Ameril. She works at the club with me."

"There aren't any pictures of you."

"I think it's kind of pretentious to put up pictures of yourself."

He stared at her, entrancing her in his gaze. "You look different without any make up on."

"I only wear it when I have to work," she responded, not having a clue how she was formulating coherent responses with her mind and body slowly turning to mush. Standing this close, Alex wasn't sure what would happen if she took another whiff of his expensive after-shave.

Unconsciously, her gaze roamed the smooth lines of his face and neck. She was shocked back into awareness by the light purple and pink marring his tanned complexion.

"Oh my God, your eye. We have to put some ice on that. Hopefully it won't swell too badly."

She led him toward her kitchen, flicking the lights on, and bidding him to sit in a chair. Grabbing the ice tray from the freezer, she broke the ice into pieces and placed them inside a sandwich size Ziploc. She tried to control her jumbled nerves with breathing and counting exercises, but didn't feel any better when she moved toward him.

"Tilt your head back a little," she said in a small voice, gulping the lump in her throat at the sight of the smooth, muscled neck inches from her face. Her pulse rate kicked into overdrive, and she took several deep breaths before moving closer. Trying valiantly to lower the tension, she uttered, "You know, I don't even know your name."

He laughed self-consciously. "Steve Macmillan."

"Alexandria Houston," she responded with a light laugh, wondering why such a simple thing as introductions seemed wholly inappropriate.

"I'm sorry you had to get involved in this, Steve. I'm sure you had better things planned than this." She waved a tanned hand toward his face, indicating the bruises marring his otherwise perfect features.

"It wasn't your fault. Besides I got to use a little Judo." He grinned, and she felt herself relax.

"It doesn't look like it helped."

"It's not a big deal," he said, before reaching for her hand. "Uh ... you going to use that?"

"Oh yeah. Sorry."

She had invited him here for ice, but instead she stood mooning over him like some star-struck groupie.

"It might sting a little," she said, just before placing the bag against his face.

"Shit! That's cold." His hands responded automatically, flying out in purely defensive reaction.

"I'm sorry. I should have put a towel on it," she replied hastily, removing the baggie.

"No, it's fine. I just wasn't expecting it."

He nodded once, giving her leave to continue, but Alex froze.

The hands on her hips were like twin brands of fire, and the reaction inside her body was potent. Alex could only stare down at him in wonder as desire, urgent and hot, moved swiftly through her. Tingles raced down her spine, and unconsciously she moved closer into his grasp.

Steve's palms tightened, and a dazed expression covered his face. Like a moth drawn to a bright flame, Alex's head tilted closer sealing their lips with a fusion of warmth.

Their first touch was soft and sweet, a gentle moving of mouths. Lips caressed slowly back and forth, learning and discovering the feel, his tongue sweeping boldly inside.

Alex opened eagerly, welcoming his persuasive invasion, and a frenzied, heated dance occurred between their lips. She moaned softly when Steve began trailing kisses down the gentle column of her throat and stepped further into his warm embrace.

The intensity of the day's events, beginning with her mad dash from the club and ending with the fight outside, had left an open avenue for the feelings and emotions rocketing through her body. The need, the want, the desire to release her tensions and frustrations had her grabbing at Steve's shoulders, arms, shirt, any part of him she could get hold of.

When his hand moved to caress her breasts, Alex groaned, and lifted her arms, telling Steve without words how far this could go. Even as he tossed the shirt over her head, and into the corner, she arched into his touch to increase the pressure on her nipples.

Long adept fingers tweaked and plucked, twisted and pulled, till Alex's rouged peaks were hard as diamonds. Moaning loudly, she urged his head closer to her breasts, and was rewarded when an eager mouth opened wide and suckled long.

She was entranced by the sight of Steve, licking her nipples, his eyes closed like she was the tastiest morsel alive. Ravenous hunger seared her body. Never a shy woman, Alex pushed her breasts together, and arched her back at the feel of his mouth relishing both her hardened nubs.

Their mutual moans reached a crescendo when a large palm moved down her stomach and waist to knead the sensitive clit between her thighs. Alex gasped as lighting speared through her body, and a heady feeling like a shot of Jack Daniels went straight to her head.

When Steve began a frantic dash to remove her sweats, Alex denied him by standing firm, reaching for the buttons of his shirt instead.

Tempted to rip it apart, as she had seen done in so many movies, the smooth, satiny feel of the expensive material stopped her rash action. Slowly, Alex removed each button until a muscular, tanned torso was revealed.

Perhaps it was the extreme emotion they had shared earlier. Maybe it was the ultimate attraction of opposites. Whatever the case, Alex didn't question the desire to feel Steve's cock inside her. She wanted it like she needed air to breathe. Running her hands down his chest, Alex gripped the edges of his shirt drawing him from the chair.

CHAPTER THREE

Crossing the threshold leading from the living room to the bedroom, Alex took five steps from Steve and immediately shed her sweats and panties. Standing before him, with nothing more than a pair of gaudy earrings she normally wore on stage and a gold necklace, she beckoned to him with a crook of her finger.

His dark eyes heated with desire, the pupils dilating with need, and the tingling tremors in her body became an earthquake of want. Her gaze fell to the thick bulge beneath his pants, and her cunt answered with a clenching flex. Alex wanted that cock so badly, pounding inside her, she backed unconsciously toward the bed.

Steve stalked toward her, his hot gaze never wavering, and Alex watched in sensual fascination as the shiny gold buckle of his belt dropped to the floor. His pants drooped, giving her an intimate view of the thick, silk encased cock, and the juices between her legs dribbled with abandon.

The bed dipped slightly when Steve set a muscular knee upon it, and Alex's anticipation rose to unparalleled degrees. The moment of reckoning had finally arrived. She was excited more so than she had ever been for another man.

Alex sat up and leaned closer to his large frame, trying to feel every part of his body. Her large cherry rouge nipples brushed slightly against his belly, as she worked her mouth toward his lips. She focused on savoring the moment, on savoring the unique taste, unlike anything and anyone she had ever encountered. When Alex finally reached the zenith of his mouth, she rushed inside, intent on devouring his essence.

Arching deeply into his caress, Alex rolled her nipples back and forth against the rough hairs of his chest, glorying in the feel. She wanted nothing more than to lay back and watch Steve mount her, his cock thrusting inside her over and over. The vision was so intense, so overwhelming, she moaned in pain, her cunt clenching ceaselessly in a reflex over and over.

She grabbed at Steve to convey her urgent demands, and an answering groan spent in her mouth. She ripped off his trousers and boxers, freeing the thick cock into her hands. She rubbed and caressed the hard length until he shuddered, and pushed against her.

"Stop, I'm gonna cum," he moaned, his words breathless, uttered between heavy gasps.

"I want you to cum," she said, equally breathless.

Steve growled in response, pushing Alex with the flat of his hand so she fell roughly against the bed. "I've been wanting to fuck you all night," he said passionately. "When I thought you were a hooker, I was willing to pay to sink my cock in this pussy, whatever the price."

The coarse words set off a five-alarm fire in her body. "Come here," she said, fingering her clit, the juices spreading on her hands and fingers. "I want to feel you inside me."

Steve moaned, bent quickly at the waist, and slammed his cock into her wet crevice. Alex screamed at the invasion. He filled her so quickly, so fully, she felt a slight tingling

of pain. The dewy wetness of her cunt cushioned his thrust, but he was large and thick. It was an intrusive assault, and she breathed deeply to relax the muscles in her pelvis.

* * * *

"God, you feel so good." Steve's eyes were closed, and the battle for control of his body was a full out war. He tried to still the urgent demands, tried to keep his cock from slicing inside her, but his hips rotated and he plunged as deep as he could go.

The slick flesh welcomed his cock like a haven, and Steve couldn't control the need to bury himself inside her over and over. He opened his eyes, and gazed at the beautiful woman lying beneath him. She looked like a wanton dream come to life. Her face flushed, her bottom lip tinged red, an expression of rapture on her visage. Her tight beaded nipples stabbed at his chest, and he threw his head back in abandon. He wouldn't be able to control himself much longer.

Unbelievable pressure built in his cock, and he rotated his hips, smashing against her clit. He wanted to give her pleasure, to bring her over the edge with him, but he kept pounding inside her with vengeance, over and over, again and again.

Steve tried to be gentle, knew the sounds issuing from her lips were a mixture of pain and pleasure, but the intense spasms of her cunt urged his wicked thrust harder and harder. She was pushing him so close to the precipice. If he didn't control his body, he was going to shatter in a million pieces. He worked on timing his thrust in conjunction with the spasms from her cunt. Squeeze, release, thrust, and then from the top all over again.

The large, wooden headboard banged forcefully against the wall, and the sounds served to heighten Steve's arousal. He didn't care if the whole neighborhood heard. He arched his back and fucked her harder in a rhythm.

* * * *

"Please, harder. Give it to me harder," Alex nearly screamed. She was on a frenzied path of desire and she could feel the building of pressure deep inside. Spreading her legs wider to accommodate Steve's entry, she tightened and squeezed the muscles of her cunt.

She was close. So close that any moment her pussy would clench tightly, and warm, thick dew would coat her insides.

"God ... I'm gonna cum!" She shouted loudly, and his thrust became faster, more intense.

A surge of electricity rushed through her, the muscles of her cunt pulsated. A scant second later Steve burst inside her, and she could feel endless spurts of thick, milky liquid coating and oozing from her pussy.

Breathing harshly, Alex wasn't amazed at the dark cloud of sleep that moved rapidly after such a fulfilling orgasm. Dislodging a nearly asleep Steve, she grabbed a nearby pillow, and quickly rested her head. Seconds later she was lulled by the intermittent snoring of the man beside her.

* * * *

Steve awoke from the deepest sleep of his life with a fight through mist and fog. At first, he could barely make heads or tails of his surroundings, but slowly a few things began to penetrate his cloudy mind. One of his eyes felt like someone filled it with jelly, and he was lying on a bed with his head cushioned against a fabulous pair of breasts. Steve didn't need to open his eyes to connect the soft pillowy swells. A man always knew when he was lying on some breasts.

He lifted his lids and confirmed the reality. A pink, slightly rouge nipple stared back at him. Yet, something about that nipple seemed achingly familiar, and he struggled to remember.

As if a tidal wave assailed him, Steve was assaulted by memories. He was lying entangled on Alex's bed, and last night they had fucked as if their lives would be ended this very morning. It was some of the best sex he could ever remember having.

Thoroughly disconcerted, and swamped by feelings and emotions, Steve struggled with a deep wave of shock before he finally found the strength to move. Lifting his head gently, cautious of not waking Alex, he slowly unraveled his legs from hers and moved off the bed.

Steve stilled, momentarily arrested by the prone form of a sleeping, naked Alex. She looked beautiful lying there, like an erotic Sleeping Beauty. Red hair trailed all over the bed, and her lashes formed dark crescent circles against her face. Her lips were slightly red, undoubtedly, from the hard frantic kisses they'd shared.

Steve remembered the feel of her lips and stifled a groan. His gaze drifted further down and halted at her bald cunt. He stared at it for a long time before physically forcing his gaze away. He didn't even want to think about how good that pussy felt, clenching and caressing his cock. His unruly member gave a convulsive protest, but Steve was done listening. *You got me into this.*

He shook his head, mentally scolding the wayward appendage, and looked around for his clothes. Shrugging into his shirt, pants, and shoes, Steve wondered how he had gotten into this mess. He should have been at the Summit by now, relaxing in the peaceful surroundings of nature. Instead, he was floundering around in unknown surroundings trying to get himself together.

He really didn't have a desire to face an embarrassing morning after. Hell! It was hard enough just looking at Alex. Steve didn't even want to think about what might happen if she actually opened her eyes.

Totally unprepared for the crazy night last evening, and weary of what might be, he finished dressing as quickly as possible. He wasn't quite sure why he was running—oward he wasn't. But he knew two things with certainty: if he stayed they would repeat their frantic love making again and again, and he might not want to stop fucking her. Ever.

Yep, it's time to get the fuck out of here.

Steve's cock jerked again, and he shook his head. It was definitely time for the bigger brain to take action. Flustered by his unusual lack of responsibility, he berated himself for feeling like an eager, untried schoolboy.

When Steve finally located his shoes, he heard a muffled sigh from the region of the bed. He froze, one shoe in hand, and looked at Alex. He waited tensely, but she didn't open her eyes. The breath he had been holding whooshed out of his lungs, and he quickly moved from the room.

This whole episode needed to be filed under the "never should have happened" category.

Steve looked at the sleeping woman one last time, regret and indecision pausing his steps.

There could be consequences.

He remembered the heady feeling of shooting his cum inside her. He hadn't thought about protection before or after the event. Now, Steve couldn't think of anything else. He couldn't just leave. What if she was pregnant? What if that huge load of potent semen left behind a tangible marker of his presence? He shuddered at the thought of other consequences, but put that out of his mind quickly. Mentally beginning a checklist of things to be done tomorrow, an appointment with the doctor was at the top of his list.

If she were anyone else, he would have woken her with a kiss and been glad when she turned in his arms, but she wasn't just anyone and neither was he. Last night had gone too far, but Steve knew with a deep sense of knowledge that he wouldn't change a thing. It was done, and stars above he wanted it to happen again. Yet he couldn't just walk out the door, at least not yet.

Tiptoeing to her kitchen, he grimaced at the visible reminders of their passionate encounter. He tried to forget about the memories they stirred.

It all began with that damn bag of ice.

Pushing away the errant thought, Steve quickly reached inside his trousers to retrieve his wallet. He flicked through a few credit cards before he finally found what he was looking for. A stiff white business card, with gold embossed letters bearing his name, company logo, and telephone numbers. As he pinned the card to her fridge, Steve's mind echoed with the over exaggerated Southern accent of the cartoon character, Yosemite Sam. *You yellow-bellied coward!*

"Shut up," he whispered to the voice in his head. Didn't it understand he was making the right decision?

After securing the card with a furry white magnet, Steve stepped back and adjusted the placement so it was more visible. His gaze roamed again to the t-shirt and bag of water, and his cock jumped and lengthened. He had to get out here before he made the same mistake ... again.

* * * *

Alex woke when the front door closed, and knew immediately Steve was gone. She had felt the bed dip when he moved, and tried to remain immobile, pretending sleep. What could a girl possibly say to a man she had just fucked like the earth was ending? Alex couldn't think of any answers, and was partially glad he left. Well, she did have some regrets, but she banished the thoughts quickly.

He probably thinks I'm sort of a slut.

And she wouldn't blame him for thinking that either. She wasn't the type of girl to engage in one-night stands. At least she never had before. Something about sleeping with a person she just met didn't sit too well with her, but now Alex could only shake her head in disbelief. Not only had she slept with him after only knowing him an hour, but they hadn't used a condom. She never had sex without a condom. It was an established rule that she had never broken, until last night.

Last night had changed a lot of things. Thankfully, she wasn't concerned about pregnancy. Alex had been on the Depo shot for nearly three years. But, there were more consequences to unprotected sex than just pregnancy. A quick shudder moved through her, and Alex trembled from the unwelcome thoughts.

Moving heavy feeling limbs off her queen sized mattress, she gasped at the slight protest from her nether region. *Damn, his cock was big.* She felt a tremor of ache at the remembered fullness, and tried to forget the thick, long penis pushing in and out of her body.

Slowly, she made her way toward the bathroom, needing a literal wash to the memories of last night. It was time to get started on her day. She needed to find another job, and she couldn't do that if she sat on her butt.

The hot spraying water was like a balm to her aching body. It helped to clear her mind. Alex wondered if maybe it was time to retire from the decadent world of strip tease. She'd done well. Saving much of her earnings, she had a nice little nest egg. Maybe it is time to quit.

Alex had started dancing because it was easy money, and it afforded her the opportunity to work very few hours while attending classes. A normal profession was too time consuming, and she remembered her harried days working two jobs to pay the bills. Dancing was a lot easier, but she was tired of paying the price.

Her father would be horrified if he discovered.

She grimaced, as she bent her head forward, directly under the watery rays. If her father's business hadn't bankrupted, she wouldn't have had to dance at all.

Alex remembered life before dancing with fond, but depressed memories.

If her stupid brother had never convinced her parents to invest in one of his harebrained schemes, none of this would have happened. Loving their oldest child, like good parents should, they lost everything, their business, their savings, and nearly their home. The frantic phone call from her mother, explaining what had happened, was a day of infamy for Alex, and she shuddered from the recollection.

At nineteen, Alex wished she could have done more to help them, but she did the best she could. She dropped out of school and returned to Houghton, Michigan to help with expenses, working three jobs to bring in income. She would have stayed, but her father urged her to finish her degree at UCLA.

Alex smiled fondly, and reached for a bottle of shampoo. She loved her dad. Even during those trying times he was a rock, dependable and good-natured to the last.

Spreading a dollop of Nexus in her hair she worked up lather. It was a good thing her father lived close to three thousand miles away, though. If he knew what she did for a living, he would kick her butt all the way back to Michigan.

Alex rinsed the soap from her head, and thought back to what led her to become a stripper. Struggling to pay the rent, she'd searched the help wanted ads for jobs and was enticed by the lure of easy money. She could see the print clearly as if she was reading it in the shower.

Five hundred dollars a night, she remembered, and the glee of the moment filled her mind. She was already stressed because working two jobs caused her schoolwork to suffer tremendously. Alex barely had time to study, and after receiving her first "F", she decided that she needed to do something, or flunk out of school.

Before the fiasco, which Alex liked to refer to as "Paul's Revenge", her parents had helped with rent and tuition. Now, tuition, living expenses, food, and everything else were all on her. As her thoughts twisted back, she could feel the anguish of eviction signs and past due notices weighting heavily on her shoulders.

Answering the ad, Alex was a little perplexed by the "Classy Lady". The club itself was pretty classy, although the appearance of the outside was a little hard to take in.

The inside, however, was dark but clean and the furnishings consisted of a lot of couches and plush velvet chairs. Numerous pictures of naked, beautiful ladies decorated the walls, and a huge stage with two golden poles graced the middle. A bar was situated in the back, and scantily clad servers moved with ease through the maze of chairs and couches. Two bouncers, Mic and Ric, escorted her to the back to meet with the manager, Dan.

Alex had wrestled with her conscience the whole way. It was daylight when she had arrived, and there weren't too many customers, but she still felt like running for the hills. She should have known what the ad was all about when she read it.

I mean, how many businesses are called, "Classy Lady"?

It seemed foolish in the extreme that she had thought it wouldn't be a strip club, or some other sort of shady business. Alex debated a whole week, told her mom with strict instructions not to tell her father, and decided to do it. She remembered her mother's words, "You're a grown woman now, Alexandria. You have to make your own choices." It wasn't encouragement, but it was acceptance. Alex had never looked back.

Until last night.

She shook her head in grief over the events of the previous evening. If she had walked out that first day, none of this would have happened.

CHAPTER FOUR

One year later...

"The profits have dipped, but ten million has been invested into R&D."

Steve sat in the sumptuous boardroom in the main headquarters of Macmillan International and listened with half an ear as Robert Milton droned on about profits, losses, and research. The nuts and bolts of the speech were over with anyway, and it was a struggle to stay focused. Within a few minutes his mind began to wander to a topic he'd been trying to forget.

Alex.

He wondered what she was doing; what she'd been up to lately. He hadn't seen her since that incredible night a year ago—a night that stayed in his memory like a vivid illusion.

Steve felt like an idiot, and he couldn't seem to shake the affliction either. He'd done just about everything possible to forget about her, except seek out the services of a shrink. And he was beginning to think that might be his next step. Shit! He'd even tried a little wild sex, participating in a couple of threesomes. Nothing helped.

Yep, I need to have my head examined.

"So, are there any questions?"

Steve jerked back to awareness and Milton's speech. The droning finally done, the managing director of research and development glanced around the boardroom with eager eyes.

"I think we got it, Bob." He looked around and said, "If there isn't any other urgent business, why don't we take a lunch break?"

Thankful nods greeted his announcement and everyone stood quickly, gathering their briefcases and folders.

"I noticed you looked a little preoccupied during the meeting." Jake laughed, coming around to the head of the table and leaning against the mahogany wood in a casual pose.

Was it that obvious? "I have a lot of things on my mind."

"Those things wouldn't consist of a certain stripper you met a year ago, would they?"

Why in the world had he told his brother about that night? Two months ago, he'd shared his dilemma with Jake one night over one too many beers. Ever since his brother wouldn't leave him alone.

"I was thinking about the upcoming energy commission," he lied.

"Sure, that's why you were staring off into space. Senators and their energy reports always do that to me."

"Don't you have something important to do? Isn't there a racquetball court calling your name somewhere?" he asked, hoping to get Jake out of his face.

"Nope, I'm free today."

Jake's teasing brown eyes were full of mirth, and Steve's palms itched. Oh, what he wouldn't give to wipe that smug grin from his brother's face.

"How about Mahoney's for lunch? You can tell me about it there," Jake said with a smile.

"Sure," Steve replied, knowing there was no way to get away from his brother today. When Jake had that wicked glint in his eyes, all you could do was hunker down and prepare for a long siege. He decided to give in gracefully.

"I'll clean up the mess here. What's the agenda for later?" Grace interrupted, her portly frame pausing in the doorway leading from the conference room.

Steve didn't know what he'd do without his PA. She was the epitome of efficiency. He'd been about to call when she appeared out of nowhere.

"We're on a break. Call catering and have them bring up something for later. We may need another one."

Grace nodded, "Mr. Milton?"

Both Steve and Jake laughed. Trust the ever-efficient Grace to detect the 'Milton' problem.

Forty minutes later, sitting in the crowded bar and grill that was famous for its steak sandwiches, Steve bowed to the inevitable inquisition.

Jake began as soon as the waitress deposited their drinks. "Why don't you just go back to the club and see if she still works there?"

Steve swirled the ice around in his coca-cola with a long striped straw, wishing he had ordered something stronger. A Long Island Iced Tea would definitely numb his mind to this particular conversation.

"For the millionth time. Drop it. I told you, it was just one night," he said, rolling his eyes at his brother's look of disbelief.

"One night you can't get off your mind." Jake's voice lowered in a perfect imitation of Steve's. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't stop thinking about her."

Tilting his head back, hoping an earthquake would level the building, he answered, "I will get over it. Going back to the club is not an option."

"Why not? Are you afraid that the one night wasn't a fluke?"

Steve was afraid of just that, but he wouldn't admit that to his brother. He did have some pride left, and his preoccupation with Alex was becoming ridiculous. It didn't make sense.

"It was a fluke," he uttered, though his statement lacked conviction.

"So go back to the club and find out," Jake said determinedly.

He could go back to the club, though he seriously doubted she still worked there. Suddenly, going back didn't seem like a bad idea at all. He was positive she was no longer there. He remembered the night of her firing vividly. And, if he went, he could finally get his brother off his back.

"If I go, will you give it a rest?"

"Absolutely, but I'm going with you." Jake nodded and grinned.

Steve knew he'd given in too easily.

* * * *

"Miss? Do you have this in an extra large?"

Alex stared at the hideous green and pink summer dress, and cast weary eyes on the rotund woman who contemplated wearing it. The frock was more appropriate for falling off a cliff, and Alex had to stamp down the urge to tell her so.

"Whatever you see on the rack is all we have left, ma'am," she answered, her tone professional. The large woman nodded, and bounded off to another row of horrible smocks. Alex smothered a laugh, as a vision of a blob covered in pink and green came to mind.

God, I hate this job!

Few tortures compared to working at Fam-Mart. The discount store catered to every crying and unruly child in California, as well as some of the biggest perverts this side of the Rocky Mountains. She thought she'd had it bad dancing. She didn't know the half of it.

But, the job had decent hours and Alex was given plenty of time off for school. It also helped to supplement her income, and she couldn't complain about that.

Alex could deal with it a while longer. She had one more year of school, and then it was off to riches and glory, or to the nearest high school to teach. She planned on tutoring young minds, while she worked her way through the masters program for psychology.

Exhausted, she glanced at her wristwatch, and hoped the remaining three hours of her shift would pass blissfully fast. Turning lithely, she returned to finish her job of setting up this week's displays of God-awful apparel. Alex looked at the pale, wooden mannequin and shook her head.

"I'm sorry friend. I would have chosen something else, but it's not my call," she said under her breath.

Her stiff companion remained mute in silent protest, and she sighed wearily.

"Hey sweetie pie, I was wondering if you could help me?"

Alex resisted rolling her eyes, and turned to greet the owner of the voice.

A short, skinny man, with beady eyes set close under his brows, dressed like an eighties reject, leered at her lustfully.

"Yes," she answered politely, determined to ignore his gaze.

"I was wondering what size bra you wear?"

She gasped, trying hard not to look at his smoke stained teeth. "Excuse me?"

"Well, my girlfriend is about the same size as you and I was wondering what size to buy her." The dirty little lecher smiled broadly, and Alex resisted the urge to back away from the smell of his breath.

Girlfriend? Yeah, right! No self-respecting woman would touch him. He sounded so stupid, and looked so pathetic she almost laughed at the thought of him with a real live girl. His blow up doll would be a more apropos description.

"I don't think I can help you. You would have to know more then just her cup size," she answered stiffly, hoping he would get a clue real quick.

"I don't know. You look to be about the same."

The lecher's eyes plastered to her chest, and her skin wanted to crawl from her body. Alex flushed with anger, and responded, her voice tight, "I don't think I can help you, sir. Maybe you should bring in your ... girlfriend and buy her the gift while she's here."

Brown-teeth smiled leeringly, just before he reached his sweaty palms toward both her breasts.

Alex blinked in shock, reared back her arm and slapped the man for all she was worth. The echoing sound caused patrons standing near to turn and look toward the commotion.

"You bitch," the pervert hissed, his sweaty hand resting on a red cheek. He glared at her with malicious intent before turning abruptly, and stalking down the aisle way, nearly knocking an old lady over.

"Asshole," Alex muttered.

It took several seconds of rigid calming to gather her wits. The nerve of some people.

Even when she danced, Alex had never experienced something like that. There were rules to lap dances and most customers obeyed those rules. If they didn't, Mic or Ric would have tossed them out of the club so fast the road would have left skid marks on their ass.

Obviously, there needed to be rules in Fam-Mart, too.

Alex inhaled deeply, a measure of calm flowing through her body. She was on her way to feeling halfway normal, when she spied Gloria, the day shift manager, walking toward her.

Fantastic.

"I need to see you in my office, Alex."

* * * *

"So, she fired you?"

"Yeah, she fired me. Can you believe that shit?" Alex wanted to throttle Ameril when she held her side and cried with laughter. "Thanks, glad to know you find this so amusing."

She had tried to plead her case with Gloria, after they entered her office, but the manager stated, "We can not have you slapping customers because they offend you."

Apparently, the pervert had run and told Gloria what happened. Yet, he clearly neglected to mention his own outlandish behavior. So, she'd been fired, her severance check cut there on the spot.

Alex watched as Ameril tried unsuccessfully to stop her bout of laughter, shaking her head when her friend rolled back against the couch and clutched her stomach.

"I'm sorry, but I just can't believe she fired you. She's lucky I don't work for her. I would have slapped her next." Ameril gasped, her blue eyes watery with tears of mirth.

Alex rolled her eyes, for all of Ameril's bold talk she was probably the sweetest person she knew. She couldn't picture Ameril slapping anyone. Much less picture her slapping the stocky Gloria.

When Ameril had her hysterical laughter under control, she asked seriously, "So what are you going to do?"

Good question. She had asked herself that same thing on her drive home. "Get another job I suppose, just not at your local Fam-Mart."

Ameril laughed again, but looked curiously at her, and Alex knew what was coming next. "You can always go back to the club." Alex shook her head quickly, and opened her mouth to speak but Ameril beat her to the punch. "No, it's a lot better there now. Do you remember Angel?" At Alex's brief nod, Ameril continued, "Well, she finally hung up her

wings. She's now the manager. Tony fired Dan. Apparently, you weren't the only one with complaints about his behavior."

Alex remembered Dan with disgust. Jerk.

"What happened?" She was curious to know. Although, she had kept in touch with a few of the girls from the club, she didn't share much in their gossip anymore.

"He said something really foul to her a while back and Tony axed him. When Angel, I mean, Melissa, decided to retire Tony offered her the job."

Tony was the owner of the club. Alex had met him a few times during her two-year stint at the Classy Lady. He had gotten into the stripping business as a fluke, but now owned nearly fifteen strip clubs nationwide. Alex remembered the tall blonde man from her dancing days fondly. He was a definite flirt, but he was pretty nice and didn't push when turned down.

"The first thing she did was fire those two bozos, Mic and Ric. So, there's no reason for you not to come back now. A lot of the girls miss you. I miss you. Besides, what kind of job are you going to find that will allow you make plenty of money, and give you time for school?"

Ameril definitely had a point, Alex thought. She'd been running herself ragged to make ends meet, and attend school full time. It was tempting, but the Classy Lady housed other memories aside from Dan, the jerk, and Mic and Ric, the lame. A sudden vision of dark brown eyes, and thick wavy hair flashed in her mind.

Damn, why can't I forget about that man?

She shook her head at Ameril. "I don't know. I haven't danced in a long time. I might trip and fall on my face."

"Please give me another excuse than that. Seriously, just come back for one night. If you don't like it then I will never bother you again," Ameril replied.

Alex could see she was determined. "One night?"

"I'm telling you, it's a different place. Angel. Melissa has really fixed the place up nice. She got rid of a lot of the riffraff Dan used to tolerate, and it's a lot better now."

Alex watched the pleading look in Ameril's eyes, and knew she'd lost the fight. She tried one last futile time to resist. "I don't know."

Ameril cast a doubtful glare at her, and quickly rushed, "You aren't still thinking about that guy are you? What's his name again?"

Alex had few secrets from Ameril. She told her everything, yet she wished she had never told her about that night, at least the end portion of it.

When she stayed mute, Ameril continued on, unperturbed. "Don't tell me you're still hung up over that guy?"

"I am not hung up over him, thank you very much," Alex volunteered heatedly.

"Don't give me that crap. I set you up on two dates." She held two fingers up, like Alex had troubling counting. "Two handsome and fine guys I know from school, but you turned both of them down flat. So, don't give me that yin-yang about how you're not still hung up over him. I don't believe it."

Alex's gaze bored a hole in the wall, but she stayed silent refusing to answer. She couldn't deny it, but she didn't want to admit it either.

When the silence lengthened, and Ameril continued to glare at her, she finally gave up the battle. "Okay, I still think about him. Is that a crime?"

"It is if you don't get on with the rest of your life. What's the matter with you? It was just sex."

That was easy for Ameril to say. She could write a book on how to wrap guys around her finger. Alex, unfortunately, wasn't so lucky. "I am not hung up over him," she reiterated.

"Riiiiigggh. And I'm the Queen of France."

She shook her head at Ameril's poor taste in jokes. "Why are we talking about this? Fine, I'll go back to the club if you give up hounding me about him."

Her friend smiled in triumph. "Thank you. How about Saturday? Do you still have your outfits?"

Ameril was rattling off questions, and Alex had to think quickly to keep up with the change of topic. Her friend was like a lightning rod, no wonder she was studying law. She was going to make a great lawyer. Her ability to throw witnesses off guard would be legendary.

CHAPTER FIVE

Saturday came quicker than Alex would have liked, but a lot of her fears banished at the warm reception she received.

As soon as she stepped into the brightly lit dressing room, she heard a furious round of hearty "Hellos".

"Hey Alex, welcome back," greeted Susie.

Susie, the petite and vociferous blonde nicknamed the "The Mouth", rushed toward her. Alex had always liked her, even if she could talk a house on fire.

"Thanks, Susie. How's everything been with you?"

Susie opened her mouth to speak, and Alex braced for the long-winded round up.

She gave a silent 'thanks' when Ameril jumped into the conversation before Susie could even begin.

"Melissa wants to talk to you."

Alex looked up to see Melissa Montgomery, former dancer, standing a scant two feet away. At forty, Melissa looked better than many women half her age. A tall, voluptuous brunette thanks to the help of her doctor—the newly appointed manager of the Classy Lady was a sight in velvet black pumps and a matching black dress.

"Welcome back, Alex."

"Thanks, but I don't know if I'm going to stay, though," she said truthfully. At Ameril's brief snort, she turned her head to glare at her friend, but continued, "I just want to check it out for tonight."

"No problem. I heard what happened with Dan, and I understand if you don't want to work here, but let me tell you, a lot of things have changed. I don't think you will have any more problems."

Alex smiled happily at the sincere words. She had missed the close camaraderie of the dancers of the Classy Lady. They were a tight knit group of women, owing to the fact that it wasn't easy to share the stresses of their job with everyone. Most of the girls stuck together as a rule. Excluding her experience with Dan, it was generally a pleasant atmosphere.

Returning her thoughts to the conversation at hand, she replied, "It wasn't anything personal against the club. It was just Dan."

Melissa frowned in displeasure. "Yeah, he was an asshole." Both women laughed at the apt description. "Well, if you decide to stay, come and talk to me after your shift."

Alex watched her depart through the doorway, and turned to face a grinning Ameril. "See? What did I tell you?"

"Alright already. It's different, you've convinced me. Now, will you shut up?"

"Okay, okay." Ameril still held a silly grin on her face.

Alex grinned back at her friend, before turning to look at her reflection in the large panel mirror. She could hear the harmony of a Jimi Hendrix tune playing loudly from the club speakers, and rocked back in her chair to the beat. She wondered if she still had what it took to go out on stage.

Might as well go out there and find out.

It didn't take long for her to get back into the swing of things. Her first performance was a little disconcerting, but Alex got through it with only a slight stumble. So far, the night looked good, and profitable.

Alex took an empty seat at the bar, grateful at having a moment to rest her feet and ankles. Tempted to slip her stilettos off, she instead propped her feet on the rail.

Damn. Forgot how uncomfortable these things are.

"I guess I don't need to ask how you're doing."

Ameril slid in the vacant seat next to her, wearing one of her sexiest outfits, a lacy red dress that reached her ankles, a g-string, and six-inch black heels. Her dark pink nipples were visible through the sheer material, and her long ash blonde hair hung loose down her back.

"I'm doing all right. It's pretty busy, though," Alex responded with a wave, gesturing toward the packed house.

"Yeah, there's barely room to walk. It's this new thing Angel, I mean, Melissa started, it's brought a lot of new customers to the place." Ameril groaned. "Three dances for the price of one—big hit."

"I have never seen it this busy," Alex said, raising her voice to be heard over the music.

"Well, get used to it. It's always like this on the weekends."

She hadn't agreed to come back, but it seemed Ameril took it upon herself to believe she would. Deciding to ignore her friend's comment, she remarked, "Where have you been? I haven't seen you all night."

Ameril's eyes rolled, and Alex nearly laughed at the pained expression on her face.

"Do you remember the customer with the hair piece?"

How could she forget? "Yes, he has a huge rug on his head."

"Don't laugh, he's really sweet." Yet, Ameril had a hard time holding in her own giggles. "His wife left him. He's really broken up about it. I've been talking to him all night. I feel really badly for the guy."

That was generous of her. A dancer's time was money. "So, where is he now?"

"I told him to go home, and write his wife a poem." Ameril sighed. "I was talking to him for so long I lost track of time. Now, I have to recoup my earnings." Her blue eyes lightened perceptibly, and Alex could almost see the bulb above her head. "Hey, let's go on stage together. Then we could do a few rounds as a duo."

She certainly had the right idea on how to recoup her losses.

Girl-girl stage performances were a rarity, and guaranteed to bring the house down. It also put a ton of money in the duo's pockets.

Since it was illegal to actually have sexual relations on stage, most of their actions were simulated—most of them.

Alex began to warm to the idea immediately. "Let's do it."

* * * *

"Is this it?" Jake asked.

Steve inhaled, and wondered how he got to this juncture. He had tried every tactic he knew to dissuade his younger brother. Bribes, physical coercion, blackmail, nothing had worked.

This was where it all began.

A year ago, if he had driven out of this lot like he'd planned, he wouldn't be sitting here debating.

"Are you going to get out?"

Steve turned to stare at his brother, a comment formed on his lips.

"You aren't scared are you?"

Steve wished he could laugh because Jake sounded very affronted.

His brother's question was a direct attack on his manhood though, and Steve grabbed the door handle in retaliation. He wasn't scared. Well, not totally scared, but Jake wouldn't understand the feelings that were rioting in his mind.

She probably doesn't work here anymore.

The thought spurred his body into action, and Steve looked at his brother, and sounded very confident when he said, "No, let's go."

The memory of the Classy Lady was a vivid stamp in Steve's mind, but he hadn't actually been inside. He did remember thinking the place was a hole in the wall, and was highly surprised at the glistening interior that greeted him. It didn't look like a seedy club at all.

The inside was dark, but the railings around the club were glistening in gold. The stage was covered in black marble. Colored lights reflected off the surface, leading to an extremely decadent air. The glossy veneer added to the hint of money and desire permeating the surroundings.

"The bar's over there. Let's get a drink."

Steve frowned at his brother's demanding tone, but nodded and followed him through the throng of people. The place was really crowded, and they had to dodge numerous men with drinks, and plenty of nearly naked women, to find their way. When they were finally seated at the black lacquered surface, surrounded by numerous chairs, Steve ordered a straight shot of whiskey, and rum and coke for Jake.

Turning, drink in hand, he surveyed the club and its occupants.

"I thought you said the place was dump. This isn't bad." Jake motioned his arm around the dark interior.

He hadn't actually said that, but figured he'd probably said something close. "I only saw the outside," Steve yelled.

They were sitting at the end, on a curved section, right next to the speakers. Steve looked around quickly for an available seat, wanting to get away from the blaring sounds.

"There's an empty couch over there. Come on."

The Dutch Courage spreading through his bloodstream helped ease Steve's nerves. It probably had more to do with the fact that he hadn't seen Alex out of all the sexily clad women walking around. He would have recognized her anywhere. Her long red-burgundy tresses and maddening body weren't among the crowd of nubile, young women he had glimpsed so far. A measure of calm permeated his body, and Steve relaxed slightly.

Amidst a lot of "excuse me", "pardon me", and other such polite entreaties, they finally made their way to an available couch. As they settled their long legs against the plush golden velvet, Steve's eyes wandered to the stage. The girl on the black marble surface danced, stripped, and talked at the same time.

Amazing.

"Is she here?"

"No. I told you she doesn't work here anymore. This is a wasted trip," he answered.

"I disagree, brother."

Jake's eyes were glued to the stage, and Steve shook his head. Trust his brother to never turn down the sight of a naked woman. Jake was the official hound dog, and an Elvis impersonator couldn't top his lust.

A flash of lights and the booming voice of the emcee interrupted Steve's thoughts.

"Gentlemen ... and ladies we have a special treat tonight. Two beautiful girls are going to give you the show of your lives. Get your bodies and dollars ready fofoooooorrrrrr ... Jordan and Amy."

Jordan?

Steve's body tensed, his senses on full alert. Aware of his brother looking at him strangely, he blocked the intrusion and focused on the stage. A flush of man-made mist darkened the interior, and Steve blinked several times to clear his vision. When he could see clearly, his pulse kicked up a furious pounding. A beacon of burgundy had entered the stage, and he knew immediately it was Alex.

The round of epithets, prayers, and thanks couldn't be numbered as they raced through his mind.

Alex wore a sheer black nylon dress, g-string, and the ever-present stilettos. She looked exotic and arousing, and just like he remembered. Steve's cock lengthened at the sight.

He was concentrating so hard on Alex's lithe figure, he nearly missed the other woman who trailed behind. The blonde was equally beautiful, though not in the same way that kept his attention straying to the tall red head. A bit shorter than Alex, her legs seemed to stretch directly from her hips, helped by the six-inch heels she wore.

"Which one is she?" Jake's question threw Steve from his reverie.

"The redhead," he answered automatically, sparing little thought to the question.

His gaze was held prisoner by the erotic dancing of the women. They moved in synchronized movements, timing their twists and turns around the stage. They were so graceful. The high-heeled shoes they wore made them look as if they floated on air.

They each grabbed one of the two glistening, golden poles near the middle of the stage, and spun around until Steve thought he would be dizzy from the sight. He'd never been so entranced by a mere dance. They glided by each other like lithe erotic angels, and stopped near the middle of the stage.

Aside from the melodious tunes echoing from the speakers, the club was completely silent. Everyone, even the girls, stayed focused on the attraction.

Steve watched in a sexual daze as Alex drifted behind the petite blond, her hands roaming the woman's breast. Pressure began building at the base of his spine and rushed straight to the region between his thighs. He nearly groaned aloud when Alex tweaked and plucked the blonde's nipples, causing them to extend in her hands through the fabric. When Alex pulled the straps from the woman's body revealing a firm pair of breasts, Steve had to shift in his seat.

He couldn't see the true color of the nipples, but they looked dark. His mouth dried at a sudden vision of Alex sucking one of those taut buds in her mouth.

Steve inhaled a deep breath. If he didn't watch himself, he was going to cum in his pants. When the blonde, who he remembered was named Amy, knelt in front of Alex he

gulped. Her face parallel to Alex's cunt, the blonde moved closer, like she was inhaling a rich fragrance. A tremor raced through his body, and a wave of pure, hot lust slammed into him. Amy moved Alex's g-string aside and buried her face in the welcoming pussy. Steve nearly fell off the couch.

Alex threw her head back, and released the long hair crowned on her head, while her hips moved in rhythm to the song-bumping against Amy's mouth. Watching the waves fall down around her shoulders, Steve's biggest desire was to get on stage and join them. After he had reveled in the two of them, he would fuck Alex senseless and never let her out of his sight again. The possessive thought rankled in his mind, combining with his lust, and he continued to gaze, spellbound.

Alex knelt on the stage, facing the blonde, and Steve could see her long, pink tongue swabbing and caressing Amy's full lips. He watched in stunned arousal as blood-red fingernails raked along Alex's back. His mouth went dry when he witnessed both tongues caressing, in an erotic dance of passion.

Endlessly, the two women kissed, opening their mouths wide. When they separated, after what felt like hours to Steve, Alex lowered her head toward the region of the blonde's breast. He wished he could materialize on the other side of stage because he couldn't see anything. All he could glimpse was red hair moving seductively back and forth.

Steve still hadn't seen Alex's nipples, and he strained for the sight. He remembered the feel of them stabbing into his chest, and his groin ached and pulsated. When the blonde moved her hands to the straps on Alex's shoulders, the sight of her large, firm breasts was nearly his undoing. Any moment he was sure to embarrass himself by staining his pants with a huge load of semen.

Forcibly removing his gaze from the stage, he rolled his eyes to glance at Jake. His brother's jaw hung slack, his mouth wide open, a look of lust and intrigue on his features, as well as a huge erection bulging beneath his pants.

A disturbing emotion assailed Steve. A feeling that instantly cooled his ardent lust. Jealousy.

He didn't want his brother looking at Alex with desire. His eyes drifted around the room, noticing the glazed looks of the other men present. Anger, unlike anything he'd ever felt, seared his body. He didn't want anyone looking at Alex with lust.

She's mine.

Steve no longer wanted to get on the stage and join them. He wanted to get up there and pull Alex off. Furious, he returned his vision to the stage.

Alex knelt between the spread thighs of the blonde, her hand cupping the other woman's butt cheeks as she moved back and forth seductively. He liked the sight. He couldn't deny it, but he didn't want other men to see it. He didn't want anyone to see it but him.

CHAPTER SIX

"Great job girls. How much money did you two make?" Melissa asked the question as soon as they entered the dressing room.

"I can't believe it. We made about two hundred dollars apiece." Alex said, clutching a huge wad of cash.

"Good job. The men are in a frenzy now. Get out there and capitalize some more," Melissa said over her shoulder, turning to leave the dressing room.

The door swished closed behind her, and Alex turned to Ameril grinning. "That was a good run."

"Yes, it was. Is that yours?" Ameril asked breathlessly, pointing to a nearby glass of water.

"Yeah, go ahead and take a drink, you look like you're about to pass out."

Ameril chuckled, taking a sip. "It was hot up there, and I did spend a lot of time between your thighs."

"Yes you did, but not as much as I spent between yours."

Ameril gave a tired laugh, and Alex punched her playfully in the shoulder. Leaning back in her chair, she thought back to the stage performance they'd just given.

No one in the audience knew the routine was simulated. Although in the past, they had shared of few verboten licks, tonight was completely for show. The money sitting on the table was testimony that they fooled everyone. Normally, the duo routine netted about fifty dollars apiece. Tonight they had taken in double.

Alex turned to Ameril. "Let's wait to go out there. I'm a little hungry."

"Again?" Ameril sighed.

Alex's short bark of laughter echoed throughout the dressing room, and she shook her head in amused mirth. Walking to the pay phone in the back, she dialed the number for a local Chinese restaurant. When the delivery guy arrived twenty minutes later, he eyed her naked nipples for a long time, nearly forgetting to take the money she offered. Alex thanked him with a laugh and decent tip, and ushered him out of the dressing room.

"I forgot about that," she said to Ameril, who already opened a pair of chopsticks to eat.

Alex remembered from her former days at the Classy Lady how many delivery guys, and girls, had strolled into the dressing room astounded at the wealth of naked ladies.

"Yeah, he just started working there. He always forgets to take the money," Ameril muttered, her mouth full of food.

Alex laughed, sat next to her friend to partake of the Chinese delights, and forgot about the guy who brought it. When they were done eating, and were pleasantly sated from rice and sweet and sour chicken, nearly twenty-five minutes had passed. Alex leaned back in her chair, and asked, "You ready?"

"Yeah," she answered. "Though I can barely stand."

Alex stood quickly to put on her shoes, rising to nearly six feet in height. "Come on, lazy butt. There is money to be had out there," she said confidently, the thrill of the hunt inside her.

Whatever reservations she'd had about returning to the club had disappeared. It wasn't the same place she remembered, and Ameril had been right. She'd nearly made enough for her rent. Tomorrow she could rest assured knowing her bills were well under control.

Ameril moved slowly, so Alex prodded at her arm with her nails. "Come on, let's get out there."

"Okay, okay. Let's go."

It took a moment for Alex's eyes to adjust to the darkened interior of the club. The dressing room had been bright, and she waited a few seconds before venturing out further.

"Where do you want to start? Left or right?" Ameril voiced, right behind her.

After every duo performance, they danced as a pair. It helped solidify the stage performance, and it brought in more cash. She looked around the room briefly, confident she didn't see anyone she knew.

"Let's start with the left." She turned to Ameril, grabbing her hand. "You ready?"

"Bring it on," Ameril answered, her blonde hair swinging forward as she bounced around like a boxer.

An hour later, they had more money than they could manage in their small handbags. The crowded room, full of sweaty, cock-stiff men, had been eagerly awaiting their arrival. Alex found out later that Fred, the deejay/emcee, had announced they would be out 'for each man's personal pleasure' in a few minutes. It was a tantalizing promise, and it kept the horde on edge, hard as rocks.

She and Ameril frequently returned to the dressing room for a breather, hydrating themselves with water. Alex had forgotten what hard work dancing could be. A good lap dance consisted of more than wiggling butts and shaking tits. A good dancer ensured the customer's sensual, erotic fantasy, and Alex took pride in being a very good dancer.

"Do you want to work the right or back now?" Ameril's question intruded into her thoughts.

"Umm ... let's get the back first," she answered. The back didn't have as many people, since most of the men sat to the left and the right of the stage vying for better positions.

"Okay, but you ask the questions this time. I think my voice is going out," Ameril squeaked.

Alex nodded in sympathy, and tried to remember the phrases she used to entice a quick dance. Picking her way through the crowd, with Ameril right on her heels, she glanced around for a willing victim.

Oh my God. She could have sworn she had just seen Steve Macmillan sitting on a couch far in the back. She blinked several times, and tried to move around a group of guys for a better view.

"What's the matter?" Ameril questioned perceptively.

No, her mind screamed, but when the crowd parted, there he sat on a black velvet couch. Their gazes locked, and she knew he was real, and not some figment of her imagination.

"What is it?" Ameril asked again.

"Steve Macmillan," she responded in a whisper, not knowing if her friend heard.

Alex didn't care though. The shock, pleasure, fear, and embarrassment running through her body paralyzed her feet to the floor. He looked exactly as she remembered. Since she thought about him all the time, she could visualize every aching line of his face. Even in the dark, his brown eyes were visible. Not so much because she could see them, but because she knew what they looked like. She was feeling heavy doses of shock, when Ameril jerked her around physically.

"Do you see someone from back home?" Alex shook her head violently. "Then what is it?"

"Steve Macmillan," she finally answered, pronouncing each syllable clearly.

She watched in a daze as Ameril's blue eyes widen. "Here?"

"Yes." She was a mumbling idiot, but she couldn't get control.

What's he doing here?

She wasn't ashamed of her dancing, but she'd hoped to never meet him on this level again. He was way too powerful a force, and she wanted to be on equal footing. Standing here in a dress that didn't conceal anything, she felt weak and powerless. And because of the heated glaze in his eyes, Alex wanted him more now than the first time.

Nearly hyperventilating, her body shook rapidly from Ameril's hard grip.

"He's a customer. That's all. Snap out of it."

Easy for her to say, Alex thought. "I'm getting out of here."

"No, you're not. You are going to walk over there with your head held high. He already knows what you do for a living. Don't start acting like a wimp now."

That was true. She shouldn't be ashamed, but a part of her was. She'd never wanted to see anyone she knew. She couldn't be "Jordan" when someone knew her as Alex. It broke her mode and made her uncomfortable.

"I'm not going over there," she said firmly.

"Yes, you are," Ameril replied, just as firmly.

They stared at each other like two gladiators, and Alex wished her friend wasn't so adamant. Why couldn't she understand that she wasn't prepared to deal with him right now?

Not ever.

She turned once more to look at Steve, and noticed he was sitting with someone. The two men looked so much alike they had to be brothers.

Great, he brought his family with him. Alex closed her eyes in mortification. The night had been looking good. She'd made plenty of money, and was having a good time. Now things had taken a turn for the worse.

Her eyes drifted to Steve's. His expression was so determined, her heart stuttered then picked up its pace. He looked relaxed, lounging gracefully against the couch, like he had no intentions of leaving. The two hours remaining until the club closed suddenly seemed like an eternity.

"We can stand here all night, or we can get it over with," Ameril muttered.

"All right." She reached deep inside her soul to build up her courage. *I'm definitely going to need it.*

Ameril led the way, and Alex trailed behind. Her courage plummeted like a bird with a broken wing with each step. Why did he have to be here? There were thousands of other clubs he could have chosen. Why would he come back here?

She had no answers for the questions racing through her mind, and as his presence loomed closer, she simply gave up looking for one. Ameril could do all the talking. She doubted if she could formulate a coherent sentence.

"So, how are you gentlemen doing this evening?" Ameril asked calmly.

It was a standard question, and she knew Ameril asked every customer the same thing before a dance. Yet, she still felt a trill of warning echo in her brain.

"Excellent, how about you two?" This was from the man who looked so much like Steve, and Alex shifted her focus to him. He was gazing at Ameril with a heated look, seemingly ignoring her.

Alex could feel Steve's eyes on her, requesting with silence that she look at him. But, she ignored the feeling and concentrated on her invisibility skills.

"Good. Thank you for asking," Ameril said politely. "I might be doing better if I got a dance."

No she didn't. Ameril had evidently lost her mind. Alex couldn't believe what she just heard. There was no way on this green earth that she was going to double for Steve or the other. She opened her mouth to voice her objection, and words failed as the Steve look-a-like responded to Ameril's challenge.

"I want a dance," he silkily replied, his gaze shifting briefly her way, "but only if you two dance for me and my brother."

Dance for the both of them? Had the whole world gone crazy while she was lapping a few well-paying customers?

"Together we're very expensive. You may not be able to afford us," Ameril challenged.

She recognized the defiance in Ameril's voice, and hoped her friend knew what she was doing. If she didn't this whole scene promised to get nasty.

Alex shifted on her heels, rocking slowly back and forth, listening to the conversation. "How expensive?" The smoothly spoken reply caused Alex to draw a deep breath of air.

"Well, for the both of us the cost is five thousand dollars ... apiece. Plus the cost of the room."

Alex's mind went blank.

Five thousand dollars! No one could rustle up ten grand at midnight. It was impossible. All the banks were closed. Plus, it was the weekend. She didn't think Donald Trump could rustle up that kind of cash. And it would be cash. Strip clubs were a cash only business, at least this strip club was. She looked at Ameril's profile to interpret her thoughts. The triumph of the moment sparkled from Ameril like a jewel in bright sunlight.

Alex began to relax, and felt a moment's peace. Unconsciously, her gaze fell directly on the man who had occupied more dreams than normal. Steve looked exactly as she remembered. Cool, confident, and extremely sexy. His bold brown stare held Alex's easily, and her vaginal muscles clenched spasmodically. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach, and her body clenched as memories of their one encounter came to mind.

"Ten thousand dollars," the brother responded, after the necessary pause that had to accompany an amount so large.

"Plus the cost of the room," Ameril reminded him.

Alex could tell by the tone of her friend's voice she was warming to the game.

"I take it you won't accept a check?"

"Sorry honey, cash only."

The whole situation was becoming slightly ridiculous, and again Alex looked at Steve, gauging his reaction. Her confidence nearly failed, when she didn't detect a lick of apprehension. Shifting her attention back to the brother, she prayed silently for the craziness to end.

"So what do you think, Steve?" Alex would be damned if she didn't hear a wealth of satisfaction in the voice.

"Let's do it," Steve said.

She dipped her head forward sure she hadn't heard right. Ameril, too, seemed very perplexed.

"You have ten thousand dollars in your pocket?" Ameril asked, disbelief clear in her voice.

"No honey, I don't have ten thousand dollars in my pocket."

Alex breathed a sigh of relief. She was definitely going to need a drink after this, and she was glad the Classy Lady served alcohol.

"Well I am sorry. It's cash or no dance," Ameril grabbed Alex's hand, and began to lead her away.

Thank God. It was finally over. She wanted to get back to the dressing room and hide out. Again her eyes shifted to Steve, and she was shocked by the anger and determination blazing from his brown orbs.

"Hold on." At the command, Alex and Ameril froze. "I don't have ten thousand dollars on me, but I'll have it in twenty minutes. Will the offer still be open when we get back?"

Would the offer still be open? She pondered the question, and looked at Ameril.

Her friend didn't look surprised. In fact, she looked happy and sated. "Well, we close in two hours. If you come back, and if we aren't busy, the dance is yours."

Alex tugged at Ameril's hand, giving her notice that it was time to go. She wanted to sneak out of here and be done with the whole mess, but Ameril wasn't budging. Alex squeezed her hand hard. Let's go, she pleaded silently, but still Ameril refused to move.

"I'll be back," he said, and he couldn't have said it better unless Arnold Schwarzenegger had been there to say it for him.

For the last time, she shifted her vision toward Steve. He'd barely said anything the entire time. Just sat there like a disinterested observer. Please, she beseeched with her eyes, before turning around to walk away.

Alex wasn't sure if she was pleading with him to stay or to go, but the question loomed like a disturbing specter in her mind. She pondered it all the way back to the dressing room, and pounced on Ameril as soon as they entered.

"What in the hell were you thinking?" she screamed, and several scantily clad females turned in their direction.

Ameril pinned her with stark gaze, and Alex could read the request for silence. Turning rapidly on her heels, Alex grabbed Ameril and stalked purposefully toward the bathroom.

When the doors shut with a bang behind them, Alex spun around and waited for an explanation.

"Would you relax? It's impossible to get that kind of cash this late at night. I don't care what he said," Ameril snarled, and Alex blinked in shock.

She had missed something really important out there. It didn't really surprise her since she'd been trying desperately not to focus on Steve, but there had been something going on between Ameril and the other man.

"You like him?"

"Plueeze, I wouldn't like that toad if he was guaranteed to turn into a prince."

I think the woman doth protest too much. "If you didn't like him why did you challenge him like that?"

"Because the arrogant bastard needed to be put in his place."

Alex nodded her head, but gave Ameril a look that spelled of disbelief. "Riiight."

"Would you give it a rest already? He's not going to be able to come up with the cash, and then we can laugh in their faces."

Alex wasn't so sure about that, but she reluctantly agreed anyway. "I guess you're right, but I don't want to laugh in anyone's face. I just want to get out of here."

"Fine, but I'm going back out." Ameril turned away, and paused. "Are you coming?"

Forget it, her mind yelled. She didn't need, or want, to go back out there. But she also didn't want to look like a coward.

"Alright," she said finally.

Alex exited the dressing room a lot more cautiously than she did last time. She waited several seconds at the archway leading into the main area, scanning the crowd for Steve or his brother. Her eagle eyes were on search mode, and she looked left, right, front, and back, before finally deciding that Ameril was right. They were gone. She didn't spot them anywhere.

The two brothers were nowhere to be found. Alex doubted they were in the bathroom. Both of them had looked too determined to be suddenly hiding out like children. If anything, she reflected, they had probably walked out, deciding quickly, that ten thousand dollars was too much to pay. For a second she had thought that they might answer Ameril's hastily uttered proposition.

"See? They left."

"Okay, so you were right," Alex said, casting one last look around to be sure.

"I know I was right."

For a brief second, Alex thought she heard regret in Ameril's voice.

It couldn't be, she thought. Ameril was a tiger. She ate men for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She was the one who was really a fool. She still hadn't stopped thinking about Steve.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Steve listened to Jake's commanding voice. His brother was holding a no-holds-barred discussion with the owner of First Merchant Banks, Harry Carter.

"I need to get the money now," Jake said, and Steve listened intently to the one-sided conversation.

"Yes, I know what time it is, but this is important."

He doubted Harry would view it that way. Ten thousand dollars for a lap dance, 'plus the cost of the room', Steve remembered the blonde's words. That wouldn't even register as a blip on Carter's importance scale.

Tactfully, his brother neglected to inform Harry of the reasons why the money was so vital. He didn't make it sound like life or death, but he put emphasis on their need, and Steve marveled when he detected the consent.

After seeing Alex on stage, Steve couldn't stop thinking about her, or stop himself from wanting her. If it cost ten thousand dollars, then ten thousand dollars needed to be paid. They had already called on cell phones for the location of the nearest First Merchants. Steve had resisted a triumphant shout because there was a bank only fifteen minutes away. From the determined look on his brother's face, it would probably be about ten, barring cops and speeding tickets.

"Harry's going to get a hold of the operations manager for the region. He said it shouldn't be too long," Jake said, snapping shut his cell phone and starting the car.

"Good," he replied in a bored voice, not wanting to clue his brother to the anxiety in his body. Just the thought of a wriggling, naked Alex on his thighs hardened his shaft, and he had to shift positions to hide the bulge.

His mind raced with memories. He could see her green eyes flushed with passion, mouth tinted rouge from heated kisses. It was enough to fill his cock so hard, so quickly; he felt a brief spasm of pain in his pelvis.

"How long do you think it will be before someone gets there?" Jake asked.

Steve didn't have a clue, but spurred into action from his restless body he motioned forward with a jerk of his hand. "I don't know, but let's go."

He wasn't sure how they had arrived at this juncture. It seemed scant minutes ago he sat here in the parking lot of the Classy Lady contemplating if Alex still worked there. Now, Jake was tearing out of the lot at top speed; it all seemed a little surreal. He wouldn't dare voice his confusion, though.

He and Jake were so anxious to get to the bank, neither had stopped to question the other for the reasons why. He knew why he wanted to go. Just the thought of Alex was enough to spur him into action, but his brother looked equally determined.

Jake's square jaw set, and Steve could almost hear the grinding of teeth. His brother only wore this look when he faced an opponent who he knew would be tough. Jake never wavered from his stance, and could be a mean son of bitch when needed; Steve knew this like the back of his hand, and he glanced at his brother quickly to gauge him.

Yep. His brother looked like he was about to step into a boardroom full of needle-sharp negotiators, challenge sparking from his eyes.

He wanted to ponder his thoughts a little longer but the squeal of tires jerked on his attention. The lot was empty.

Perhaps it had been a little unrealistic to think they could get the money this fast. It was late. Power and influence could do a lot, but it couldn't make people materialize out of thin air. He knew Harry would exert his force, but the CEO and owner of First Merchants wasn't capable of moving mountains. Even for customers as important and rich as the Macmillan brothers.

Steve's head dipped in defeat. If they had an hour things would be different. Hell, in an hour he and Jake could have rustled up the money themselves, and they wouldn't need a bank for it, either. The office wasn't too far from the club, and there was enough money stored in the vault. Yet, it would take much longer than an hour to get there and back.

Twenty minutes wasn't feasible, and although he knew this, it didn't help the stale taste of defeat saturating his mouth.

"Fuck," Jake's harsh epithet telling, and Steve concurred in silence. Five minutes had passed and still no one had arrived.

Steve was ready to leave when the distant hum of a car sounded in the background. He tensed, but refused to turn his head. When the roar of the engine pulled directly into a spot beside them, he closed his eyes.

It looked like they would be getting that dance after all.

* * * *

Dead on her feet, Alex stumbled to the dressing room and dropped into an available chair like a weary heap. She frowned when Ameril trailed in behind her, taking the chair next to her.

"Come on. We got one more hour left before it's quitting time."

Shit, she was ready to quit an hour ago. Alex loved Ameril dearly, but there were times her drive and enthusiasm could be nerve racking.

"I need to rest. We've been dancing for an hour straight. I'm tired."

Ameril reluctantly settled deeper into the cushions of the chair. "Okay, five minutes and then we're back out there."

"Yeah, whatever," Alex said, shaking her head.

She wasn't going back out there in five minutes or five hours. She was tired, and they had already earned plenty of money. She could take the week off and study. Ameril had recouped her losses so she had no reason to complain. The night was over as far as Alex was concerned, and she kicked off her heels with a sigh, leaning back into the chair.

This night, while not a complete disaster, had been extremely unusual, and it was time for it to end. She hadn't stopped thinking about Steve. His heated dark eyes stirred a hornet's nest she had thought she was done with.

When images of his face superimposed over the customers she and Ameril danced for, she decided to call a halt. Once she got her breathing, she was marching right into Melissa's office and cashing out.

Alex grabbed her shiny green purse, thinking it best to start counting her money. She had always liked to keep running totals of the dances she did, so she could assure she wasn't cheated when it came time to tally up the percentages. It was something she had to be cautious about when dealing with Dan, but she sincerely doubted if Melissa would try

anything like that. Yet, it was better to be safe than sorry, and the voluptuous brunette could always make a mistake.

Alex had her crumpled ones, fives, twenties, fifties, and hundreds spread out on the dressing table in front of her. Ameril's slight grunt ignored, she proceeded to count quickly.

"Put that money away," Melissa echoed from behind her.

Glancing up at the mirrored reflection, Alex could see the glint in Melissa's bright hazel eyes, like she was walking in a restaurant smelling the best food ever made.

"I'm tired, Melissa."

"Well get un-tired quick because we have a request for your presence." The brunette was all business, and her quick gesturing included Ameril, who perked up beside her.

"We only have an hour till we close. Tell them to come back tomorrow."

Nobody came back tomorrow. Alex knew this with certainty, and so did Melissa, obviously, because she leaned forward with a determined look. "Private room for the two of you," she whispered.

Private room.

"Who is it?" Ameril asked the question before Alex could even open her mouth.

"Two men. Handsome, rich men. I'll set it up."

Melissa flounced out of the dressing room, and the large black door shut behind her with a creaky 'swish'. The volume of noise around Alex turned up suddenly, like someone had cranked the stereo to full blast. Her gaze drifted around the room in shock, before finally settling on a stunned looking Ameril.

Alex tried to formulate some kind of words, but she was left with nothing but an empty mind and a lax jaw. Briefly, she wished she was the type of woman who could faint because nothing seemed better right now than falling out of the chair.

"What should we do?" Ameril asked, and Alex snorted in disgust.

Apparently, Ameril's foolhardy challenge wasn't so brave. Alex was tempted to give her a few choice words. She blamed the whole fiasco on the lovable, yet, forceful and challenging Ameril. If that crazy girl hadn't opened her mouth, she would be home resting in front the television right now watching The Sopranos.

"I don't know, friend. What do you think we should do?"

Ameril tapped her left foot nervously, and Alex smiled in crazed amusement. She'd never seen her friend lose composure so quickly, so apparently. If this weren't a fraught-filled moment, she would have beckoned for a camera to capture this with a Kodak.

"I ... I think we should go out there."

Alex didn't agree. She'd like to finish counting her money and leave, but something, and she wished she knew what, stopped her.

He was out there right now. He'd come back, with ten thousand dollars no less, and he wanted her.

The answer became suddenly clear. "Yes, let's give them a dance they won't forget."

"You're sure," Ameril responded in a serious voice.

"Yes," Alex answered, grabbing Ameril's arm.

She was definitely sure.

Memories like quicksilver invaded her foggy mind. Her front door closing, the slight pang of regret, before she covered it with feelings of relief. The hours she'd spent thinking of him, his body, his stature, his everything. It all came to a head and she was

ready. More than ready, actually, to face him, his brother, the whole damn firing squad if need be. It was time to show that man a few things, and she was just the woman to do it.

She may have been a scared rabbit an hour ago, cringing and frightened because of shock, but she was hell bent to impress a few things on his mind. Now, all she needed to do was prepare Ameril.

Ameril, for all her bravado really wasn't that brave. Alex knew she put on a good front, but she wasn't nearly as tough as she let on. Of course, Ameril had perfect emotional armor, as a dancer she could have nothing less, but she was more equipped for logical battles of the mind. Her hasty bluff called, it was time for Alex to step into the lead.

"Get your shoes," she ordered quickly.

"Don't you think we should change or something? We still have our stage outfits on."

Alex blinked twice before looking down at her body. They were both clad in matching emerald one piece spandex dresses, the hems reaching just below the curving of their buttocks, white stilettos secured at the ankles with straps.

Taking time to change would give them the opportunity to change their minds.

"No, we're going like this."

Alex nodded to Ameril, and waited impatiently for her to don her shoes.

Melissa burst back into the room, just as Ameril had fastened the last strap. "Come on, they're waiting in number five."

"We're almost done," she glanced at a pale Ameril, who was busy trying to paint on lipstick.

"Well, hurry up. I got some CDs from Fred for your music. Do you need anything else?" Melissa asked in helpful urgency.

"Yes, I—we need a drink."

Ameril seconded, "Yes, please."

"Sure thing, girls." In a flash, Melissa was out the door and back again, carrying two glasses filled with clear liquid. At Alex's confused expression, she said, "Vodka. It doesn't leave that lingering smell on your breath."

Alex nodded, and drank in a rush. The heated liquid speared her insides like fire. Her eyes watered, and she swallowed several times to remove the taste.

"You guys ready?"

"Yes," Ameril answered, and Alex guessed she had finally found a reserve of courage.

Melissa looked grateful, and ushered them toward the darkened hallways in the back of the club. Walking down the narrow corridor had the same feel as executioner alley, and Alex breathed deeply for control.

"Okay ... you ready?" Melissa asked, and Alex banked all of her courage for this week and the next as they appeared in front of the door labeled 'five'.

"Sure," she answered, far from ready but willing to face the challenge.

"You got one hour."

"W-what?" Alex grabbed Melissa's long arms before she could scurry away. "The rooms are thirty minutes for five hundred per person."

"They paid two thousand...for the both of you. A thousand dollar tip ... pretty good girls. "

Two thousand dollars!

That would up the grand total to twelve thousand dollars. It was staggering, and Alex had to grab Ameril to keep from falling.

No one, she thought quickly, paid twelve thousand dollars for a dance, one hour or not. There wasn't enough chatting, dancing and ass wriggling she could do in an hour to justify that. She'd wear herself out if she even tried. Her courage faltered significantly, and she felt her breathing accelerate.

"We don't have to go in there," Ameril's said, her voice hushed. Melissa was far down the hall now, but she knew her friend kept quiet because the doors leading to the private rooms were paper-thin. It wouldn't take much for the two occupants to hear their conversation.

"No, we have to go in there," she whispered heatedly, and bolstered her flagging esteem. "We'll do three routines and then we will leave. One hour or not."

Ameril nodded, and Alex felt a measure of courage return. She reached for the doorknob, but Ameril quickly stayed her hand.

"You're sure about this?"

No, she wasn't sure and she wanted to tell her so, but she nodded and turned the handle.

It was now or never.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Alex turned the knob slowly. The room was dark, but her eyesight had adjusted in the hallway. Steve sat on a couch right next to the door, his brother on a couch on the opposite wall, directly under a picture of a famous porn star.

Alex's eyes roamed around the room in stunned delirium, taking in the sight and sounds. A small nightlight cast the room in eerie shadows, and she felt her knees knock together. Ameril clutched her hand, her grip forceful. Massive Attack played on the nearby CD player, the tune haunting and melodic.

"The clock already started ticking, so you might want to close the door."

Alex gasped, and looked toward the owner of the deep, husky voice. It was the brother, but he wasn't speaking to her, his gaze was riveted on Ameril, who stood framed in the doorway.

She peered over her shoulder, thinking Ameril would turn and bolt, but instead the petite blond stepped into the room, silently shutting the door behind her.

Alex had yet to look at Steve, but she could feel his gaze on her. She wondered if he was going to say anything. So far, the brother had done all the talking.

"I thought you were going to dance for us?"

Alex closed her eyes. She didn't need to look to see who uttered the question. Steve's rich, dark voice sounded very near from his position on the couch, and she tensed nervously.

"Would you like us to dance together or separately?" she asked, surprised her voice didn't tremble. To her ears, she sounded calm and collected.

"I've already seen you together. I want you to dance for me," he whispered, and Alex felt a rush of heat between her legs.

Her head turned slowly, and she found herself staring into familiar eyes, darkened charcoal black by the room's shadowed interior. He looked relaxed and poised, but she could see telltale hints of tension in his large, muscular body. The answering tension in her own heated core moved her closer, everyone else in the room fading to oblivion.

She didn't hear the brother rise from the couch to take Ameril's hand. She didn't hear their hushed words. Her focus solely on Steve, she glided until she stood directly in front of him.

Alex didn't really have any words to say. So, she closed her eyes letting the music take hold of her body, as it had done hundreds of other times.

She dipped forward slightly, raising her arms high above her so her breasts thrust in the air. Her hips moved in sync with the rhythm of the music, and she swayed erotically. Her gaze locked with Steve's, and she stared, challenging him. He moved slightly, tried to touch her, but she backed away quickly turning away from him.

She bent from the hip, so that her taut buttocks were on display. His quick indrawn breath gave Alex courage, and she trailed one hand along her ass, balancing her body with the other so she didn't fall forward. Coming to her knees slowly, her buttocks poised high in the air, she reared forward until she knelt on all fours.

Her back arched, and she rotated her neck, flipping her long hair round and round. Ameril lay a scant two feet in front of her, sensually trailing her hands over her firm, ripe breasts. Alex's gaze shifted toward the brother, and watched as he rubbed a large hand over the huge bulge in his pants.

Tearing her eyes from the sight, she peered over her shoulder at Steve, and imagined his hands rubbing his cock. She turned slowly, rocking her body with the beat of the music and crawled toward Steve.

Settling on her haunches, right between his spread thighs, she slowly peeled the top portion of her dress away, giving him a bird's eye view of her large, rouge nipples. He groaned loudly, and Alex reveled in her power as a large hand settled over the large cock protruding through his pants.

Alex toyed with her breasts. Tweaking and plucking until they stood at attention like little soldiers. She bent her head slightly, cupped her large mounds, and ran a sleek tongue over the peaks. Steve moaned and reached for her roughly.

His palms settled over her arms and lifted her off the floor. Pulling her forward, until she straddled his thighs. When her aching cunt came into contact with the hardness encased inside his trousers, Alex rubbed her budding clit against him, eager for the contact. Her eyes rolled back in her head, as Steve's hot mouth started suckling fervently on her tender breasts.

In a distant part of her mind Alex could hear Ameril groaning. She glanced over her shoulder and expelled a deep sigh. Ameril was lying on the floor, her legs spread wide, with the brother kneeling between them. His mouth fed from her pussy like a starving man.

It was too much, the feel of Steve's hard cock between her legs, the sight of Ameril being eaten out, the suckling pull of Steve's mouth on her breast. A tremendous orgasm rocketed through her body, vibrating Alex from head to toe.

Steve groaned against her breasts, and pushed her off of him quickly. Alex nearly fell to the floor, but he grabbed her and righted her until she stood in front of him on shaking legs. His hands moved to the fastening of his pants and within seconds his cock freed, hanging low.

A tremor moved through her at the sight of it, so long and thick. She wanted to suck it, wanted to feel it sliding inside her mouth. Dropping to her knees quickly, Alex swept her tongue in quick brisk motions, lathering his turgid length.

* * * *

"Alex," Steve groaned, spearing his hands in her hair to guide her mouth. The burgundy tresses caressed his hands like slips of silk, and he clenched tighter, holding her head steady. His hips jackknifed back and forth, and he encouraged her to suck him deeper and faster.

A heavy pressure pushed against his spine, and he knew any minute his semen would come bursting from his body. Steve didn't want to cum in her mouth. He wanted to cum inside her hot, lithe body. But, the moist cavern sucking him deeper, almost to the back of her throat, made it hard to think of anything else.

He looked down, watched helplessly as his cock disappeared inside her mouth over and over. Steve shuddered, restraining his orgasm, and pulled his gaze from her kneeling before him, like a slave to his pleasure.

His gaze drifted across the room. Jake was bending Amy over the couch, rubbing his cock between the tight confines of her pussy lips. Steve recognized the teasing action, and had to swallow a moan at the arousing sight.

He had to be inside Alex, had to get inside that sweet pussy. He wouldn't tease her. He couldn't take that much strain. His cock demanded release, and as much as he wanted to spurt inside her mouth, Steve needed to feel it inside of her cunt.

Grabbing her hair roughly, he pulled her lips away from his cock, stepping back to sit down when she tried to latch onto him again. "I want to fuck you," he ordered, his voice harsh with tense passion.

"Oh, God..." she moaned, and immediately climbed on top of him, straddling like she had done before.

Steve stopped her. He didn't want her that way. He wanted her to sit on his cock with her back to chest, so he could play with her breast and nipples. He loved the feel of them, and he wanted them in his hands while she rode him hard and fast. And it would be hard and fast. He wouldn't accept it any other way.

Steve sat Alex away from him. Careful to be gentler with her small frame than when he pulled her from her knees, he turned her around and slid quickly inside her.

Her cunt welcomed his cock like no other, and Steve pushed deeper, wanting to feel every bit of her pulsating pussy. He groaned aloud as pleasure ricocheted throughout his body.

Pulling her roughly against his chest, he filled his hands with her breasts. Her pelvis rotated back and forth in a circle, and his dick lodged so deeply inside her he could feel the slick passageway convulsing and throbbing. It was like a tight, moist cave, and Steve thrust his hips, trying to go inside as far as he could.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Jake slamming into the blonde from behind. Watching his brother fuck hard and fast, over and over, spurred Steve's hips to a faster pace. He pinched Alex's nipples, and moved her head until the soft stroke of her hair tumbled around his shoulders.

"Do you want me to fuck you like that?" he whispered in her ear.

"Yes, yes," she moaned.

Steve suddenly reared off the couch, and Alex had to grab onto him. His cock buried deep inside her cunt, each aching movement lodged him deeper.

Alex nearly screamed from the pleasure. She bent over, her breasts resting against the arm of the couch, as Steve's cock pounded into her pussy, rattling her teeth from the force of his motion. She could feel every inch of him slice into her vagina.

The slapping sounds of flesh, including the sounds from the other side of the room, were heady and erotic. Alex turned her head and watched, highly aroused, as Ameril's breasts bobbed back and forth. The brother's tight buttocks clenched and flexed with every deep thrust.

Steve moved like a piston now, and Alex had a vivid picture of what she looked like in Ameril's position.

"Fuck me," she yelled, and heard Ameril's answering groan.

Within moments, Ameril shouted loudly, "Oh, DAMN!"

And Alex was right behind her as an earth shattering orgasm shot through her body like a Colt .45. Steve grunted and pushed hard against her pelvis before shuddering and collapsing on top of her.

Through a hazy fog, she heard another distant moan and then there was only the sound of the music and harsh breathing. Alex knew where she was. Her eyes were rolling around in her head in an aftermath of pleasure. She could see the shadows of the small private room. She could hear the rumbling noise from the speakers blaring music inside the main portion of the club. She could hear the muffled sounds of conversations through the walls. She was sure, if given a moment, she might actually feel a little ashamed of herself. But right now she needed to lie here a while longer. Her body still shook, and she didn't dare think of moving.

The longer she lay the more conscious thought began to seep into her mind.

Ohmygawd!

She and Ameril had to get out of here. Any second Melissa would be walking down the hall, if she opened the door and found them like this...

Alex shuddered, and moved quickly, elbowing Steve in her haste to get from under him.

"Move dammit. Hurry up and get dressed," she snapped at him.

Steve muffled an oath, and Alex hurried from under him. She would be ashamed in about five minutes. Right now she needed to focus. She and Ameril had to get out of here before Melissa walked in.

Looking around for her dress, which Steve had managed to pull off somehow, she gestured quickly to Ameril.

"Ameril, hurry the fuck up."

If the crazy girl kept lollygagging they were going to be answering a lot of questions neither one of them would want to answer, in particular, why they just did something akin to prostitution, and why they shouldn't be hauled off to jail.

"Ameril?"

"Y-yeah, okay." Ameril moved slowly, but answered in a weary voice.

Alex's gaze moved back to Steve. He must have righted his clothes while she had been searching for her shoes because he sat on the couch now, staring at her intently.

She faltered a moment, caught in the heat of his gaze.

Oh no you don't.

She was getting out of here, and there wasn't time for round two, even though her body quickened at the thought. Alex had found one shoe, and was busy looking for the other when she heard slight footsteps treading down the hall.

Her eyes widened in fright, and she shot worried glances from one brother to the next. They sat placidly on the couches, looking like nothing was out of the ordinary, except like maybe they had gotten the dance of their lives.

Ameril, too, looked composed.

So, why am I the only one feeling like Dr. Doom is walking down the hall?

A short swift knock sounded on the thin wooden door seconds later. Melissa poked her head inside, smiling happily. "You guys finished?"

"Yes," Alex and Ameril answered in unison, and Melissa looked to the both of them questioningly.

"Okay. Well, take your time. We're about to close anyway," she said, turning a bright gaze to Steve and then Jake. "Did you fellas enjoy your dance?"

"Best dance I ever had," Steve replied coolly, smiling engagingly.

Alex wanted the floor to swallow her whole. Ameril was having fits, but concealed it well by turning around and looking for her other shoe.

"I'm glad. Make sure you come back to the Classy Lady then. Best club on the West Coast."

Melissa smiled once more before departing, and Alex let go of the breath she'd been holding.

"Jesus, that was close," Ameril said.

Alex buried her fingers in her hair and pulled slightly. If Melissa had arrived five minutes sooner—

Alex shook her head wearily. It was time to get out of here, but she couldn't leave yet, and she didn't want to think of the reasons why. She glanced at Ameril and took in her worried expression.

"We'll take it out of the pot for tonight," Ameril said in hushed voice, and it was clear to Alex they'd been thinking the same thing.

There was no way she was going to charge Steve or his brother ten thousand dollars. This whole episode reeked of prostitution. Melissa would have made them pay beforehand, that was the standard policy. But, Alex didn't feel comfortable charging them anything.

She turned to Steve, dreading having to ask the question. "You paid two thousand for the room, right?"

Alex didn't think Melissa would lie, but she wanted to be sure.

Steve tilted his head to the side, but responded in a low voice, "Yes ... two thousand in cash."

Alex took a deep breath, calculating the numbers in her head. "How much do you have on you Ameril?"

"I have four hundred dollars on me, and some more money in my locker."

She had nearly eight hundred dollars, but two hundred of that was owed to the club.

"I have six hundred. How much do you have in the locker?"

Ameril eyes drifted shut, and she knew her friend calculated swiftly. "I don't have enough."

Alex put her face in her hands. She would have to go in her stash.

"What are you talking about?"

Alex's gaze moved swiftly across the room to the brother lounging on the other couch. She opened her mouth to explain, but was stopped by Ameril's angry words.

"Look buddy, I..."

"Jake," he interrupted Ameril's tirade. "Do I need to make you say my name again for you to remember it?"

Alex watched a slight flush travel across Ameril's face. She would have expected a snappy come back, something, but Ameril's lips sealed.

Warily, Alex turned toward Steve. He was looking at her with the same heated gaze as before, but he didn't say a word.

"We want to pay for the room," she said, finally finding her voice.

Steve looked at her for several seconds. "No."

She opened her mouth, determined to make him listen to reason when he forestalled her by standing quickly. One minute he sat relaxed, the next he towered above her. She shrank back a little, but tried to remain calm.

"When's your birthday?" he asked quietly.

Her birthday?

The question jarred Alex, but she answered automatically, "August twenty sixth."

"Consider this an early present, then," he said, handing her a thick and large white envelope.

Alex looked at him briefly before glancing down. The envelope bulged from the seams.

"No," she said, trying to hand it back to him.

"Take it, Alex," Steve ordered, his voice firm.

She would mail it back to him. She promised herself. There was no way she was keeping the money. No way. Alex looked into his eyes, and made one more effort to give him back his money, but he shook his head and grabbed her face with both hands. Gentle lips caressed her cheeks, before moving to her mouth to place soft, heated kisses on her lips.

"I don't know what you've done to me," he whispered seductively. "I blame it all on your legs." He smiled, and pulled away from her. "I'll talk to you later."

Alex watched him leave, and tried to deny the power of his heated words. His long strides bounded down the hallway, and she had to resist the ridiculous urge to run after him.

Alex turned to Ameril and gasped in shock.

Jake had her in a deep embrace. Their lips were locked passionately. When they separated, he whispered something in Ameril's ear, and she blushed furiously before regaining composure.

What a night.

CHAPTER NINE

Alex fingered the card Steve had left pinned to her fridge a year ago. It was still in pristine condition, though the edges were a little worn. She'd been tempted to throw the card away when she'd first seen it stuck to the surface with her white Hello Kitty magnet. She'd even gone so far as to walk right up to the trash can with the card in hand, but she couldn't bring herself to actually put it inside. You can't throw away memories, she thought, and that was what she had been trying to do. A part of her, a larger portion than she was willing to recognize, wanted to remember. So, she kept the card in an envelope in a little drawer of her nightstand, glancing at it occasionally when memories seemed to overwhelm her.

She'd never thought of calling him during their year long absence, but every so often curiosity would get the best of her, and she wanted to find out more about him. Aside from the fact he was the best lay she'd ever had in her life.

As the days lengthened, she'd become more and more curious, and finally gave in to temptation. Sitting down one day at her computer, she'd logged onto the internet, and typed, "Macmillan International" inside the blank box for the search engine. She'd been shocked when nearly two thousand hits popped on the screen.

"Macmillan International outbids Cipher Electronics." The most recent article read, and she'd clicked the link before she knew what she was doing. A picture of Steve shaking hands with a small, portly man flashed on the screen.

"Steve Macmillan, CEO and majority share holder, of Macmillan International outbids Cipher Electronics for control of ASG."

Alex scanned the rest of the article briefly, her jaw dropping in awe. She'd clicked article after article, until her eyes crossed with strain. Steve Macmillan wasn't just a good fuck. He was filthy, disgusting, and dirty-to-the-core rich. In fact, he was one of the richest men in the world. Alex had been shocked, and tried to stifle the warm feelings increasing in her body. It might have helped a little if he was some dirt bag, or some unknown entity, but apparently, at least according to the internet, he was a nice guy, and a powerhouse in the business community.

Ambient thoughts of him sitting behind a large oak desk, scattering his influence and power, filled endless fantasies. She was a normal everyday somebody, but she'd banged one of the most influential men in the world. It was a dirty thought that frequently led to some of the best orgasms of her life. She imagined herself in control of him, tempting and teasing him mercilessly, a prisoner of her whims and desires.

No wonder he thinks you're a prostitute.

Alex closed her eyes in memory. Every time their paths crossed she acted just like one. The first time she jumped him. The second time she fucked him in a strip club, with other people watching no less, and took five thousand dollars as payment. Although there were slight tingles in her body from the thought, she hated having him think of her that way.

"It's not my fault, though," she said aloud. She couldn't help herself when he was near. Steve was the best catalyst to sex she'd ever met. He merged sensuality and passion like a well-built freeway. Twice, he brought her two personas together, Alex and Jordan.

Jordan—the go-getter, and Alex—the sexually deprived.

The two personas were an oddity she didn't understand. Alex breathed deeply, controlling her wayward thoughts. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about split personalities, and unfulfilled desires.

Her gaze roamed to the envelope on the kitchen table. She needed to send Steve's money back. It had been two days since that night at the Classy Lady, and she still didn't know what to do. Ameril had agreed, the whole thing stank of prostitution, and left it in her hands. Now, she needed to figure out the best way to safely return the cash. Regular post wasn't going to work. She thought about the banks, but if she went to her bank trying to change ten thousand dollars, she wouldn't have to wait long for the IRS to start knocking on her door.

Alex shook her head absently. That left one option. She would have to go to Macmillan International, and give the money back personally. The thought sent a helpless shudder through her body, and her eyes shut tight. She didn't like the idea, but it was the only avenue left. That meant there was one thing to do: call Steve and convince him to see her.

"Mr. Macmillan's office," an efficient voice answered after the second buzz.

She took a deep breath, but spoke rapidly into the receiver. "May I speak with Steven Macmillan please?"

"May I ask who's calling?"

"A-Alexandria Houston."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Houston. Mr. Macmillan is not in the office. Is there a message?"

Alex released a pent up breath, "No, there's no message. Thank you." She disconnected the call with an angry press to the "talk" button.

"Great," she said aloud. "Why didn't I realize his calls would be screened?"

No doubt the efficient voice would tell him she called. She cursed herself every type of fool imaginable, but had to stop when her potent epithets were interrupted by sudden knocks at her door.

It was most likely the manager, or the elderly Mrs. Henderson from next door. A slight smile touched her lips as she thought of the kind, gray-haired lady. *She probably needs to borrow something*, she thought, and walked quickly to open the door.

"What do you..."

Alex's jaw slacked, and her voice trailed into nothingness. It wasn't the gray-haired, Mrs. Henderson, standing in the aisle way outside her door.

* * * *

Steve looked at Alex standing before him. She was wearing a t-shirt two sizes too big and blue sweat pants with U-C-L-A emblazoned on the side. She looked young. Her hair was pulled into a tight knot on top her head, a few tendrils escaping to wave around her oval face. If possible, she looked even more beautiful, and his breath quickened.

"Can I come in?"

He watched her look around, her brows creased in confusion. "How did you get inside the complex?"

"I pressed all the buttons till someone let me in."

She still didn't look convinced. "You pressed all the buttons?"

He didn't know why he imagined she would greet him with open arms and a smile on her face. Though she had been grinning when she opened the door, but he doubted that was for him.

Who did she think it was?

"Were you expecting someone?" he asked, and scolded himself for the slight awareness of jealousy singeing though his body.

"I thought you were my neighbor."

"Can I come in?" he asked again, relaxing somewhat.

She inhaled rapidly, but relented, opening the door wider.

When he was inside her living room, he looked around briefly. He hadn't spent much time checking the place out last time, so everything looked unfamiliar. He took a moment to survey the apartment. It was small, the walls painted a utilitarian white. Numerous art deco pictures hung on every available surface. A large rug graced the entry in muted colors of brown and red, and a comfortable looking sofa stood against the longest wall. A scratched, but sturdy coffee table stood in front, covered with books and papers. The place felt cozy, and comfortable.

He wished he could take advantage of the soothing interior, but instead he felt restless. Alex moved from her place near the door, to stand in the open entryway of her kitchen. The sun shone brightly inside, and she seemed bathed in golden hues.

"So, are you going to tell me what you're doing here?" she asked, after a long moment of silence.

"We need to talk."

He waited for her ask, 'about what?' but she stayed stubbornly mute, and Steve could sense her building anger. She turned abruptly, pacing back and forth, agitated. "So you're here for another fuck? Right?" She hissed, glaring at him.

Steve's brows dropped low, and he stared at her. He wasn't here for another fuck. At least, that's what he told himself. He was here because there was something between them. Something that he couldn't get out of his system, no matter how hard he tried. "I told you we would talk again," he responded, and wished he had another statement stored up his sleeve. That sounded lame, and she narrowed her eyes in disgust.

"Yeah, I figured that," she snapped. "You want to fuck the prostitute some more don't you?"

Steve sighed and took a seat on the couch. "You're not a prostitute, Alex."

She stopped pacing, striding angrily toward the kitchen, and picking up a stuffed white envelope. He recognized it as the same one he'd handed to her at the club.

"That's not what this says," she snarled, holding the envelope in a tight grasp. "I don't want your money."

"I didn't come to talk to you about the money," he said quietly, not wanting to engage her in combat.

"Well, that's what I want to talk to you about." She stalked toward him. "Take it back."

Her hand launched like a pitcher, and she threw the envelope at him, hitting him squarely in the chest. Triumph glared in her eyes, and Steve felt the slow boil of anger deep in his gut. He had expected some shock, maybe a little misunderstanding on her part, but the cold fury lashing from her green gaze was unexpected. Combined with his raging emotions a hurricane built in the small apartment, and Steve started to feel caught up in the maelstrom.

"You charged the money, Alex," he snapped back.

"Don't call me, Alex. I'm Jordan to you. Only Jordan."

The rage in her voice ignited the flame of fury in Steve. He bounded from the couch in a flash, striding toward her. He felt his own burst of triumph when she backed up slightly, but the fearful expression on her face stilled his raging emotions.

He hadn't come here to scare her. He needed to understand what was happening to him, and she was the only one with the answers.

"I didn't come here to fight with you, Alex." He put a slight emphasis on her name. He didn't understand why she would want him to call her Jordan. She would always be Alex to him, sweet, beautiful, feisty Alex.

"Then what are you doing here, Steve? Don't tell me you didn't come here for another roll in the hay. I don't believe you." She glared at him, but her voice was calm and even.

He turned and glanced absently at the pictures hanging from the wall. He had rehearsed a scene in the car. Everything had sounded so perfect then. He would ask her to be his mistress. Explain to her what he wanted. Uncomplicated sex, no strings attached. He would keep her in the lap of luxury, and she would be at his beck and call whenever he wanted. He would explain to her how it was in her best interest. She wouldn't have to work at the club. He would be adamant about that, and she wouldn't have to worry about transportation because he would buy her whatever kind of car she desired. They would both get what they wanted. He would have her, and she wouldn't have to dance. He didn't understand why he was finding the well-rehearsed words so difficult to utter, or so difficult to understand.

"I want us to continue with our relationship," he said finally, turning to face her.

Alex gasped, "What relationship? We fucked. That's it. There isn't any relationship in that."

Steve inhaled swiftly. She had just unknowingly given him the opening he needed. "There can be," he said softly, watching her face intently for any reaction.

Nothing. She was blank, and Steve wondered what she thought behind the stoic poker face.

"What are you talking about?"

"You and I, Alex." Steve moved toward her, and this time she didn't back away.

"The way we make each other feel."

"~~Y~~-you don't make me feel..."

He interrupted, reaching her in two quick strides. "Don't lie," he said, cradling her breast in a large palm.

Steve watched her pupils dilate, the black disk overwhelming her green irises. "I want you, and I know you want me. Don't fight it," he cajoled, tilting his head forward until his lips rested against her cheek. He would use whatever powers of persuasion were

needed. He didn't plan on leaving until he had her consent. When she arched her large breast into his palm, he considered not leaving at all.

"Oh, Steve," she moaned.

"Say yes," he murmured, moving his hands under her shirt. "You know you want it. Just say, yes Steven. That's all you have to say." He rolled her taut nipple between his fingers, stimulating her to do his will. The bud grew longer, distending into his hand. Moving closer, he rubbed his bulging cock against her waist. "Say it, Alex. Tell me now or I won't give you what you want," he said, pinching a nipple hard. "What you need."

"Oh, God ... Yes Steven, yes."

He smiled against her lips.

Victory.

He would have her whenever he wanted. However he wanted. He lifted her quickly, so she had to wrap her long legs around his waist, and carried her from the room, not stopping till he reached queen-size mattress. Laying her down gently, he grabbed her sweats and t-shirt and pulled them free of her body with quick yanks. Pink cotton panties, stained with wetness, were removed next. He shed his pants, shoes, and shirt, nearly ripping the linen material in his haste. The musky scent of her arousal filled his nostrils, and he felt like an animal eager to fuck, eager to brand her with his cock.

He knelt between her legs, his face raised just above her cunt. She smelled like a rich, fragrant flower, and he inhaled several times trying to memorize her scent. Twirling a long finger between her satin thighs, he stopped periodically to saturate his finger with her dewy woman's juices. She moaned aloud, rotating her hips. Her vagina tried to suck his finger inside, and Steve pinched her clit hard, telling her without words he would set the pace.

"Are you on the pill, Alex?"

He didn't want to ask the question. They had already had unprotected sex twice before. It seemed a little foolish, and late, to be asking now, but he wanted this relationship to begin on the right foot.

"I get a shot every three months," she replied. "I don't have any ... diseases either. You're the only person ... I've slept with in a while." Pink tinged her cheeks, and forehead, and Alex turned her eyes to the wall behind him. Her words moved him. He knew what it took to say them. He felt more triumph.

She was his.

Absolutely.

"There won't be anyone else, Alex. You're mine," he replied, before diving his face in her cunt.

Steve had been dreaming about the taste of her pussy for so long. He was merciless, wanting to taste every crevice. He teased her clit gently with the tip of his tongue, alternating with lapping gently at the slick, tight hole underneath. He absorbed her eager moans, and stilled her hips when she tried to shove her pussy in his face.

Spreading her lips apart with one hand, he pushed two fingers inside her cunt, vibrating her clit with a throaty sound when the slick passageway tightened around his fingers. She tasted like tangy honey, rich and sweet. He coated his tongue with her essence before sticking it as far as possible inside her. Alex reared off the bed, and Steve's mouth followed, his hands caressing her ass in a kneading embrace. He licked,

nipped, and lapped her pussy for another ten minutes. He wanted to feed off her forever, but his cock ached badly.

He lifted his head from her pussy, staring into her glazed eyes. He had wanted to take her with smooth, gentle thrusts this time, but the anxiety in his body was overwhelming. He grabbed at her thighs, spreading her legs wide and plunged inside her slick wet passage in one sure stroke.

"Yesss," Alex screamed loudly.

Steve grunted in response, and his hips moved with a frenzy of lust. He placed her legs on his shoulders and leaned into her, groaning loudly when he felt his cock shove another inch inside her pussy. Bracing his weight with his arms, Steve fucked Alex deeply, penetrating to the core of her being. The curved angle of her cunt fit his cock like a glove, and her breasts bounced from the force of his plunging.

"All mine," Steve gasped, just before he sealed his lips to Alex's mouth. His tongue swept inside like a bold conqueror, and he vanquished her into ultimate surrender. Her body convulsed under his, and she screamed her release into his mouth.

Steve had never felt such pleasure, such vital release. He struggled to maintain as his body tightened, his balls expanding and aching. Seconds later, he burst inside her, shooting thick hot semen until she gushed and oozed.

Steve collapsed, falling to the side of her, and wrapped his muscular arms around her.

All mine.

CHAPTER TEN

"The energy commission is meeting next month. I think we should push the commercial now. We want to send a ... Steven, are you listening to me?"

Steve glanced quickly at Marie. She sat primly, her legs crossed, in the chair opposite his desk dressed in a fashionable black business suit. Her long chestnut hair styled in a severe bun, a perturbed look on her face, hazel eyes flashing with annoyance.

"Yes, I'm listening and you're right," Steve agreed, but he really didn't have a clue what he agreed to.

"Where's your mind? You've been drifting in la-la land for the past hour."

Steve knew where his mind had been. It had been in the same place for the past three weeks. Lodged inside Alex's tight little body. He couldn't stop thinking about her. No matter how many times he fucked her, sucked on her clit, came in her mouth, or caressed her body. His mind stayed with her. He couldn't go five minutes without thoughts of her intruding. It didn't matter where he was, what he was doing, or who he was with.

Hell!

Yesterday, he'd become so aroused from thinking about her. He'd had to call a short recess to the meeting he'd been in, to excuse himself to the bathroom to jerk off. He hadn't done anything like that since-ever!

He was obsessed. He knew it, owned up to it, and relented because there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

"I've had a lot on my mind lately," he responded truthfully. It was easier than prevaricating. Marie could smell a lie a mile away.

"You and Jake both. The energy commission is around the corner. HR 5201 is on the agenda. If you two don't snap out of it we're going to lose billions. What could be more important than that?"

Steve sighed absently, running a hand through his hair. She was right, of course. He needed to get his mind together. Not just for the sake of his business, either.

"Do you have the numbers for the energy report?" Steve asked. When Marie nodded, he continued, "I'll look through it, and get back with you on the commercial spot. We may not want to push the commission." Marie looked appeased, and Steve leaned back in his chair.

"What's really wrong with you, Steven? You and Jake have been acting really funny." Her eyes narrowed, and he prepared for the worse. "It's a woman, isn't it?"

"Mind your own business, Marie," he snapped, not at all willing to discuss his sexual problems with his younger sister.

She shook her head. "Suit yourself, then. Just remember the charity ball Mom and Dad are sponsoring next week. You won't forget that will you?" She rose from chair with grace, and Steve had to suppress an oath.

He had forgotten all about it.

Damn!

He told Alex he would take her to the Summit next week. He'd have to cancel now. He couldn't miss the event. His family would skin him alive. His mother had been planning the ball for nearly six months. When Marie left, and the large wooden door closed softly behind her, he reached for the phone to call Alex. He dialed the first three digits then suddenly slammed the phone down in anger.

He didn't need to call her. They didn't have a commitment. If he couldn't make it for a date, then he couldn't make it for a date. It was as simple as that. He had never fretted this much over a woman in his life, and he wouldn't start now. He had to get over this. He couldn't afford to be wrapped up in Alex. The crazy emotions were tying him in knots. He had thought that making Alex his mistress would solve the problem. It had made things worse, far worse.

The loud beeping from the phone near his elbow caused Steve to glare at it like an evil apparition. He pressed the button, connecting him to his secretary. "Who is it, Grace?" He snapped abruptly. He didn't mean to sound so harsh, and tempered his tone. "I don't want to be bothered right now. Take a message."

There was a moment's silence, before Grace responded, "It's your mother."

Great! Just what I need.

"Yes, Mother," Steve said, after Grace connected the two lines.

"Steven," his mother crooned. "Are you busy, dear?"

He gave a short laugh. His mother always asked the same question when she called him at work. The funny part was it didn't matter if he was busy or not. His mother would steam ahead anyway. "Not too busy for you, Mom. What's up?"

"Well, your father and I were wondering who you're planning on taking to the Chrysalis dinner, dear."

The Chrysalis Foundation was his mother's pet project, and the bane of his life. He loved his mother and her philanthropic soul sincerely, but her charity events always seemed to cause havoc. His parents never failed to set him up with some society woman. Usually someone's daughter, niece, or second cousin from the country club they attended. He'd say no, and they'd push and push until he finally gave in.

"I might not be able to make it, Mom. I've got a lot of things to do for the commission meeting next month in Washington."

Steve grimaced, waiting for the inevitable pouting. "You're not going," his mother sounded offended, near tears.

It never fails.

"Your father and I already reserved a table for the family."

The old girl is really laying it on thick, Steve thought. "I'll be there, Mom," he sighed into the speaker.

"That's great, dear. So, are you taking your latest girlfriend?"

Steve nearly choked on the water he'd been sipping. Coughing and spluttering loudly, he asked, "What girlfriend?"

"Steven, I'm your mother. Don't you think I know when you have a new girlfriend?"

He was shocked. Steve knew he had been a little out of it, but he didn't think it was so apparent. If his parents knew then it was official. He was crazy—the situation with Alex out of control.

"I don't have a girlfriend, Mother. I don't know why you would say that," Steve choked. He'd finally gotten his coughing under control, but he was still struggling with a deep sense of shock.

"If you say so, dear. So, does that mean you aren't bringing anyone?"

He rolled his eyes and then glared at the phone. He might as well agree, and get it over with. Yet, he didn't want to give into his mother's persuasive ways too easily. Ambient thoughts of Alex intruded, but he pushed them away with force.

"What's wrong with going stag, Mom?"

"Stag? What is that Steven?"

He sighed, "Never mind. Who do you want me to take?"

"You remember Helen Brooks, don't you?" He didn't remember, but he murmured an affirmative anyway. "Her daughter is visiting from Boston, very nice girl. She's a lawyer."

Steve smothered his groan.

Not another lawyer.

His mother seemed determined for one her sons to marry a lawyer. He'd never had the heart to tell her he detested them. The last one she'd set him up with had spent the evening arguing her way through appetizers, dinner, dessert, and coffee. The one before that one valiantly tried to convince Steve of the wrongness of off-sea oil drilling.

Environmental Lawyers.

He really hated those.

"I'll give her your number. That way you two can make arrangements. How does that sound, Steven?"

It didn't sound good at all, but he approved anyway. "Sure, Mom."

"You're such a good boy," his mother said sweetly.

Steve didn't take the praise too highly. She said the same thing to all of her children, with the name or sex changed, whenever she was able to cajole them into cooperating. He couldn't count how many times he had heard that particular statement.

He ended the call after he said the appropriate good byes, and put a hand to his head. His gaze fell on the imitation Monet hanging from the longest wall. His sister had assured him that it was a very good copy, its value well priced. The woman in the picture was enjoying the sunlight. Her dark blue dress styled for the Victorian era. She looked distant, but vaguely happy. He wondered what Alex would wear to his house tonight. Something sheer and sleek like the outfit she had worn on stage that night with Ameril.

"Goddamnit!" Steve yelled, slamming his fist to the desk.

It hadn't even been five minutes.

* * * *

Alex stared at every piece of clothing in her closet.

"Nope." She tossed the dress on the floor onto the large accumulating pile.

"Uh-uh. Don't think so." Another dress went flying.

After four more dresses were tossed in the pile, Alex threw her hands up in frustration. She'd been looking for something to wear for the past hour. In forty-five minutes, Steve would be ringing the intercom buzzer, and she still hadn't found something suitable.

"I don't know what the big deal is. It's just a dinner at his house," she said aloud. Not caring that she talked to herself, since there was no one there to hear the craziness.

"At his house. His palace is more like it."

Flouncing on the bed, she stared at the mound of clothes. She didn't have anything to wear. It didn't matter that there were at least twenty dresses on the floor. Everything she owned was too old, too dreary, or too cheap. She wanted to impress him, not scare him. Looking intently at the clothes on the floor, she rebounded with determination. She would find something, and bounced off the bed to search through the pile.

Steve usually came to her apartment. But after a long, and loud argument over her reluctance to go to his house, Alex finally agreed with him. She was being silly. It shouldn't matter that his place was probably fifty times bigger than her whole apartment complex. It shouldn't matter that he had two maids and a chauffeur/gardener. It shouldn't matter that she was scared as hell.

Alex picked up a sunny yellow dress, and tossed it into a new "potential" pile. She would find something if it killed her.

Forty minutes later, showered, dressed, styled, and made-up, she made her way to the living room. She would have been ready fifteen minutes ago, but a raging debate in her mind held her up. Alex had been hesitant about putting slight touches of mascara, eye shadow, and lipstick on. But, eventually, decided she needed a little armor. Nervous, fearing her buzzer would sound at any moment, she made her way to the couch and sat down gingerly. Steve was unusually prompt, at least to her reckoning. She could barely make it to work on time.

Alex's thoughts drifted to the Classy Lady. The club had been the biggest bone of contention in their three idyllic weeks. They argued consistently about her continued desire to dance. She kept reiterating that the club helped to pay her bills, and put her through school. He'd continually replied, she didn't need to work.

They quarreled long and frequently, but she held her ground. What he didn't know, and what she refused to tell him, was she had stopped working at the club. She'd gotten another job at a local clothing store the day after he showed up at her apartment.

She couldn't continue to work at the Classy Lady while she had a relationship with Steve. It felt wrong. Ameril, of course, called her every type of fool imaginable, but she didn't relent. What she couldn't understand was why it was so hard to tell him she no longer danced. The best guess she could surmise stemmed from Steve's repeated attempts to force his money on her. She'd already turned down two cars, a condo, and an offer to pay her tuition. No matter how hard she tried to explain, he didn't get it. He couldn't understand how his gifts smacked of payment for services rendered in her mind. Steve's consistent response, "silly" didn't register with her.

And they still played a game over the ten thousand dollars. Alex would put it in his pants, or coat pocket. Only to find it later stuffed in her purse, or a drawer. It was becoming kind of inane, but she fingered the envelope wondering where she could put it next.

Alex couldn't believe how swiftly life had changed for her. She still wasn't sure why she'd agreed to Steve's proposition of a no-strings affair. The whole idea was preposterous. That day he had come to her house, which now seemed like a lifetime ago, she'd become so furious she estimated later she hadn't been thinking straight.

After he'd fucked her senseless, it just didn't seem to matter anymore. She wanted him. Wanted to be with him. And desired him like no other. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with a no-strings affair.

A sex affair.

Now, things had become more complicated.

The jarring sound from her intercom disturbed her thoughts and she jumped from the couch.

Prompt as usual.

Walking toward the intercom she pressed the "talk" button rapidly, trying to stem her excitement. "Steve?"

"Who else would it be?" A deep voice filled the room.

Alex smirked at the intercom, but answered, "I don't know, who else could it be?"

"Open the door."

She frowned. He sounded different. Not his usual teasing self. Something had to be wrong.

"Hold on." Alex pressed the "enter" button, and glanced around her apartment. She'd cleaned earlier, but she still looked around for stray socks and underwear.

A minute later a firm knock sounded. She opened the door, and Steve stepped over the threshold quickly, grabbed her arms and pulled her into a large embrace. Warm lips melded, and Alex felt tingles racing up and down her spine. Just as abruptly, he pushed her away from him, catching her when she almost stumbled.

"Well, hello to you too," she said.

"Are you ready?"

Alex blinked. She had never heard Steve sound like this, hard and cold.

"Uh ... yeah ... I just need to grab my coat," she replied, and rushed to her room.

When she returned, Steve stood in the doorway, like he was afraid to come inside, and she figured he must have had a bad day.

"Ready." She looked at him with a smile, and watched as the corners of his mouth dropped. Nervously she said, "Look, if this is a bad day I understand. We can see each other tomorrow ... or another day."

Her breath baited, waiting for a response.

"I'm fine. I got a lot on my mind. Are you ready?"

Alex relaxed, slightly. "Yeah."

She wished she had rethought the "yeah" statement because she definitely wasn't ready for the trip in the car. The silence deafening, it nearly drowned out the jazzy tunes from the CD player. She tried engaging him in conversation, but his monosyllabic responses weren't enough. She settled back against the seat, and tried to unwind her twisted nerves. His mood didn't improve at all during the forty-minute drive from Covina to Pacific Palisades. He kept his eyes trained on the road, and didn't look or speak to her once.

When they finally arrived at the "palace", Alex breathed a sigh of relief. At least now she could get out of the car. She didn't know what was wrong with him, but there was something strange about sitting next to a huge hulk of silent man while trapped in a vehicle.

Steve's house wasn't fifty times bigger than her apartment complex, but it was large and stately. She'd expected to drive through a gate or something. She was surprised to be pulling into a garage and parking-

Whoa! A Porsche Carrera GT. "Nice car," she gushed, unable to stop the fascination in her voice. She walked around the luxury roadster to admire the sleek angles.

"You like it?" Steve asked.

"Like it? Ever since I saw Sixteen Candles I've always thought Porsches were hot."

She ran her hand along silver-gray paint, and imagined cruising down the highway.

"Let's go for a drive."

Alex looked at Steve wearily. "What was wrong earlier?" His change in demeanor was a little disconcerting. He seemed like he was back to normal, but she couldn't turn a blind eye to his attitude.

"Thinking too much," he dismissed, and gestured toward the car. "Come on. You can drive," he added temptingly.

She decided to let it go, passing it off to a bad day like she figured. The car also served as big distraction. She poked her head through the open window, admiring the inside.

"It's a stick. I don't know how to drive a manual," she said dejectedly.

Steve grabbed a set of keys from a hook near the garage door, tossing them to her. "I'll teach you."

Her jaw dropped. "You're going to teach me to drive a stick in a Porsche? Haven't you ever heard of Volkswagen?"

"What's the matter? Scared?" Steve laughed.

The tension Alex had been feeling ever since he appeared at her door flowed away. She smiled happily, glad that his mood had vanished. "Yeah, I'm scared of messing up your car. Besides, what about dinner?"

"It can wait a little while. I have to do my civic duty to America."

Alex shook her head, pinching her brows in confusion. "Civic duty to America? What are you talking about?"

"It's un-American not to know how to drive a stick?"

"Un-American?" Alex gave a short bark of laughter. "What if I strip the gears or something? How American would that be?"

"It can be fixed," Steve replied nonchalantly, shrugging his shoulders. He walked around, opening the driver's side door.

"You're too rich," she said, smirking because it was true.

"Disgusting, isn't it?" he chortled.

"Well, far be it from me to mess with your civic duty. Just don't go blaming me when your transmission's lying on the road."

Alex bent low, and slid into the bucket seat. She looked up at Steve. He stared at her intently, his rich brown gaze full of ... something. Alex couldn't define what it was, but it made her hot and bothered.

"I missed you today," he said seriously.

"I missed you, too," she replied truthfully.

During every one of her classes Steve's face continually popped into her mind. She would find herself grinning like a fool from a joke he had told her a week ago, frowning

in thought over a recent debate about politics, or clenching her thighs tight because her pussy leaked with memories of his hard cock. She couldn't get him off her mind.

This is why the relationship is becoming complicated, she thought. If she couldn't keep her feelings under control then their no-strings commitment needed to end, and she didn't want it to end. That was also a problem.

She looked away, breathing deeply. Steve cleared his throat and walked around to the other side. When he was seated beside her, she sat quietly.

"Do you still want to go?" she asked, after silence again loomed large. Steve had that look on his face again, and she cursed herself for not keeping her emotions in check.

"Yes," he answered, shaking his head like he had water in his ears. He turned to her smiling. The teasing light returning to his eyes, "You sure you're not scared?"

Alex inhaled her sigh, glad the strange moment had passed. "Plueeze. You sure you're not scared?"

He laughed quickly, but began explaining the standard H formation of the gearshift. Alex had to get comfortable with the notion of three pedals. Having learned to drive on an automatic, the clutch was a bit of an oddity. After she shifted a few times for practice, she was ready to go.

"Okay, just remember what I told you. Ease off the clutch and press slowly on the gas," Steve instructed, using his hands like the clutch and the gas for demonstration.

"Ease off the clutch and press slowly on the gas," she repeated. She had successfully put the car in reverse, which Steve assured her was the easiest gear, and prepared to back out.

She visualized the process once more in her head, and felt confident. She turned to look at Steve; he was checking his seat belt. "I just want to ask. How much does this car cost?"

"Hundred fifty thousand," he said calmly.

"Hundred fifty thousand," she parroted, before squealing out of the garage, smoke rising from the wheels.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"You should have seen your face," Alex said into Steve's chest. She laughed, a muffled sound that echoed loudly in the spacious room.

"Did I look like I was ready to die?" Steve asked, flashing a toothy grin.

"Yep, you looked like you were ready to piss your pants for the finale."

"I told you to ease off of the clutch."

"I'm sorry, but I've only ever driven an automatic. I thought you meant ease into it. Not ease off it. What was I supposed to think?" Alex asked sincerely, though she dampened her chagrined laugh in the light hairs of his upper torso.

If first encounters could be measured, she thought she'd done pretty well. Not only had she eventually mastered the weirdness of manual drive, though she still didn't understand why someone would want to go through all the trouble, she had also mastered Steve's emotions. After the tense moments earlier, she felt like she understood him.

He felt some of the same emotions she did. That was the only explanation. He wasn't comfortable with them, like her, but he dealt with them the best way he knew how, silence and stoniness. His admittance to missing her cost him something he wasn't ready to reveal. It helped to know he was incapable of dealing with the impulses she inspired. As different as they were, the feelings rioting through their bodies were similar.

Alex felt ready to deal. Deal with Steve and his stubbornness. Deal with his uncanny ability to disturb her at any given moment. Deal with the feelings he inspired. It was an epiphany long in the coming, she thought. Sharing and caring could come later. A silent reckoning bonded them in ways she never believed possible.

She gazed into his brown eyes, and smiled engagingly. "Thanks for teaching me how to drive a stick. I never knew it would be so enlightening."

"I don't know about enlightening, but it was fun."

Alex rolled on top of him, pinning him to the bed with her arms. "Oh, it was enlightening. More than you know." Steve raised an eyebrow condescendingly, and she laughed out loud in his face. "Have I ever told you that I get turned on when I think of you shackled up for my pleasure?" At the shake of sable brown hair, she tightened her grip, and said, "I can't tell you how many times I rubbed my pussy thinking about you tied up, waiting for me to please and tease you. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" At the sound of an in drawn breath, Alex drew more courage for her fantasy.

She hopped from the bed, naked, and grabbed a few errant socks lying around. Steve had a magnificent bed, with a huge intricate wooden headboard, just the type of headboard to inspire Alex's lustful fantasies.

"What are you doing?" Steve asked, his heated gaze following her around the room.

"I'm going to tie you up," she answered coolly.

"No, you're not."

"What's the matter? You aren't scared are you?" Alex threw Steve's question from earlier back at him.

He raised a kingly eyebrow. "Is this a BDSM fantasy? Are you going to spank me next?" he laughed.

"Why didn't you tell me you've done this before, Steven?" she asked seriously, enjoying teasing him.

He chuckled, "Why don't you get in bed and let me fulfill you?" Steve gripped his long cock, rubbing the length up and down. Hard and stiff, his shaft stuck up like a pole. Alex defied the shudder cascading straight from her stomach to her cunt. Finding two long socks, she climbed back in the bed.

"Put your hands above your head."

"Alexandria."

"Steven," she mocked. "Come on, I promise it won't hurt. You might even like it," she cajoled.

"So, if I let you tie me up. What are you going to do for me?" he asked skeptically.

"I'll fuck you, of course. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she laughed.

He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her head down. His lips were like molten lava against her heated flesh, and his tongue licked fire inside her mouth. They kissed passionately for several moments.

"I know you're going to fuck me," he whispered in her ear.

"Please, for me," she murmured.

He sighed, but thrust his hands back toward the headboard. Alex wanted to grin in triumph. She quickly fastened one hand, then the other, to the headboard, and rested back on her haunches admiring her work. With his arms spread wide, he looked like a chained God from Mount Olympus.

"Now, I can have my wicked way with you," she teased, running her hands over his chest, ready to begin her fantasy.

Alex tormented his upper body every way she knew how. Running the flat of her tongue against blunt nipples, biting him gently when he moaned, and kissing and licking every available surface. She sucked a raised bicep, lightly at first, and then more strongly, until a pink little love bite remained. No part of his torso went untouched, and she used the tips of her hair to tickle his stomach. His navel fascinated her. He was an "inny", and she poked a dainty tongue inside. Steve shuddered and pulled at the socks.

"You know what I'm going to do next, don't you?" She asked heatedly, positioning her body until her face was above his cock. He didn't answer her verbally, but tossed his head against the pillows, moaning his need. "I'm going to suck your cock," she murmured, and reveled in the twitching answer from his penis. "I'm going to lick it up and down. Then I'm going to suck on your balls. Would you like that, Steven?"

"Yes," he answered, his voice nearly inaudible.

She fondled his long, thick shaft with the palm of her hand, marveling at the velvety texture. "Hmm ... but first I'm going to tease that tight little asshole with my tongue." Steve nearly threw her off the bed when his hips jerked up. She grabbed hold of him and slapped his cock gently. "Don't do that again, baby. Or I won't let you cum in my mouth."

"Alex," he sighed. "Don't tease me. I'm ready to explode."

"So, you don't want me to tease you?" she questioned softly.

"God, yes, please. Do it."

She smiled, and bent her head toward the juncture of his thighs, inhaling his manly scent. His testicles looked heavy and swollen, so she petted them lightly. Squeezing and cupping his sacks like two huge playthings.

"Bend your legs for me, Steven," she ordered lightly, and two large knees sheltered her head. Alex had the slight impression of being caged. He was the one tied up, but she was the one held captive. Spreading his butt cheeks apart, she revealed the puckered asshole. Without any warning, she plunged her face between his legs, lying down until her limbs hung off the bed.

She caressed, teased, and mercilessly abused him with her tongue.

Steve shouted, and demanded, "Fuck me, Alex."

She didn't listen. Didn't even stop her torture. She licked every portion and came back for seconds. He nearly reared off the bed twice, and she heard the slight tearing of material. She looked up between his thighs, finally giving him some respite. "You're going to tear the socks," she said calmly, in control of their love-play.

"I don't give a shit. Sit on it, Alex." She didn't need a dictionary to figure out what "it" he was talking about. "Fuck me," he continued harshly.

"I haven't sucked your cock yet, Steven."

He moaned, thrashing his head in the pillow and pulling on his restraints until she thought they might break.

Alex paid little attention to the ripping sounds, and opened her mouth wide, sucking every inch of his cock into her mouth. The blunt tip prodded the back of her throat, and she inhaled through her nose, suckling him relentlessly.

She gobbled the milky essence of pre-cum greedily, squeezing her cheeks to get more. She could feel his shaft hardening like stone, and knew he was close to the edge.

"Oh God!" he shouted to the heavens. "God, I'm gonna cum. Oh God!"

After Steve's last testimony, he burst in her mouth. Shooting long streams of his milky fluid, and she swallowed every drop. She continued sucking, not letting go until he was limp and flaccid.

Alex lips twisted into a wry grin, and she gazed into bright brown eyes. "So you like being tied up?"

Steve shook his head, but laughed hoarsely. "You're crazy. Untie me and come here."

When the torn, nearly shredded socks were removed, Steve cuddled Alex close, kissing her hair and forehead.

"You were fantastic," he uttered.

She laughed. "Thank you, baby. So were you."

* * * *

Steve caressed Alex's shoulder, smiling at the soft sounds of her feminine snoring. Still struggling after that amazing orgasm, he tried to remember if he had ever cum like that before. Her endless torment on his asshole had built up volcanic pressure in his cock. Another wave of sensual aftermath swept through him, and he shuddered. Sighing softly, he gazed at the woman sleeping next to him. She felt so right, looked so right beside him. It wasn't just that she gave mind-blowing head. It was the woman herself. She was so selfless.

He couldn't deny any longer that he felt more than lust for her. He didn't want to inspect the feelings too closely because they scared him. Frightened him more than he cared to admit.

The feelings didn't seem to be going away, either. In fact, if he was honest with himself, they were growing stronger each day he spent with her. She occupied a corner of his brain, his feelings and emotions becoming more in tune with hers. It was terrifying to a man who had never, up until this point, carried more than token affection for the women he dated, bedded, and let go.

A month had been the standard time for Steve and relationships. He'd buy them nice little trinkets, and send them on their way when he was done with them.

He couldn't even contemplate letting Alex go, though, and they had been spending time together for three weeks.

She's so different than I thought she would be.

Who would have guessed that a stripper could be so deep? Yet, Alex's profession was one of things causing all the problems for him. He could never, not in this lifetime or the next, see himself in a serious relationship with a woman who took her clothes off for a living. It wasn't that he didn't respect her. He knew she was educated, well spoken, and capable of comparing IQ scores with anyone. He knew she was struggling for a better life. And it wasn't that he didn't respect her. Hell! He admired her courage and independence, but she could never be the woman for him. The whole idea was preposterous. There were just too many considerations, too many differences.

A man like me could never be with a stripper.

Steve didn't understand why the thought filled him with dread.

It all didn't make sense. He couldn't even tell her about the Chrysalis dinner. He'd lied, telling her he had to go out of town for business. He'd promised to make it up to her, and she had promised to take a couple of nights off from the club.

Steve frowned harshly; she still refused to give up working at that the damn place. He'd tried every persuasive trick known to man to convince her she didn't need to work there. She still resisted, saying, "It's my job."

"Some friggin job," he uttered in the stillness of the night.

He hated her working there. Hated knowing that other men were looking at what was his. What belonged to him. A possessive palm cupped her breast, tweaking her nipple. Alex shifted, moaned in her sleep, but didn't awaken.

The possessive feeling rankled deeply in Steve, and contradicted everything he knew was right. He shouldn't be feeling possessive. He didn't have right to feel that way, but that didn't stop his palm from moving gently, possessively, to the other breast.

* * * *

"So have you decided what you want to do today?" Steve asked.

Alex swallowed another bite of eggs, prepared by Steve's housekeeper, Mrs. Walker. The elderly woman had knocked gently on the door twenty minutes ago carrying a tray with breakfast. Alex felt a little shy at first, but the kind lady didn't raise an eyebrow when she walked in the room. I'm sure this is nothing to her.

Jealousy, like Alex had never known, seared her. She squashed down the venomous feeling quickly. It shouldn't matter how many women Steve had slept with before her, she reminded herself. As long as he kept their bargain of fidelity while they were involved, then she should be fine.

The problem: she wasn't.

She turned her head to glare at Steve, and he blinked in confusion. "You don't want to go anywhere? That's fine with me," he said.

"No, no ... I was just thinking about something else," she replied, feeling a bit foolish.

"So what would you like to do? I'm game for anything."

Alex thought a while. She couldn't think of anything exciting. They had already done so many fantastic things. Last week they went sailing on Steve's yacht to Catalina Island. The week before they flew to Cancun, Mexico in his personal Lear jet. And that was just two of the things they'd done in the past three weeks.

She racked her brain trying to come up with something exciting. Then it hit her. "Let's go to the amusement park," she said finally.

"The amusement park?" Steve looked like a few of her brain marbles were rolling out of her ears.

"Yeah, the amusement park. You know what that is right?" She peered at him, wondering if he had ever been to one. "It's a place people go to have fun. You know, amuse themselves. They have roller coasters, water rides..."

"I know what an amusement park is, Alex," Steve spat, clearly annoyed. "I'm just wondering why you would want to go to one."

"It's fun, Steve." Alex laughed at his crossed-eye look. "We can ride the rides, eat cotton candy, see the 3-D exhibit..."

"Stand in lines, brave sweltering heat, get sick. That sounds like a lot fun."

"Aww ... come on. Where's your sense of adventure?"

Steve rolled his eyes, "You stole all my adventuring last night. Remember? I don't think I can adventure to the bathroom."

Alex laughed, swatting him playfully on the chest. "You started it, buster. You know what they say. If you can't stand the heat, don't start the fire."

"I think you got that confused, honey," he choked, fighting back laughter.

"I like my saying better. So, do you want to go or not?"

Steve looked forlorn, but replied, "You've convinced me. I'll call Harry. I think we'll take the limo today."

He reached for the phone, and Alex gasped, "The limo?"

"You didn't think I was going to let you drive the Porsche? Did you?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I told you. You should have worn shorts," Alex said, dodging a laughing group of teenagers.

They had just exited "Hacksaw's Avenger" a roaring rapids ride with a raging man-made waterfall. Alex's white shorts and red t-shirt were plastered to her body, and Steve's jeans were drenched, along with his expensive, button down white cotton shirt.

He looked like a big, wet dog, complete with soggy hair. The whole scene made Alex laugh out loud.

"It's going to take ages for your pants to dry," she remarked, once her laughter had ceased.

Steve twisted the ends of his shirt, squeezing out the excess water. The look he threw her could have dried clothes, and singed the skin from her body. "I should wring your neck. You're permanently off my Christmas list," he said dryly.

"Aww, I'm hurt," she crowed. Though inside she felt a deep thrill of pleasure. He mentioned Christmas, and it was only the month of April. Did that mean he was thinking about their relationship lasting that long?

"Let's skip the roller coaster and go back home. You can dry me off there," he purred, pulling her body close, the heat in his eyes tangible. Alex felt the pulse in her neck beat a staccato pace. Not just from the proximity of Steve's body, but also at the word "home." He said it like it was their home, not just his.

"Roller coaster first. Drying later," she laughed, moving away from him reluctantly.

"Spoilsport."

Hand in hand, they walked through the large amusement park. The place was nearly overrun with laughing children and teenagers. The smell of popcorn, hot dogs, and caramel apples filled the air. Alex was having a great time, and even though he wouldn't admit to it, she knew Steve was too.

They had been at the park for nearly three hours, the bright sunlight parting the dreary clouds earlier to beam brightly. Alex felt like a little kid again, and grabbed Steve's arm hastily, pulling him toward the next ride.

"Let's get on this one, Steve."

"Mountain High?" he named, reading the huge sign. "Why don't I wait for you down here?" he said, eyeing the twists and turns of the huge wooden roller coaster wryly.

"Stop being such a baby," she laughed.

"Baby?" He yanked her arm, dragging her until they were next in line, right behind a group of rambunctious teenagers. Alex tried not to laugh, and snuggled closer to Steve when he folded his arms around her, dropping his chin on the crown of her hair. She smiled a wicked grin, and took the opportunity to tease him a little, wriggling her butt against his pelvis every time they took a few steps.

"Stop that," he whispered in her ear.

"What's the matter? Can't handle it?" She wriggled again, causing Steve to groan softly.

"Can you handle being bent over and fucked in front of all of these people?"

Alex's pussy clenched at the words. "Oh, you exhibitionist," she murmured, turning her head so her lips were on his cheek.

They'd been waiting in line for about an hour, and the entire time Alex had teased Steve with the curves of her ass. His cock was growing steadily, and she could feel him pushing forcefully into the swells of her rounded cheeks. Their little line dance, arousing and erotic, was getting out of control. She finally called a halt, stepping far in front of him.

He pulled her back close, "You're going to pay for that," he said against her ear. She laughed softly, but didn't reply.

For thirty more minutes they waited, moving forward like a line of cattle awaiting slaughter. Finally, they were seated, barred, and anxious for the green light. Steve had chosen the back of the coaster, and Alex stifled her amazement. The back and front cars were the most exciting, the g-force and gravity the most potent there. She glanced at Steve with a smug grin, wondering if he knew this.

The green light flashed, signaling the car's movement, and Alex held her breath. They traveled up a long steep metal hill. The clanging clinks as the coaster cars moved forward increased the angst. She smiled at Steve, but he seemed unaffected.

"It's time for payback, honey," he said, raising his voice slightly.

"What are you talk-"

Steve hands moved to the button snap of her shorts, his hand snaking down inside her panties. Alex glanced at him wide eyed.

"What are you doing?" she asked, looking around. Since they were in the back no one could see them. The two people sitting in front of them focused solely on the upcoming drop.

"Getting my revenge," he said, just as long, strong fingers touched an aching clit.

The world dropped out from under Alex.

Literally.

She skyrocketed to heaven while Steve's fingers moved with sure grace, caressing and pinching her clit. The turns and twists of the coaster forced his hand against her budding sex, and Alex screamed in ecstasy.

Mountain High had definitely taken on a new dimension. For one long, throbbing minute, Steve caressed Alex's pussy. He took absolutely no prisoners, his fingers moving like a scythe in and out of her cunt, caressing and soothing.

The frequent drops and turns of the ride only increased her arousal, and added to the luster of the moment. Her stomach rose and fell with each track of the coaster.

It was torture, sheer and utter torture. Mainly because the ride would be over all too soon, and she was nowhere near the shattering orgasm she craved. She pushed at his hand, urging it and him to go faster.

He smiled, yelling, "Do you want to cum?"

"Oh, Yeessssss," she screamed. Her pussy tingled so badly, Alex nearly screamed in frustration when the coaster car glided to a jarringly slow speed.

"Jerk," she spat.

"Sorry, Charlie," Steve chuckled.

Frantically, Alex zipped and buttoned her shorts, glaring at him. He smiled, looking satisfied. By the time they were safely ensconced inside the station, Alex still struggled to get her breathing and pulse rate under control. The safety bars released with a

mechanized whoosh, and she jumped from the car, yanking on Steve's hand. She hurried him down the exit line.

Outside people were "oohhing" and "aahing" at the on-ride photo gallery shown on various overhead televisions. Alex ignored them and the pictures. She didn't need to see the crazy look of rapture frozen on her. She had one blaring thought on her brain.

Fucking.

She rushed Steve along until she found a nearly deserted bathroom on the edge of the park. There were people outside, sitting on nearby benches, talking and laughing. None of them paid any attention to the couple moving swiftly to the restroom.

"Wait right here. I'll be back in a few minutes," she said.

Steve looked perplexed, but nodded, leaning against the tiled wall.

Alex walked inside. Two women attempted to fix their wind tussled hair in a large wall mirror on the left. Alex moved between them, making a great show of washing her hands in the basin. She checked the mirror fifty times, glancing at the occupants stealthily, urging them to leave with mental powers she never knew she possessed. Finally, the two women exited, and she glanced around.

The restroom empty, she looked around furtively until she spotted an "Out of Order" sign leaning against a wall. She moved the sign, placing it directly outside the door.

Composing herself, she walked out gracefully. Steve leaned casually against the wall, looking around, as if he didn't have a care in the world, which of course he probably didn't. Alex, on the other hand, had one pressing, major thought. She sneaked up behind him, checking for curious eyes, and grabbed a hold of his shirt quickly.

"Hey..."

"Shut up," she whispered, pushing Steve inside the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

"We can't have sex in here, Alex," he murmured, looking highly amused.

"Yes, we can," she answered determinedly, and pushed him toward the last stall.

Steve might not want to have sex in a public bathroom, but she was hell bent to convince him. If she didn't have his cock inside of her soon, she was going to have a major tantrum.

"In there," she gestured toward the last stall.

Steve turned to look at her, and the wicked glint in his eye was all she needed to see.

Steve fucked Alex hard. Holding her body upright, large palms cupping her ass, the cool tile wall to her back. Her long legs wrapped around his waist, and he flexed his buttocks, pushing his cock deeper inside with each thrust. Harsh groans echoed, and Steve reveled in the tight feel of her cunt.

Sinking his thick, long shaft in and out, he grunted, "Is this what you want?"

"Yes. God. Steven," she moaned. He rewarded her by arching his back, lifting her higher, and pounding hard.

* * * *

Steve's arousal ascended to an unbelievable height. He rotated, swiveled, and ground his pelvis, until the slick cock slid rapidly against her clit. Alex groaned, and he feared they might be discovered if she got any louder.

Sealing his lips with hers, he swallowed the sounds. Like lightning his tongue moved swiftly inside the hot cavern, and he gloried in the taste of sweet cotton candy, and the pure unadulterated zest of Alex. A frenzy of lust swept through him, and he forgot everything except his need for Alex and the crazy yearning she inspired.

"It's says it's out of order," a voice echoed, and Steve froze, his cock lodged deeply inside Alex's cunt.

"How can a bathroom be out of order?" Another voice said.

Alex's green eyes glazed, wide with worry. She tried to struggle out of his hold, but he tightened the grip on her ass, pinning her with his cock and body to the wall. The corners of his lips kicked into a devilish smile, and he whispered, "Don't say anything. They'll go away."

Alex shook her head frantically, tapping him lightly on the shoulder. "Stop," her tone quiet, so they wouldn't be discovered.

Steve followed her gaze to the unlocked stall, and he struggled to maintain his control. Apparently, Steve guessed, Alex forgot to lock the door in her rabid need to get to his cock. All it would take was a push and the two sexually crazed residents would be revealed.

Under normal circumstances, this might have mattered to him, but the situation in itself was so abnormal, he didn't even blink. He regained his stance, legs spread far apart, and continued fucking her. Alex's eyes rolled in the back of her head, and he could tell that she struggled to withhold a gasp. She bit her bottom lip so hard the edges tinged red. He soothed the angry flesh with a swirl of his tongue, and rocked against her steadily.

"Did you see Lauren? She was all over Rick. The bitch. I can't stand her. She thinks she's better than everyone else because her daddy can buy her anything she wants." The conversation continued, and Steve racked with pleasure, listened with a half an ear.

"I know. Did I tell you what Cathy said about her?" The other voice sounded eager.

"No, what did she say?"

"She told me Rick and Lauren had sex last week in the back seat of her car." A harsh laugh echoed, and Steve felt Alex shudder, her pussy walls flexing rhythmically in another climax.

"Rick told Michael, and Michael told Chase, and Chase told Linda, cause you know their dating now, and she told me." The voice finished breathless.

Steve fucked Alex harder, the tension building in his body gathering in the region of his cock. He wanted to cum badly, the exhibitionism tendencies Alex accused him of earlier coming into play.

"Are you serious?" One of the voices gasped.

"Yes, and he said that it wasn't that great. Can you believe that? I mean she acts like such hot shit. She's not even good in the sack." Twittering giggles echoed loudly.

Steve laughed softly against Alex throat, whispering, "Can you believe that?"

"Oh God," Alex breathed, tossing her head back against the wall.

"Yes, she's such a slut. I can't understand what Rick sees in her," the voice continued.

"I know. But it's not like he can see anything beyond pussy anyway." More laughter filled the room, the sounds bouncing off the walls, covering Alex's harsh breathing.

Steve, heavily into the moment, said softly in her ear, "I like the word pussy. It's so appropriate."

"OHMYGAWD," one of the voices said, and Steve wanted to yell along when Alex's cunt clenched tightly for the third time. "Did I tell you what Regina told me?"

"Noooo, what did she say?"

"Well Regina heard it from Susan, and she heard it from Lacey because her sister Ebony told her because you know ... Ebony and Charlene are friends ... that Rick has a really small dick."

Steve leaned his head against the wall and screwed Alex with all he was worth, his cock slamming into her over and over. Light beads of sweat dotted his forehead, and he struggled to maintain silence.

"That is so crazy."

"I know. Hold up, I have to use the bathroom."

Steve resisted the trembling in his body. Any moment now he was going to explode. The door right next to them opened, and Steve paused momentarily.

"Don't stop," Alex whispered, so he continued fucking her.

A few seconds later, the same door opened again, and he heard the distant sounds of running water. He shuddered, so close to orgasm that everything magnified. The flushing of the toilet, the muffled sounds of sneakers walking back and forth, the continued conversation.

"I can't believe that," the voice just outside the stall now. "You know he asked me to help him study for Dr. Martine's psychology exam. I told him to ask Lauren."

"You're so cold," and the voice punctuated with a light sound of laughter. "She can't even pass English. Did you know that she didn't pass the last exam? I don't know how she got into college."

The splashing sounds from the basin finished, and Steve heard the pipes shutting down. His cock twitched restlessly, and he knew that he couldn't contain his seed any longer.

"Her daddy's money of course. How else would she have gotten in?"

Steve let go and slammed into Alex one last time. He tried, but couldn't contain the rough groan that echoed in the room.

"Eeeewwww..." Both voices said simultaneously.

"Someone's in here taking a shit," a voice whispered loudly. "Let's go."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ameril Haverton walked outside, inhaling the crisp night air.

"Where's your car?"

She glanced at John, the tall reed-thin bouncer, and replied, "It's over there. I got here late so I had to park kind of far away."

"No problem, Amy."

Ameril looked at John quickly. She had told him her real name was Ameril several times, but he didn't seem to get it. She shook her head, deciding it didn't matter, and walked quickly, John trailing a few steps behind. The parking lot was nearly empty, only a few vehicles remained. Most of them were run down and beaten up by life, so it was natural that a shiny white Hummer caught her attention.

Wonder who that belongs to?

It seemed out of place among the beat-up Fords and Hondas. She clutched her purse tighter and quickened her pace.

"Do you know who that car belongs to, John?"

"I've seen it here a few times, but I've never seen the person driving it. It doesn't belong to one of the girls, though. I would have remembered that. Do you think I should check it out?"

Ameril thought John should check out a brain, but kept the thought from voicing. She was a little leery, though. A strange car parked in the lot of a strip club closed for the evening didn't bode well. It was common knowledge strippers carried large amounts of money after work. This was the reason John escorted her to the car. He would be the first line of defense if someone jumped out attempting to rob her.

She looked at John, gauging his stature. She should have asked Fred to escort her. He definitely would have been better protection. Moving quickly toward her 2000 Dodge Neon, she looked through the large back panel window of the H2.

Someone was sitting inside.

Her pulse quickened, and she reached inside her purse, intent on retrieving her cell phone. It could be someone's boyfriend, but she wanted to be ready just in case. Her shoulders jumped when she heard a car door slam.

Stiffening, she turned toward the noise. Cell phone in hand, ready to run like hell, she wanted to get a good look at her attacker so she could finger them in a line up. If she actually made it to a line up, she amended.

It wasn't a mugger approaching, but the purposeful look scared Ameril more than a would-be robber.

Jake Macmillan

"Don't come any closer," John said, fear trembling his voice. Jake didn't pause. "I have some Mace in my pocket. I don't want to spray you, buster."

Ameril rolled her eyes to the stick figure of a man standing next to her. Some bouncer.

"It's okay John. I know him" Ameril wished there wasn't a grain of truth to the statement, but she did know the tall, handsome man walking toward them. Knew him better than she would have liked to.

"I told you not to come back here," she said angrily.

Since killing and maiming weren't in the cards tonight, she faced this new threat with a measure of ease. A small measure of ease, she rectified, but still some nonetheless.

"And I told you not to order me around like some lackey," Jake said in a strong voice, shifting a narrowed brown gaze to John. "Tell him to go," he ordered.

Ameril opened her mouth to tell Jake where he could go, when John answered quickly, forestalling her angry tirade. "I'll leave when Ameril tells me it's okay."

Ameril reassessed her earlier evaluation.

John has some balls after all. It was a lighthearted thought, and would have brought a smile to her face if it weren't for Jake's menacing gaze.

He turned toward her, his statement clear as crystal. "Either you tell him to go, or I make him go."

She swallowed the lump in her throat, and gestured to John. "It's okay. I'll be alright."

She reached in her wallet for his customary tip, thinking he deserved a little more than the ten-dollars she'd planned on giving him earlier.

Jake was quicker though. He already had a large wad of cash in his hand, and peeled off what looked to be a hundred dollar bill.

"Wow! Thanks."

Ameril rolled her eyes. *So much for bravery*, she thought. Give the man some money and he left her defenseless. She shook her head, and waited until John was out of hearing distance.

"Is that it? You think because you have money everyone's obliged to do what you say?" She stared at Jake angrily.

Jake sighed loudly. "I'm tired of playing these games with you, Ameril."

"What games?" she asked in fury, turning rapidly to walk toward her car. She could hear the sounds of his steps, pounding the pavement behind her.

"You know what I'm talking about," he said.

"No, I don't know what you're talking about," she lied, almost to her car.

Ameril did know what he was talking about though. It would be the same thing he'd been saying consistently for the past three weeks. He wanted to see her, wanted to get to know her.

She thought she'd seen the last of him after their sexual encounter in the private room three weeks ago, but that wasn't the case. Jake kept coming back to the Classy Lady, though she categorically refused to dance for him, and repeatedly told him to "fuck off."

"How long are you planning to keep this up?" he asked, his voice very close now.

Ameril struggled with her car keys, ignoring him. She couldn't deal with a man like him; didn't want to deal with a man like him. She thought Alex was out of her mind for even contemplating getting involved with his brother. She called her several different types of fool, but her friend turned a deaf ear. She knew it was only a matter of time before she got hurt, and Ameril planned to be there to help her pick up the pieces, but she would be damned if she would join in the madness.

"Will you just go away," she hissed, fighting for control. Her hands shook so badly, she keyed her own car trying to open the door.

"I'm tired of this, Ameril. I want you. You know I want you," Jake said calmly.

His words sent a tremor of ache through her body.

NO!

She would not give in. Not give in to this man, his money, or his domineering ways. No matter how much her body craved surrender.

She snorted. "Well, I don't want you."

"You are a liar," he said softly, turning her roughly to face him. Her keys dropped to the ground, and she stared up into piercing brown eyes

"No," she protested, but it was too late.

Jake's lips descended and their mouths fused in a blaze of overwrought passion. He backed her against the car with the hard planes of his body, and it felt like aftershocks shook the ground. His mouth tender, he swept through all her barriers.

She gasped when she felt a light touch to her waist, and Jake's tongue invaded the inside of her mouth like a bold conqueror. He tasted like pungent cognac, and the essence of the man himself. She felt buzzed and amplified, like a current of electricity.

Unable to deny the swift arousal in her body, their tongues mated in a sensual bliss. Over and over they swirled inside each other's mouths, devouring off one another. Ameril gave in to the raging inferno, and entwined her hands in Jake's thick brown hair, pulling him closer.

A car horn blared suddenly in the background, and Ameril froze.

"Get off me," she spat, wiping her mouth and pushing Jake with all the strength she possessed.

He stumbled back, and tried to grab hold of her again, but she bent quickly to pick up her keys. Holding them out in front of her like a weapon, she said forcefully, "I don't know what your problem is, but if I see you skulking around here again, I'm going to call the cops."

It was a bluff. She would never call the cops, but she didn't want to play this game. She took a deep breath, and stared at him determinedly. Instead of looking worried, like a normal man might, Jake smiled.

"Call them, Ameril. Call anyone you want, but I'm not leaving here. I told you before."

He stepped closer, ignored her outstretched arms, and pulled her body flush against his. She could feel the press of his arousal poking against her stomach. "I always get what I want, Ameril. And I want you."

"Stop this. Please don't do this to me," she whispered.

Jake thrust her from him angrily. "I could kill him," he uttered.

She looked at him in confusion, and tried to regain the control he had taken so ruthlessly. "Who?"

"Whoever made you so afraid. What's his name, Ameril?"

She licked her lips nervously, but feigned ignorance. "I don't know what you're talking about. For the last time, leave me alone."

Jake shook his head, and looked skyward like he needed some answers only divinity could give. When his gaze fastened on her, she could see the resolution blazing. "You

still don't get it do you? This thing between us is not going to go away. I'm not going to let it go away. Do you understand that?"

Ameril shivered, a cool wind passed and it chilled her to the bone. She was dressed warmly, in a heavy cream colored sweat suit, but it felt like the temperature had dropped to below freezing. She turned her back to him, and finally after a few tries opened the car door.

"I won't be your plaything, Jake. Not now. Not ever."

Jake stopped her before she could slide in her seat. "Have dinner with me?"

"It's two in the morning. There aren't any restaurants open." She tried to shrug loose from his grasp, but he tightened his grip and held firm.

"There's a twenty-four hour diner down the street," he replied.

Ameril eyes widened in shock. She knew there was a diner down the street. A lot of the girls went there after their shift. She'd been there a few times with Alex. They both loved the food there. They served great omelets, and home-style hash browns.

"I have school tomorrow. I can't go," she said, and flushed from the small lie.

"Liar. Tomorrow's your day off."

Her body stiffened instantly, and she turned furious blue eyes to Jake. "How do you know I don't have school tomorrow? Have you been following me?" A deep flush highlighted bronze skin, and he looked away from her gaze briefly. "You bastard. How dare you invade my privacy. Who in the hell do you think you are?"

"It's not like that."

"Listen to me, Jake, cause this is the last time I'm going to tell you." She stared at him, making sure she had his full attention. "Stop coming to the club. Stop bothering me, and don't you ever invade my privacy again. I swear to you, if you do I'm going to make you sorrier than you've ever been in your miserable life."

She slid into the driver's seat, and angrily stuck the key in the ignition. She leaned over to close the door but it wouldn't budge.

"Let go of the door, Jake," she ordered.

"Apparently, you're determined to do this the hard way, Ameril. I'm warning you. Don't play with fire. You will get burned," he said softly.

"Just let go of the door. I'm tired and want to go home."

"I tried to do this the easy way, Ameril. I tried to give you time, but you've forced my hand," he said, and Ameril nearly flinched at the intense look in his eyes.

She didn't understand the cryptic words, but more than that she didn't understand the tingles of passion pooled in the pit of her belly.

She was grateful he couldn't see inside her. If he could, he would know what it was costing not to throw her arms around him in surrender. She verged on losing a dangerous war.

A war she was determined to win at all cost.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Life is good.

Alex buzzed around the house picking up the numerous schoolbooks scattered on the living room floor. She didn't have to work today, she'd just aced her psychology exam, and Steve would be back tomorrow. Life couldn't get any better than this. It was one of those rare moments when everything seemed perfect.

She happily wallowed in the uplifting thoughts, and figured she'd call her parents to spread the joy. She hadn't talked to them in a few days. She had been at Steve's house nearly every night before he left to go out of town. He lived a stone's throw from the college, so she stayed over on the nights before class.

I miss him

It had only been a couple of days, two to be exact, but her heart rate picked up faster when she thought of tomorrow evening.

Ambling toward the phone, resisting the urge to skip, she pressed the memory button that dialed her parents' phone number.

Her mother answered after the first ring. "Hello."

"Hi, Mom. Whatcha doing?" Alex answered, unable to hide her buoyant feelings.

"Alexandria," her mother said excitedly. There was a muffled sound, and she could hear her mother in the background yelling for her father. "Honey, pick up the phone. It's Alex."

"Alex?" her father's voice came through after a slight click.

"Hi, Dad, how are you feeling?"

"Fine, honey. It's good to hear from you. How are your studies going?"

"Great, Dad. I had an exam today," she paused for effect, "and I aced it."

"That's excellent, honey," two voices said simultaneously, and she smiled in loving amusement.

Whenever she called her parents, or they called her, both got on the phone to fill her ears. She missed them, and wondered when she might have some time to go home for a visit.

They talked idly about the weather in Michigan, her Aunt Theresa's new, younger boyfriend, and her brother's latest scheme. She chose not to comment on that. She still hadn't forgiven Paul for the situation her parents were in.

Thankfully, after the last fiasco they'd stopped lending him money, but her parents were gullible at times. She worried they might be talked into something stupid. The topic turned to her education, and they were full of questions. They wanted to know if she was doing well in her other classes, and what she had planned after college.

Her mother asked in a slightly worried voice, "How's your job? Are you still working at the marketing place?"

Alex breathed deeply. Her mother had kept the secret of her exotic dancing from her father, but she often called Alex, without the companionable voice of her husband on the line, with questions and concerns. "I got a new job," she said excitedly, and heard a deep and happy sigh from her mother.

"That's great, honey. I can't tell you how much..." Her mother stopped, and Alex could almost visualize her mother pressing her lips together. "I'm glad," she finally said.

"What's this? You got a new job. Where, honey?" This from her father, and she filled them in on her illustrious career in retail fashion. She told them about the perks of the job. The main one being a thirty-five percent discount on all their merchandise. She had just recently taken advantage of the savings and purchased a fabulous new dress. She hoped to model it for Steve when he returned. A glow of pleasure rushed through her when she thought of him, but she stifled the rush and focused her attention back to the conversation.

"So who's the new man in your life?" her mother asked, and Alex flushed with embarrassment. She was a grown woman, but still self-conscious about discussing her love life with her two elderly parents, especially her father.

"I don't have a man, Mom. What would make you say that?"

She heard a muffled chuckled. "Well, I don't know. It could be that you sound like you could fly to the moon, but that's just a guess."

Do I really sound like that?

"I'm just happy, Mom," she evaded tactfully.

"And we're glad you're happy, dear," her father said. "When are you coming home to visit?"

She talked to her parents for a while longer, promising to come home soon. She wished them well and hung up the phone with a sigh. She was really lucky, she thought gratefully. Alex had met so many girls at the club without loving parents, or without parents at all. The thought turned her pondering to Ameril.

Ameril, an orphan, had grown up in foster homes and shelters since she was a baby. It always brought tears to Alex's eyes when she thought of Ameril being shuttled from house to house, no stable or loving family to call her own. It had created a shell like hardness in Ameril, and Alex prayed for the day she'd find peace and contentment.

She picked up the phone, pressing another button to connect her to her best friend. The phone rang twice before she answered, "Hullo."

"What's wrong?" Alex asked without preamble, Ameril sounded weary and worn out.

"I had bad night," Ameril said with a sigh.

"What happened?" Her joy set aside for the moment.

"It's nothing ... just that ... no forget it."

Alex frowned, but didn't pry. Ameril, notoriously private and guarded, would tell her what happened when she felt ready. "What are you doing?" she asked, turning the topic away from last night.

"Trying to study for my torts exam, but I can't focus," Ameril lamented.

"Well, stick your head in that book and don't take it out. I'll talk to you later." She smiled, thinking of a blonde head stuck to a big book.

"Wait, how did your dinner with Steve go?"

Alex's lips twisted in a wry grin. Ameril had been dead set against Steve from day one. Surprised her friend cared to ask, she answered, "It was good. We went to Magic World the next day." Her body trembled from memories. "We had fun."

"Good."

"Well, I won't keep you. Crack open that book, sister. That's an order." She laughed, thinking Ameril sounded like she needed a smile.

"Alright, slave driver. Call me later."

She hung up the phone and stretched pleasantly in the chair, glancing around her apartment with contentment, everything cleaned and presentable.

She decided to rest for a while, and curl up on her comfortable couch with a good book. She had a lot of unread paperbacks on the bookshelf, and she picked one randomly. A stuffed envelope, hidden behind the book, fell to the floor near her feet.

Alex laughed out loud, and bent to pick up the cash filled envelope. More thoughts of Steve bombarded her mind, and she sighed, wishing he were here now. Throwing the money on the coffee table, she silently vowed to find a better hiding place tomorrow.

Alex tried to focus on the pages, but couldn't seem to find the attention. She tossed the paperback on the coffee table with a flick of her wrist and reached for the remote control. Pressing the "On" button, she flipped through the channels like a well-bred channel surfer, waiting for a glimpse of a show that would catch her fancy.

Alex shook her head dispassionately. She had debated a full week before moving into the apartment about purchasing cable. She hardly watched TV, but it seemed kind of archaic to only have seven channels in this day and age. So, she'd called her local cable company, and they added two hundred more. Yet, with all the choices there wasn't a damn thing on. Perhaps it would have been better to stick with seven. At least that would have narrowed things down a bit.

She paused on a channel. Things were blowing up everywhere, gunshots blazed in the background.

Tom Cruise

Alex gave a lovelorn sigh. She'd been in love with Tom since he flown through the movie screen in *Top Gun*. He smiled at her, on the television that is, and she crooned, "Oh, Tom, you handsome man."

He laughed, and she watched the movie with little interest. As much as she loved Tom, the movie sucked. She surfed through a few more channels, stopping at the Food Network.

"Yummy." Her stomach growling at the delicious sight of baked salmon, mashed potatoes, and asparagus. She listened to the host for a while, wondering if she had enough ingredients in the fridge to whip up that scrumptious looking meal. A quick mental check assured her she didn't, so she pressed the button.

An alien was busy making a lunch out of some unknowing space traveler on another channel. Blood spattered everywhere, and Alex's stomach turned. She hated gory movies, and pressed the button quickly.

"He shoots, and scooooooreeeessss," a loud announcing voice yelled from her TV speakers. Alex watched the basketball game for a few seconds before remembering she didn't like basketball and moved on. A crazy man wrestling an alligator caught and held her attention for a while. She liked nature shows, and watched the program in silence.

She might have continued watching but the dreaded commercials came on, and she continued surfing. She stopped on another movie channel, and she watched for a few minutes. Alec Baldwin was sweating and looking good in his youth. The scene flashed and Sean Connery spoke in a horrible Russian accent. She watched a while longer, but she already seen the movie, and moved on.

It didn't make sense to Alex to watch a movie she already seen. Especially when she had one hundred ninety-nine more choices available. One of those channels had to have something new and entertaining.

She flipped a while longer, and tried to remember the channel for the nature program. With so many channels, she had forgotten. Disgusted, she was about to turn off the TV and focus on the book, when the screen flashed a new image.

Joan Rivers talked in her trademark whiny voice, and a woman who had to be her daughter stood next to her. She turned up the volume a bit because for some reason the sound was a little lower on this channel. A parade of stars and beautiful Hollywood types strolled across the screen.

Brad Pitt.

Alex was near to drooling, and tossed the remote on the floor. The scene switched to an elderly couple, with a distinguished and stately looking gentleman wearing a black tuxedo, the woman a glittering dress, beaded and sparkling. It hung loosely about her body, doing an excellent job of hiding excess weight. Joan talked to the couple spiritedly, asking questions and making comments.

I'm definitely going to read that book, she thought. Now that Brad had left the scene, the show lost interest. She reached for the remote, but paused, her mouth hanging wide open.

It's Steve.

Alex nearly knocked the coffee table over when she jumped into a sitting position. She listened intently as Joan talked to Steve like best friends from grade school, which Alex knew was impossible since the woman was old enough to be his mother. The corners of her lips twisted as she recognized Steve's, "I'm amused, but bored" smile.

Alex smiled fully, enjoying his witty banter with the sometimes not so affable host. Pleasantly surprised to see him on television, a few things began to penetrate her mind. The broadcast signal being shown said "Live from Los Angeles" in a little corner of the television. Alex blinked, and tried to correlate the two statements, when another occurrence stopped her mid thought.

A beautiful brunette walked onto the screen and immediately linked arms with Steve. He smiled at her, and Alex froze in absolute shock. It took two seconds to realize the woman was Steve's date, and if she had any doubt's Joan's words, "lovely date" confirmed reality. The conversation on the television shifted to the woman's outfit, and soon the couple walked off.

A terrible pain rioted through Alex's body, and she doubled over, clutching her stomach. Nauseous, she ran to the bathroom. When she reached the toilet, she opened the lid and fell to her knees to vomit wretchedly. She wanted to release the staggering pain with it. Wanted to flush it down the pipes, and forget about it. But, it didn't go away. When she looked in the mirror, after she rinsed her mouth out, she was surprised to see tears running down her face. She wiped at them angrily, swearing aloud.

He lied to me.

He wasn't away on business. He was at a party right here in town. Obviously, the type of party she could never be invited to. The beautiful face of the brunette flashed in her mind, and she squashed the thought.

The moment she had been dreading had finally arrived, the emotions clear as black and white. Somehow, though she'd tried not to, she'd fallen in love with Steve. Yet, she

also knew just as clearly that a relationship between the two of them was impossible. Although he had never said it, she was not the type of girl he envisioned himself settling down with.

Alex walked slowly into the living room, but turned quickly to make a beeline for the bedroom. She didn't want to go back in there and look at the television again, remembering what she had seen—remembering how perfect Steve and the woman on his arm looked. It pained her, but she realized that was the type of woman he would marry. Not a girl like her, a girl from a poor family, an exotic dancer, former or otherwise. She could never in a million years compete with the woman on the screen. The depressing thought brought her to the bed with a bounce.

She closed her eyes, tried to vanquish the thoughts, but images of Steve and the woman twisted in passion invaded her mind, sending her to sleep with nightmares.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"I'm not available to take your call at the moment, but please leave a message and I promise to get back with you as soon as possible. Thanks."

Steve listened to Alex's recorded greeting and snapped his cell phone shut.

Where in the hell is she?

Steve had been trying to get a hold of her for the past week. Alex had told him she had a test. He remembered her mentioning it a couple of weeks ago, and figured she was knee deep in the books, but that didn't mean she couldn't call.

The last time they talked, just before the charity dinner, he told her he would see her tomorrow. An unexpected problem in the New York office developed, so he called and left a message saying he had to go back out of town for a few more days. He had flushed when the words left his lips. He had hated lying. Things between them had been great. Steve didn't want to ruin it by mentioning something so silly, like the Chrysalis dinner.

Gripping the wheel tightly, he tried to stave off the visions of Alex lying in the hospital injured. That was the only acceptable reason he could see for her not calling him. Something had to be very wrong. He cursed as traffic backed up. Normally, on the days he would see Alex, Steve left work a few hours earlier to beat the hell-spawned gridlock, but today he couldn't leave until he finished the emergency meeting with his staff.

He beat on his horn a few times, which resulted in several angry stares, but he didn't care. He had to make sure she was all right. He dialed her number again, though it had just been five minutes since his last call, and hung up when he heard the answering machine.

By the time he finally reached Alex's apartment complex, Steve was a bundle of nerves. The vision of her lying in the hospital had escalated to her lying in a ditch somewhere. Frantic to see her, he pressed the buzzer marked "Houston" and waited for a response.

Nothing.

Steve tapped a restless foot, and started pressing every number on the intercom. He got a couple of angry responses, but no one let him in. He tried to remember the one he'd pressed when he first came to see Alex four weeks ago.

An elderly lady answered thinking it was her son. Steve looked at the configuration of buttons, finally pressing the one labeled "Henderson."

Jackpot!

The elderly voice echoed, "Who is it?"

"Uh ... excuse me. My name is Steven Macmillan, and I'm here to visit Alexandria Houston, but I think her intercom is broken again," he lied, hoping he sounded sincere enough to convince her to open the door.

"She still hasn't gotten it fixed yet?" the elderly voice asked, and Steve felt a little bad for pulling the wool over her eyes.

"I don't think so. I pressed the button and there's no answer," he said, happy to give some semblance of truth.

"Well, I know she's home. I just saw her take her laundry down."

Steve froze, anger hot and rapid pouring through his body.

"Could you let me in please?" he asked cordially, though to his voice sounded to him like a rampaging stalker.

"Sure, I already know the two of you are ... friends."

Steve flushed and remembered the woman lived next door. Positive she had heard a few of their late-night banging sessions, he shifted on his feet, slightly embarrassed.

The door buzzed, and he yanked it open. He took the stairs to Alex's second floor apartment two at a time, and banged on the door. When there was no response he leaned closer. He could hear some quiet shuffling inside, and knew immediately she was home. He banged harder, but there was still no response. He was about to open his mouth and yell for her to open up, but remembered the elderly lady living next door.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out his cell phone, and dialed her number by heart. He had it programmed, but he punched the keys angrily. Her answering machine picked up, and it seemed odd to hear the sound in the phone as well as through the door.

"Alex," he said forcefully, and he could hear a slight reverberation. "Open the fucking door. I know you're in there. Open it right now, or I swear to God I am going to kick the damn thing in."

The sudden clicks from the lock caused Steve to shake his head. Before she could crack the door an inch, he laid the flat of his hand against the wood panel and shoved hard. The door flew open and crashed like an errant shot.

Steve's vision filled with a sullen Alex, standing with hands on her hips, healthy and whole.

"What kind of fucking game are you playing, Alex?" he shouted, stepping through the door, and slamming it shut.

"W-what are you doing here, Steve?"

He shook his head again, and glared at her. He wanted to wring her neck then kiss her beautiful lips, so glad he was to see her standing there alive.

Yet, that reminded him why he was so damn mad in the first place.

"Well, let's see. I call and get your answering machine. I leave a message," he paused, "several messages, and I don't get a call back. I thought you were lying dead somewhere. That's why I'm here."

"I'm sorry I didn't assume you would think anything was wrong," she murmured, backing up a bit.

"You didn't assume? Alex, I've been calling you for the past damn week. I've left I don't know how many messages. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Stop shouting," she said, and her calm demeanor sent him over the edge. He stalked toward her, backing her up with every step, until she stood trapped by the far wall in her living room.

"Why haven't you called me? I deserved a phone call, Alex. Hell, you could have sent me a fucking letter," he yelled.

"I figured you were out of town," she said, and there was a slight tremble to her voice.

"How could you figure that when I've been calling for the past damn week telling you to call me at home?" Steve tried to get his anger under control, but his fury felt like a tangible force.

"I figured you were out of town like you were last week," she shouted back, staring at him with a penetrating stare. Steve opened his mouth to refute her words, but stopped.

Oh Gawd.

His face flushed, and he absorbed the narrow look in her eyes. "It's not what you think, Alex," he said quietly, all traces of anger gone.

His pulse rate picked up speed, and a deep sense of foreboding grabbed hold of his heart. He didn't know how she had found out about the charity ball, but it was very obvious she had.

Steve shook his head wearily, walking blindly toward her couch. "I can explain."

"There's nothing to explain. Just leave. I don't want to see you again," she said, standing against the wall like a statue.

"She doesn't matter, Alex," he pleaded. His heart hurt at her loud scoff. "We didn't do anything. My mother set me up with her for the dinner," he explained, hoping she would understand.

"I don't care. It's over, Steve. Just leave," she finished, and the words sounded like a death knell.

He shook his head, running a hand absently through his hair, and tried to make her understand. "It's not over, Alex. I won't let it end over something as silly as this."

"Silly," she shouted. "You know what's fucking silly, Steven? The fact that you didn't ask me to go." When he would have interrupted her, she held up her hand. "Stop, don't give me anymore of your bullshit. You would have never asked, and you know it. You know why? You're afraid!"

Steve's mouth shut with a snap. No, don't let her continue or it's all over, his mind screamed, but his vocal chords had stiffened, and all he could do was stare at the angry, volatile woman stomping toward him.

"You were afraid that one of your snot nose friends would see me, and know I'm a stripper. They might even, God forbid, call me by my stage name. I'm sure you had nightmares about it," she yelled. Steve looked up at her from his seat on the couch. His mind thought of things to say. He actually felt an urging in his throat, but when he opened his mouth, all that came out was air.

"You're an asshole, Steven. I never, ever want to see you again."

He flinched at her words, and finally shook himself from his stupor. "You don't understand, Alex," he said lamely, wondering where his finesse had gone.

"You know what I don't understand, Steve?" She waited until he shook his head, and then continued, "Why you're still in my fucking house. GET OUT," she screamed furiously.

Alex's furious tirade set off a dangerous clamor in his brain. He jumped from the couch, standing over her. "I have family I have to think about, Alex, a reputation to maintain for my company. I can't be gallivanting with a woman who takes her clothes off for a living," he hissed, and after the words were said would have given anything to take them back. Her eyes filled with tears and her lips trembled. "Oh, God, Alex. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry," he said, knowing that she would never forgive him.

"Just leave, Steven. Please, just go," she whispered turning her back.

He stared at her, wanting to go to her. Willing to say anything to make her change her mind, but she kept her back turned, and a wall suddenly stood between them.

His feet moved reluctantly toward the door, and he turned one last time to look at her. Her back still turned, her head bent, he could hear her muffled crying. The sounds were heart wrenching and he felt his own eyes burn with unshed tears.

He turned the handle, but stopped when he heard her say, "Take the envelope with you."

His gaze fell to the coffee table and he immediately recognized the envelope he had given her at the club. It was still sealed, its sides bulging. He rested his head against the door.

The money had taken on a greater significance than simple payment for one outrageously priced dance. It represented a bond between them. A bond he had shattered with his callous words.

"You keep it, Alex," he said, before turning the knob and leaving.

* * * *

Alex cried even harder when she heard the door softly close. Her emotions strung tight, she felt her body shake from the furious high. The scene with Steve had been worse than imagined.

A part of her had hoped he would get the message when she didn't return his calls. But another part, a stronger part it seemed, craved a showdown.

After that horrible day when she had seen him on the television, she wondered why he hadn't asked her to the party; why he had lied about it instead of telling her the truth. The conclusion, that he hadn't asked because he was ashamed of her, disgusted and infuriated Alex.

She found herself picking up the phone numerous times over this past week to curse him out. Yet, afraid to talk to him, she hid behind her machine, listening intently as his messages went from confused, to irritated, to downright pissed off.

Now it was all over, and her body shook from the aftermath. Walking toward her bedroom, wanting nothing more than to lay down, Alex longed for the blackness of an oblivious sleep.

She was stopped by a gentle knocking on her door.

Oh no.

Alex composed herself as best she could, flung the door open, expecting to see a raging and fuming Steve Macmillan. The sight of the small, elderly Mrs. Henderson stopped her short, and she stared in disbelief.

"I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head to clear the fog. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Henderson?"

"Can I come in, dear?" Mrs. Henderson asked politely.

Alex didn't really feel like company, but she couldn't refuse. She stepped back, gesturing inside.

"Would you like some tea, or soda?"

"No, dear, but thank you." Mrs. Henderson flushed, and she could see a slight pinkness under the wrinkled skin. "I couldn't help but overhear you and your young man. I wanted to see if you were alright."

Alex gasped, "I'm sorry, w-we were loud. I-I hope we didn't disturb you," she stuttered, feeling ashamed and embarrassed that the elderly lady had heard their arguing.

"Nothing to be sorry for, dear. Myron and I used to argue the same way." She smiled gently. "I was young once too, you know."

Myron was Mrs. Henderson late husband; Alex had heard his name often. The kind eyes always brightened with tears whenever the gentle woman spoke of him.

"I'm fine. We just had a disagreement," she muttered, and felt her face flame.

That was a definite understatement.

"You know, dear. Myron had a terrible temper. He would get so mad," she said, and her eyes held a faraway look. "One day we had an argument over the bills," she chuckled. "I think the folks in the next town heard us. When you love someone it's natural to argue. It doesn't mean you stop loving them, though."

Alex felt the tears she held threaten to fall, and blinked furiously to stop the moisture. Mrs. Henderson laid a withered hand on her knee, and squeezed with surprising force. "Love is a fight, honey. You have to fight to keep it going. Fight to understand. You just have to keep fighting, dear. And never give up."

Alex wished she had heard this sooner. It was too late now. "There's no more fight left, Mrs. Henderson. It's over," she said sadly, and her heart constricted in pain.

"It's never over when you love someone. Never."

In some sick, deluded way Alex wished the old woman was right.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Alex had to give Ameril credit for not saying, "I told you so."

After she relayed every gory detail, from the phone calls to the furious argument in her apartment and her conversation with Mrs. Henderson, they sat in companionable silence.

"I should have listened to you," she said after a couple moments.

"Alex, I'd never seen you so happy. I might not have liked him, but you did. That's all that mattered."

Alex had never felt more love for her friend then she did at the moment. She hugged her close, thankful that she had been blessed with such an understanding compatriot. Tears leaked from her eyes, and she wiped them angrily with the back of her hand.

"Will you ask Melissa if I can come back to the club?" she sniffled.

"Why?"

"Because ... I only stopped working there because of Steve. I shouldn't have quit."

Ameril smiled. "It was time for you to move on, Alex. You don't really want to go back. You just think you do because you have a point to prove."

Ameril was right. Dancing and that part of her life were done. It was time to focus on her life beyond the striptease, but the idea made her feel restless and confused. "I don't know what to do," she cried

"Get going with your life. There's nothing else you can do, but don't let him push you into a corner."

"I know, I know, but it all seems so stupid now. I wish I could take back everything that's happened," she said forlornly.

"Shut your mouth, you got to drive a Porsche Carrera," Ameril laughed. "Do you really want to take that back?"

No, she would happily keep that memory. She looked toward her friend, wondering what good deed in life she did to deserve her. "You're the best friend I've ever had," she said, and her vision clouded with tears. "What do you think we should do with the money?"

The envelope still sat on her coffee table, and she stared at it wishing it would go away. Ten thousand dollars was a lot of money, but the simple act that the paper represented held greater meaning for Alex.

She could never imagine spending it, even though there were a lot of things she could buy. Getting rid of it seemed the best route, a way to vanquish Steve and the memories.

"We could give it to charity," Ameril said finally.

That sounded good. "You get to pick which one."

* * * *

Steve sat on the veranda letting the cool night air chill his heated skin. He hoped the bottle of brandy in his hand would help him forget Alex.

"I thought I'd find you out here."

"Go away, Marie. I don't want to be bothered," he said, not bothering to turn around. Swigging the liquor straight from the bottle, he didn't even flinch when the fiery liquid shot down his throat. He reached down, groping for the pack of cigarettes lying on the patio floor, fired up, and inhaled the acrid smoke.

"When did you start smoking again?"

Steve snorted. "Did you see the news this morning?"

"No," she said after a pause.

"Then you must have missed the alert that said Steve's a grown man", he replied, taking another sip.

Marie chuckled softly, "Yes, I missed that one."

"Make sure you catch it next time."

"Will do."

Silence reigned, and Steve listened to the sounds of the night. Crickets chirped loudly, but nothing invaded the depressing thoughts swirling in his mind like the smoke from his cigarette.

"What's wrong, Steven? Grace says you haven't been to work in three days. That's not like you."

Steve sighed loudly. Trust his secretary to run to his sister tattling. He'd fire her if she weren't such a damn efficient worker. "I'm on vacation," he muttered, wishing his sister would go away. The bottle still had two quarters of hazy brown liquid, and he wanted to finish it in peace and quiet.

"Please tell me what's wrong, Steve. I'm worried about you. Mom and Dad are worried about you," she paused. "I haven't seen Jake, but he would be worried too. Look at you," she cried. "You're smoking again. Drinking like you haven't got a care for your liver."

Steve rolled his eyes. "For the last time, go away, Marie."

"I'm not going away till you tell me what's wrong," she said determinedly.

Steve turned, finally looking at his sister. She sat on the chaise next to him, dressed in a cool winter green suit. Her light hazel eyes were full of concern, and the ice surrounding his heart thawed. Feelings and emotions threatened to overtake him.

He sighed, "I fucked up."

"What did you fuck up, Steven? I don't like seeing you like this. Please tell me what's wrong?"

Steve inhaled another drag from his cigarette, the harsh smoke burning his lungs.

He told her all about Alex. How they met. He left out a few parts, things that younger sisters shouldn't know, and cringed when recalling the words said in her apartment. He talked for nearly thirty minutes, and Marie sat quietly on the chaise, not interrupting him once. He finished, "So," he said, once he'd finished the story, "it's over and that's it. I fucked up the greatest love of my life."

He hadn't realized he loved Alex until it was too late. He'd shut the door to their life and love forever. There weren't any words that could bring them beyond the impasse they had reached. The crazy part, he wasn't sure he even wanted to breach the barrier. There were still numerous complications: his parents, his friends, his company, public perception. They all weighted against him like a giant boulder of negativity.

He settled against the cushions of the chaise, staring dispassionately at his Olympic-size pool. Hard work and grit had paid for this house, but he would trade it all for one more moment with Alex. One more look from her beautiful green eyes. He had built Macmillan Enterprises from a floundering company into the biggest organization this side of the Atlantic, but all his pride and accomplishment paled next to his failure with Alex. He leaned back, rubbing a weary hand against his eyes.

He was so caught up in his troubles he missed Marie's next words. "What?" he asked wryly.

"I said, how can you run a billion dollar business and be so stupid?"

Steve rolled his eyes in his sister's direction. "Huh ... what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you, stupid block head. You ran her off because she's a stripper. How ignorant can you be?"

Steve sighed, a little perplexed. "There is more to this than you know, Marie."

"Please, Steven. Who do you think is going to care that she's a stripper? Mom? Dad? Jake? Me? No one is going to care. You were scared, but you blamed it on everyone else, but yourself."

Steve shook his head, and ran a hand through his hair. He pondered Marie's words, and knew she was right. He didn't think he'd been scared, but the intense feelings he had felt for Alex were overwhelming.

"How much do you love her?"

"A lot Marie, but it doesn't matter. It's over."

"Maybe not," she said.

"Didn't you hear? It's over. I fucked up."

Marie's hazel eyes lit with fiery intensity, and he could almost see the bulb above her head.

"You know, Mom and Dad wanted me to ask if you're still coming to the Chrysalis reception. You know the thank-you dinner. It's next week. Since you haven't returned any of their calls they were worried that you weren't going to come."

Steve's lips curled at the word "Chrysalis." The only thing that had emerged was a world of heartache and regret. If he had his way he wouldn't attend another Chrysalis function for as long as he lived.

"Forget it, Marie. Tell them I won't be able to make it. Tell them I'm sick. I don't care, tell them any damn thing you want."

"You have no imagination," Marie crooned.

"No, I have a bottle of brandy, and I would like to finish it. Give our parents my regrets, and make up an excuse," he muttered, reaching for the bottle sitting on the ground.

Marie laughed aloud, a happy sound that sent shivers down his spine.

Alex.

She'd stolen his happiness like a horse-riding thief, galloping into his life and stealing his heart until there was nothing but an empty shell of remorse. He wondered if he would change anything, if given a moment to go back and reverse life, but he realized with a sigh that he would never erase her. She would be a permanent stamp on his heart and memory until the day he died.

Steve raised the bottle to take a swig, but dropped his mouth in shock when Marie slapped it out of his hand. The bottle crashed onto the hard pavement and broke into

fragments. Next, she grabbed the cigarette from his lips, and tossed it into his nearby pool.

"What are you doing?" he yelled, looking toward the broken bottle, and then the soggy cigarette floating in his pool.

"Saving your ass, jerk. Now, shut up and listen."

* * * *

"Hold on, Mom. There's someone buzzing."

Alex looked curiously at the intercom. Ameril had said last night she would be by early, but she doubted it was her downstairs. Tuesday night was a work night for her, and she would most likely still be asleep.

"Hello," she said, pressing the talk button at the same time.

"Hi, my name's Marie Macmillan. I'm Steven's sister. I was wondering if I could come up and talk to you?"

Alex reared back from the intercom. She knew of Marie Macmillan by name, but she had never met her. Steve told her his sister was a "crack shot", and one hell of a businesswoman. He'd talked about her frequently during their month-long interlude.

Alex looked around her apartment. It was a mess. There was no way she would let Steve's sister come up here. The woman would think she was a nasty slob.

Hang on. What in the hell is his sister doing here?

She hadn't talked to Steve since their argument a week ago. It didn't make sense that his sister was standing outside the apartment gate.

"Uh ... everything's really a mess right now. Can I meet you downstairs?"

"It'll only take a few minutes. I have to talk to you."

Alex looked around again. She didn't want his sister up here staring at all her junk and mess. The woman would think she was a bag lady, judging by all the crap strewn around.

She tried again to dissuade her. "It's really not a good time. I'll come downstairs."

There was a slight pause before, "I don't care about the mess. I really need to talk to you."

Alex hesitated, but finally pressed the button allowing entry. She raced to the phone, remembering her mother. "Mom, I'm about to have company. Can I call you back later?" she said into the cordless receiver, dashing to the bathroom to fix her hair.

After a few seconds, Alex heard the distant sounds of firm knocking. She looked one last time in the mirror, hoping she was presentable and walked toward the door as calmly she could.

She greeted the stranger on the other side with a wry gaze, surprised by what she saw. It wasn't a hard nose businesswoman, complete with a severe bun and black business suit. A beautiful woman, with dark lustrous hair, and sparkling hazel eyes, dressed in blue jeans and a long t-shirt stood before her.

Alex blinked a few times, wondering if this was the same woman Steve had told her about.

"Hi, can I come in?" Alex still in shock nodded, and opened the door wider. "This isn't messy ... just lived in," Marie said, and Alex could do nothing but nod her head.

"Well, I don't want to keep you long, but I had to see you."

Alex swallowed the lump in her throat, and wondered why Marie Macmillan would need to see her. Her curiosity finally got the better of her, and she asked, "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Steven."

"Is he hurt or something?" She couldn't understand why she cared, but she didn't want to think of him lying in a hospital. She bit her bottom lip, as thoughts of a pale, sallow Steve came to mind.

"No, he isn't hurt. He wants to see you."

"So, why didn't he come here himself?" Alex asked suspiciously.

"He didn't think you would see him," Marie huffed, and gestured toward the couch. "Can I sit down?"

"Uh ... yeah, sure."

Alex watched Steve's sister, who looked very much like him, look around her apartment. She wondered what the dark haired woman was thinking. The brown eyes moved in a calculated way, and Alex felt weary, unsure of what was coming next.

After a while, she finally said, "Will you meet with him?"

Meet with Steve?

No way, the idea was crazy. "I don't think it's a good idea. We didn't part on good terms."

"Please, he's really broken up, drinking and smoking."

Alex frowned. She didn't know he smoked.

Yuck.

"I don't know," she said hesitantly.

"Please. I'm begging you, on behalf of my family. Just come and see him. A simple hi and bye is all I'm asking. He needs this. If you have a shred of feeling left for him you'll do it."

Alex breathed deeply, and she rolled her eyes in thought. A simple "hi" and "bye", it didn't seem so bad. Still, the idea didn't seem smart. "Maybe I could write him a letter or something."

Calling him on the phone was certainly out of the question.

"Please, if not for his sake then mine. He's driving us crazy. If he could see you one more time," she paused and inhaled a breath. "I know it would help him."

He's really that broken up about it?

Alex twisted her fingers trying to figure out what to do. Maybe she should see him. It might help to put her own feelings to rest.

"All right," she finally said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Steve tugged at the too-tight bow tie for what had to be the millionth time. It felt like a noose around his neck. He tugged again to relieve the pressure.

"Will you relax? You're making Mom and Dad nervous," Marie whispered in his ear. Easy for you to say.

Steve spared a look at his parents. They did look a little flustered. He sighed, and inhaled a shaky gulp of air to gather his nerves. Absently raking a hand through his hair, he wondered if Alex would show up.

"Stop fidgeting. She's coming." Marie punctuated her words by kicking him in the shin under the curtain of the dining table.

"Oww," he breathed, glaring at his sister.

Steve resisted rubbing his bruised leg, and looked around the sumptuous dining hall. The Chrysalis reception was going excellently. So far, there had been only one minor glitch.

He could still hear his mother's horrified gasp when the appetizers were served. The chef, Steve gathered, was a lover of art. The delicious dish of crab, lobster, and shrimp were arranged in such a way that it almost looked like two rounded ass cheeks. He'd laughed aloud, until his father penetrated him with a haughty, refined stare. He had been the only one at the table to find the idea of eating some "fishy ass" funny.

His uncouth reaction probably had more to do with the fact that he couldn't remember being this nervous in his life. Somewhere upstairs, Alex was waiting in a hotel room arranged by his sister. Might be waiting, he amended. Even though Marie was positive she'd convinced Alex to come. He wouldn't believe it until he stood in front of her.

* * * *

Alex slid her electronic key into the slot, opening the door slowly, fearfully. She took a hesitant look, poking her head inside. Marie had left instructions at the desk for her to come up here and change.

Change into what?

She hadn't planned on staying here overnight. The plan was to see Steve, say their goodbyes, wish each other good luck, and move on. The more involved she became in the affair the more she regretted giving into Marie's plans.

She finally stepped inside, awestruck at the rich, luxurious furnishings. *The other half sure lives well*, she thought.

On a table, standing in the middle of the room, a veritable banquet of treats: sweetmeats, fancy cheese, crackers, fruit, vegetables, and more. It looked delicious and Alex couldn't resist. She frowned between bites, a paper with scrawled handwriting rested near the platter, and she picked it up, reading the note quickly.

"Alex, I'm sorry I wasn't here to greet you, but I had to take care of a few things downstairs. I left several dresses (wasn't sure of your size). Please try them on and come to the reception area downstairs. Steve is down there waiting for you. Marie."

Alex shook her head, and rose to leave. This was a bad idea. She should have fought harder against the persuasive Marie. Steve's sister had made seeing Steve sound like a good idea, like some kind of cathartic release. Alex wished she had stuck to her guns. The whole idea was crazy, and she grabbed her purse, determined to leave.

She took one last look around the hotel room, noticing the boxes. Her lips curled, and she figured she might as well look at the dresses. There were at least seven boxes there. Curiosity got the better of her, and she moved on the plush mauve carpet toward the bed.

Alex had never seen so many fine and beautiful dresses in her life. Nearly all of them were her exact size, and a color she favored. Holding one of the dresses against her torso, a vivid green with lacy ruffles, she debated. She could put on this dress, look like a million bucks, and go downstairs and meet with Steve. Or she could leave and never look back. She stripped out of her clothes before she knew what she was doing.

* * * *

"Excuse me, are you Alexandria Houston?"

Alex jumped, looking around the crowded reception area, and turned toward the cultured voice-aprim looking button-down man in his twenties.

"Yes, I am," she answered, expecting to see a camera crew. She had the dress on and looked like a million bucks, but she felt like a quivering bag of nerves. It would be just her luck if this all turned out to be some wicked plot of a joke.

"I was told you were going to be here. I'm to escort you inside through the back way."

"Who told you I was going to be here?" she asked nervously, searching for other unexpected guests.

"My boss, Marie Macmillan. She said to wait for you till you arrived," he smiled warmly. "She gave me a good description."

Alex's fist clenched tightly.

Like brother like sister.

Marie had lied. She told Alex that Steve would be waiting, that she planned an intimate dinner for the two of them. Intimate dinners did not include a "back way." It also didn't need a room that could easily house two hundred fifty people. It became clear, as soon as she followed the directions from the uniformed hotel worker, that there was no intimate dinner. If she needed further proof then the huge sign reading "Chrysalis Foundation" said it all. Feeling like the mark in an elaborate set up, Alex turned to walk off.

"Ms. Houston, where are you going?"

"I'm leaving. Tell ... your boss that I changed my mind. I don't want to meet with Steve," she hissed furious, tossing the words over her shoulder.

"But he's waiting for you, ma'am."

Alex stopped, turning abruptly, and nearly collided with the man trailing after her. Steve's games, his sister's games, it was all too much for her nerves. The taut line of

reason snapped, and cold fury invaded her body. She could feel the burn, and struggled for control.

"So, what's the plan? Lead me in there to look like a fool?" she barked.

"No, Ms. Houston. ~~I~~It's ... well, you'll see, but it's nothing like you're thinking."

Alex narrowed her eyes. He looked sincere, but she was reluctant to believe anything the paid lackey said. The fool would probably jump off a cliff if any Macmillan ordered.

Wondering how, and why, she'd gotten involved with this, Alex had a strange urge to see it through to the end.

"I'll go, but if anything weird happens, I'm outta of here," she said, then thought better of it and added, "With the dress."

* * * *

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you all for coming. My mother started this organization because she felt a desire to lend a hand..."

Steve frowned listening to his sister's stumbling speech. Her attention seemed to be focused on the back of the room, and he turned his head in that direction, trying to figure out what gave her pause.

Brad, Marie's assistant, stood in the back grinning. His arms outstretched with two thumbs in the air. Marie grinned, and even from a distance Steve could see the happy sparkle in her eyes.

"The foundation has helped numerous worthy causes, from starving children in Somalia, to the homeless right here in our own country. Our last reception raised over a million dollars for literacy."

Steve raised his hands for the perfunctory clapping. He cast a bored gaze toward his parents, and looked toward the door. He could leave, but not without two hundred fifty pairs of eyes on him, two of those pair belonging to his parents.

Better to wait until it was over, then sneak out quietly to see if Alex had arrived. Marie had told him she'd gotten her a nice room upstairs, and it stretched his nerves to think of her there while he was down here.

"Steven," his mother whispered in his ear.

He turned, confused. His mother was shooting her eyes back and forth toward the stage and him. He noticed that everyone else in the reception area looked at him also.

He wondered what he'd done to be the center of attention, when Marie, said, "Will you come up here and join me? Say a few words about hopes and dreams?"

Hopes and dreams

No one could ignore a direct decree from Marie, especially one spoken in front of over two hundred people. He moved his reluctant feet toward the stage. The crowd clapped, and Steve felt like a fool.

"What are you doing?" he whispered furiously, pretending to kiss his sister's cheek.

"Just talk about hopes and dreams, I have to go to the bathroom," she whispered back, turning to kiss his other cheek.

Steve looked at the audience and tried to think of something to say.

* * * *

"This way, ma'am."

"Look, will you stop with the 'ma'am' crap. We've been standing out here for ten minutes. Are you going to tell me what's going on or not?"

"Not. Just follow me and smile when you go out on stage," the assistant responded with a chuckle.

"Go on stage," Alex gasped. "What in the hell are you talking about? Forget this dude, I'm outta here."

She turned, intent on getting the hell away, refusing to be swayed by pleading words.

"Alex, where are you going?"

Just the person I've been looking for.

"Where I'm going is home," she said, staring at the woman who'd started this whole mess. "You said dinner and talking." She waved her arms wide encompassing the lobby. "This doesn't look like dinner and talking to me," she hissed. "I can't believe I fell for this."

"No, wait, Alex. I can explain."

"You and your brother with your explanations. Go on, I'm listening. You've already wasted enough of my time. Might as well waste some more while you're at it," she said, glaring into Marie's hazel eyes.

Marie flinched at her words, and a slight blush tinged her tanned complexion. Alex had actually started to like the woman a couple of days ago. She seemed so determined to help her brother, and Alex always respected the bonds of family.

Marie had made all the arrangements. Steve and Alex would meet at the hotel for dinner. They would talk and part amicably. It sounded good to her when she heard it. Better to part friends, and forgive, were Marie's words.

It was obvious now Marie had a whole different set of plans in mind.

Marie shifted on anxious feet, and Alex might have felt sorry for her if she wasn't to blame for the whole fiasco in the first place.

"I didn't tell you exactly what was going on because I didn't think you'd agree." She smiled shyly. "Technically, it is dinner and talking. There are just more people than you two." Alex rolled her eyes, and Marie perked, "but you can think of it like a restaurant. I mean, there would be more than two people in a restaurant, right?"

Is she serious? Dinner and talking does not include going on stage in front of hundreds of people. Alex shook her head, wondered again how she'd gotten into this, and replied determinedly, "I'm gone. Tell your brother," she paused, "tell him anything you like. I'm leaving."

"Alex," Marie said quickly, grabbing her arm before she could leave. "Steve is on that stage right now. If you love him, you will go out there and stand on that stage with him."

Alex felt like a huge claymore landed inches from her feet. The challenge in Marie's eyes was evident, and she felt her breathing accelerate rapidly.

Steve's on the stage, she thought. Out there standing right now, in front of a room full of people. She blinked furiously, indecision weighing heavily.

"You do love him, right? Well, how can you say you love him when you aren't even willing to fight for that love?"

Love is a fight, honey

She did love Steve. Loved him with a deep, fulfilling passion. Could she walk away from it all, without knowing if that love was returned? Without knowing if they were destined to be?

NO!

"Let's go," she said, smiling at Marie's happy yelp.

"I can't wait till my parents meet you. They've been dying for Steve to get married for ages." Alex frowned. "Don't worry they're going to love you."

* * * *

"...A lot of people lose sight of their hopes in the weary challenge of reality. The Chrysalis Foundation helps push those dreams forward."

Alex stared at Steve, listening to his speech. Hidden behind a thick, velvet curtain partitioning the stage in the corner, her eyes drank in the vision of the tall, handsome man dressed in a tailor-made black tuxedo.

"Are you ready?" Marie asked, standing next to her.

"No, tell me what I'm supposed to do again."

Marie sighed, "Remind me to never fall in love. Okay, you're going to go out there when I give you the cue." She turned and gave the thumbs up sign. Alex thought it was kind of hokey, and suggested something different, but Marie was determined. "Then it's all up to Steve."

That part had her really worried.

"Does he know you're going to do this?"

"Nope," Marie said in an evil voice. "But trust me, once he sees you he won't mind." She turned toward Alex, her eyes moving up down in a quick perusal. "You look gorgeous by the way."

"Thanks," Alex said gratefully.

"Okay, it's show time," Marie said, before moving out of the curtains in range of Steve's peripheral vision. Alex watched his glance move to the side of the stage. Her lips twisted in a wry grin as she recognized his "Thank God" smile.

"In conclusion, I want to thank all of you for contributing to the hopes and dreams of others." He paused briefly, "May all of your hopes and dreams come true."

The audience applauded, and Marie walked out on stage. Alex's pulse kicked up a furious racket, and she tamped down on her fear.

Oh Lord!

Any minute Marie would be turning her way with her thumbs sticking up like the Fonz.

This is your last chance to run, Alex.

The adrenaline in her body rushed through her veins and she felt the desire to flee so badly, her knees nearly buckled under the strain. Black spots swam in front of her eyes, and she opened her mouth wide to breathe larger quantities of oxygen. She watched in a daze as Steve and Marie whispered in each other's ears. They pretended to kiss, but she could see Steve's mouth working furiously.

Marie tapped Steve, and stepped to the podium. "That was a lovely speech, Steven. Thank you for sharing your thoughts." She smiled brightly to the audience, and a loud

ticking began a countdown in Alex's brain. "We have someone else here who would like to share their hopes and dreams. I think their story should be an encouragement to us all."

Like someone had pressed the "slow-mo" button on her VCR, Alex watched Marie's head twist toward the corner of the stage. The palms of her hands turned upward, and the thumbs extended.

Suddenly there was applause, and the scene shifted back into regular play. Alex felt like a ton of lead was attached to her feet. She couldn't move. She tried to step forward, but the weight kept her frozen. Breathing rapidly, she used all the strength she possessed to put one foot in front of the other.

Fight for love, deary.

The words in her brain, like a loud cheerleader, kept her moving forward. The curtain parted, and blazing lights shone from the ceiling. The temperature in her body rose steadily, and she felt slight beads of sweat on her brow. She wanted to wipe her forehead, but it took all her mental concentration to keep walking.

Unconsciously her eyes wavered slightly to the right.

Steve looked like ice-cold water had been splashed on his head—his mouth hanging wide open and his face frozen like a statue. Alex faltered, but kept her balance. She thanked the stars and every saint above for the training she endured in five-inch heels. Her head turned further to the right, and suddenly it all became clear.

She was on stage. Nothing about the stage scared her. She'd taken her clothes off on the stage. Granted there weren't as many people watching, but that didn't matter. The lead vanished, and she felt like an oppressive weight lifted. Steve might denounce her, but she would keep her head high like she always did.

Her pace picked up speed, and she found herself standing next to Marie, gazing at Steve.

"Now you guys can talk," Marie said quietly, so the microphone didn't echo her voice.

Alex sensed Marie leave, but didn't take her eyes off the man standing in front of her.

"I love you," she said, and didn't care that there was an audible gasp in the audience.

The shock fell from Steve's face, and the corners of his mouth lifted in a beautiful smile. He grabbed her, and Alex's feet left the ground. His lips smashed against her, and the kiss they shared electrified the crowd. A furious round of applause and shouts penetrated the air.

Alex moved her lips against Steve's, and prayed they'd never part again. When she felt his cock press against her abdomen, she tried to speak through their kiss.

"Meeve," she said, muffled.

He kissed her again, grinning widely. "Sorry," he whispered, and set her down.

Alex had a strong urge to fix her hair, and she took a step back, and stood slightly behind Steve.

He pulled on her hand, gripping it tightly, moving her firmly to his side. "Ladies and Gentleman. This is ... Alex," he laughed, and the crowd clapped in appreciation. Hearty rounds of "ahhhs" sounding. "I fell in love with this beautiful woman," he glanced at her, "a year ago. But I almost lost her because I was stupid." He turned toward her, and she could feel the flush spreading on her cheeks. "I love you, Alex. You're the only hope and dream that I want."

Alex felt her heart melt at Steve's words. Her eyes burned with tears, and she mouthed, "I love you."

He smiled, his gaze moving to the back of the room. Alex followed his gaze, blinking back moisture. Marie and Brad were standing in the back, thumbs extended way up in the air, jumping up and down.

"I have to thank my sister, Marie, for setting this whole thing up," he said laughingly, and Alex grinned when Marie started waving and nodding. "Thanks, Marie. I would have lost her without you."

He turned to face her, and Alex swore she could see the gears moving in his head.

"I'm not going to let you go this time," he said, kneeling in front of her.

The crowd rose to their feet, and the applause was nearly deafening.

EPILOGUE

"What are you doing? You've been in there for twenty minutes," Steve yelled.

"You can't rush a dancer, Steven. These things take time," she yelled back through the door.

"Time," he muttered, looking at his cock. Hard as a rock, he waited anxiously for Alex to make her debut.

Steve leaned back against the pillows; amazed at the changes his life had taken in a few short weeks, he looked at the ceiling thinking back to the night he'd watched Alex and Ameril dance on stage. Thinking back to the night of the Chrysalis reception, a night indelibly etched in his mind. Remembering the hotel room later, where they'd fucked like rabbits. His cock twitched in fond remembrance, and Steve nodded his head.

Yep.

He had all the time in the world.

Happier than he could ever remember being, his thoughts turned to his parents. Contrary to his belief, they were ecstatic about his upcoming marriage. Though, his mother had been slightly horrified when he mentioned a small chapel in Las Vegas. She was probably off right now planning the wedding of the century. Steve smiled absently at the thought.

His parents shocked him further when they accepted Alex's former profession with a laugh. They weren't ashamed when he told them where Alex worked.

Correction. Used to work.

He chuckled, remembering his father's voice. "Bet you didn't know your great-grandmother danced cabaret?" They took the whole thing amazingly well, and he felt like a dupe for even thinking they wouldn't. After the reception, Steve realized what an idiot he'd been. If it hadn't been for Marie's intervention, he probably never would have seen Alex again. He still wondered if he would have gone after her. He liked to think he would have, but he didn't really know.

You got her now, fool, what does it matter?

Steve nodded his head then frowned. There was only one problem in his life right now.

Jake.

Steve's brows creased in confusion. His brother was supposed to be with them now in Washington, D.C. The Energy commission met tomorrow, but still there was no word from him. Steve shook his head reflecting on the odd things Marie had told him.

For the past six weeks Jake had been acting most unusual, walking around like he was in some sort of daze. He hardly ever came to work, and when he did he looked like he'd been up all night.

Steve and his brother were close, but there are some things men don't share. He figured Jake would open up in time, and to be honest he hadn't been concerned. He'd been so focused on Alex that the rest of the world had faded to oblivion. Now he wondered about his brother. Jake had been completely MIA from the office for the past week. He hadn't even showed up at the Chrysalis dinner, risking massive amounts of

retribution from their mother. The only person to have seen him had been Constance, his secretary.

He could see his mother...

"You ready?" Alex asked, stepping out of the bathroom wearing a hot pink mini dress that looked painted on her body, and matching five-inch heels.

All thoughts of Jake, as well as any other thoughts fled Steve's mind. He stared at her, jaw agape. His cock twitched, reminding him that there was a sexy, beautiful woman staring at him with more on her mind than the weather in D.C.

"Come here," he murmured, fully intending to give his cock everything it wanted.

"Later. I'm going to dance for you," she said, and he could see a fine blush in her face.

"Dance for me tomorrow."

"That's what you said last night," she laughed, walking toward the bed. Steve geared up to grab her, and she bounced back easily. He'd never understand how she was able to walk in those shoes. He sighed. He had a lifetime to figure it out. He watched her drape heavy red scarves over the lamps, dimming the room in a seductively dark glow, and walk gracefully to the stereo system above the television.

Steve became entranced in Alex's dance. She swayed and moved gracefully about the room. Propping her leg high, with the help of the bureau, she ran a hand lightly up the curve of her inner thigh. His body temperature went up a couple of notches, and he flexed and rotated his hips trying to relieve the immense pressure that had built in his cock. Removing her leg elegantly, she twirled around the room, slowly pulling the dress free from her ample charms. Steve held his breath admiring the breasts and nipples that belonged solely to him.

"God, you're beautiful, Alex," he murmured.

She smiled, but didn't say a word, just continued twirling and swaying, stopping occasionally to rub her hands over bountiful mounds.

Steve nearly catapulted from the bed in frustration to grab her and fuck her like he wanted. When she finally kicked off her shoes, and climbed on the bed, she stood towering over him, and his hands moved to her feet caressingly, and he urged her to come closer.

Alex moved slowly toward him, bringing his face level with her pussy. "Help me finish taking off my dress, Steve," she whispered.

Steve inhaled slowly, and reached to pull the clinging material from her hips. Now she stood clad only in her g-string, and Steve's cock trembled an encouraging idea to get that off too. Never one to argue with a good idea, he reached for the strings sitting high on her hips.

"No," she said and slapped his hands. "No touching now."

Steve sighed, and watched mesmerized as she lifted her leg, resting one foot on the headboard near his head. His nostrils flared, inhaling the scent of her arousal.

Steve groaned when she pulled the material aside, revealing an enticingly shaved pussy. He leaned forward, intent on capturing the prize.

Just one lick.

"Uh uh uh," she teased.

Her gaze fell to his cock, and he shuddered when she licked her lips. "You know what I want."

"Oh, God."

Alex knelt between his legs quickly, and swiped a long lick against the sensitive skin of his balls. His eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he speared his hand in her hair encouraging her. He knew he'd died and gone to heaven when she sucked the tender flesh inside her hot mouth.

"Oh, shit," he muttered, reduced to a mindless beast intent on pleasure.

Alex licked and sucked on his balls until he thought he'd go mad if he couldn't get inside her. Just when he thought he couldn't take any more, Alex took his cock in her mouth.

* * * *

"You taste so good," she said between sucks and licks.

Steve leaned back, watching his cock disappear into her mouth over and over. Her cheeks drew inwards, and he could feel every tug of her lips.

"Oh God," he moaned, intent on praising the divine being for creating his greatest gift to man-woman.

Alex sucked faster and harder, and he heard a ringing in his ears. Rolling in pleasure, it took him a moment to realize that the ringing wasn't in his head, but coming from the phone beside him. He looked at it and felt the tug of her mouth again, and decided the phone could wait.

Steve trembled when Alex ran a caressing tongue down his shaft. "Answer it," she said, smothering his cock with her mouth, and kissing the long, throbbing organ gently.

"Uh uh," he groaned, pushing on her head, urging her to continue the pleasurable suckling.

"It could be your mother."

Why did she say that?

Steve removed his gaze from the tempting sight of Alex and his cock, and stared at the phone. No man, even one enjoying some glorious head, could ignore a phone call from his mother. He sighed, and reached for the phone.

"Steven Mae-millan," he stuttered into phone, glaring in amusement at Alex, who returned to sucking his cock.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Macmillan, but I have your brother, Jake Macmillan, on the line," the hotel operator said, and he tried to remember if he actually was Steve Macmillan.

Alex sucked furiously now, and he couldn't even remember the day of the week, much less his own name.

"Put him through," he breathed, grabbing hold of her head, pushing his cock inside her mouth harder and faster.

A series of clicks sounded, and Steve struggled to remember why he was on the phone.

"Steve," Jake's voice crystal clear, sounded in his ear.

"Why aren't you in D.C.?" he groaned the question, and Alex slowed to a leisurely pace, alternating her sucking with long, hot swipes from her tongue.

"Some things have come up that I need to take care of. Constance has all the paperwork for the meeting tomorrow. Marie has all the numbers. My being there was just a formality."

"Yeah, but ... ~~M~~Mom's going to kill you for missing the reception," he stuttered, watching Alex's pink tongue caress his balls with wet slurping licks.

"I talked to her. She says she has my death warrant signed and sealed. Congratulations by the way."

"Th... thanks," he murmured, fascinated by the way his cock disappeared inside Alex's mouth.

"Alex is a great girl. I'm happy for you." Jake paused, and he could hear him sighing. "Look, I need to use the Summit for a while."

"Sure ... uh ... anything you want."

He would have promised him their first-born child. Right now, Steve's biggest concern was ending the conversation. He was so close to exploding. Those regular thoughts outside of his dick sliding over and over inside Alex's mouth were miniscule.

There was a slight muffle before Jake said, "Okay, I'll be gone for a while ... talk to you later."

Steve didn't even bother hanging up the phone properly. He tossed the receiver with a flick of his wrist, ignoring the thud when it landed on the carpeted floor.

Alex licked a long wet slather around the head of his cock, and peered at him through slanted eyes lit with green fire. His mind faded back to the splendid sensations, but a deep and abiding warmth filled the corners of his soul.

"I love you," he murmured, enthralled in every essence of her being.

Alex stopped, and opened her eyes wide to stare back at him. "I love you."

Steve's breath caught in his throat, and he realized how close he'd come to losing her. He'd been such a fool to let preconceived notions of society deter him from the woman of his dreams. She was all that would ever matter.

He grabbed her arms gently, and straddled her on top of him. In a just a few seconds he slid home inside of her warm and wet cunt. But, he held his hips still and gazed deeply into her eyes.

"You know what I'm going to do now?"

Alex rolled her hips seductively, and smiled. "No, what are you going to do?"

"Work on those kids I promised my mom."

The End

About the Author:

Karen Monroe sails all over the world in the United States Navy. In her travels, she's had the pleasure of encountering some very sexy men of different cultures and appetites. Her stories are born from fifty percent experience (she calls it research) and fifty percent vivid erotic fantasy.

Karen's love for romance novels started in the sixth grade, when a far-sighted librarian overlooked a Harlequin Temptation she had mistakenly slipped into her check-

out stack. After that fateful day, her lot in life as a writer was sealed. A stint at erotic dancing helped mold her perception of its contribution to today's lifestyle. The experience and understanding of that growing sub-culture provides Karen with the basis of some of her best stories.

In addition to writing and sailing the seven seas, Karen enjoys exotic cuisines, window shopping (she's in the Navy, give her a break!), sightseeing, learning new languages, and ~~most importantly~~ meeting guys. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of California in Los Angeles and is currently working on obtaining a Masters in English. When not out boating, Karen calls San Diego home, where she keeps a stash of one dollar bills for Ladies Night Out.

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