

ShadowsForge 3: RETAKING AMERICA

by

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WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS
Whiskey Creek Press
PO Box 51052
Casper, WY 82605-1052
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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ISBN 978-1-59374-616-2

Credits

Cover Artist: Jinger Heaston
Editor: Louise Bohmer

Printed in the United States of America

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

Shadows Forge 3: RETAKING AMERICA

“...It was interesting to read backstage life of the group and what it took to keep them going - roadies, wardrobe people and minders. It's not hard to believe that friendships can get easily strained with the ongoing pressure to perform and be something that the public wants.

Although *ShadowsForge 3: Retaking America* is about a British rock group, it's also about real, fallible people whose lives are messy and complicated. To me, that makes the book believable...”

~~Reviewed by Janet for OnceUponARomance.com

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ShadowsForge 1: Three Times A Hero

ShadowsForge 2: Trials On Tour

Dedication

~~Dedicated to Steve Conrad, my Guiding Angel.

Special Thanks to Joyce, Brandi, Diana and Maria whose dedication and loyalty have kept ShadowsForge alive and on tour.

Technical Advisor – Jonathan McMillan

Special Heartfelt Thank You to my editor, Louise Bohmer, for making me look good!~~

Chapter 1

Chicago, IL

Geoff Richards pushed back from the remains of the dinner he shared with Ty and Alexis Synclair in their suite. He missed the company of Valerie Leonard. She was barely out of his thoughts for more than a few minutes at a time since she decided to return to London a week ago to rest and heal.

The U.S. leg, early in the Ethereal Edge tour, was such a success that Nigel Patton, their ever-busy manager, was able to tack an additional two months worth of shows onto the end of the tour. So, off to America ShadowsForge flew, depositing Valerie in London on the way.

Although she still wouldn't allow him liberty beyond a kiss or friendly hug, Geoff was eager to have her near him again. He had been a "good boy" since she agreed to date him, having given him a challenge to redeem himself from his reputation before she would. No overnight relationships, no bump and grind. It was only a few weeks but it had been a long "dry spell" that Geoff was not used to or happy about.

"Lady Alexis." Geoff smiled. "Would you mind so very much if I borrowed Ty for a while? I'd like his opinion on—some band business. Would you mind?"

Alexis, her dark brown eyes sparkling, gave Ty a knowing look as she stood. "Sure. No problem. Who am I to come between old mates? I'll go read, or knit some booties or something." She turned toward the bedroom. Ty was on his feet in an instant, catching her before she reached the door.

"What do you mean booties?" His voice held a mixture of excitement and fear. He leaned down, wrapping one arm around her shoulders. He brushed her blue-black waist-length hair over her shoulder, while glancing from abdomen to face of his wife of eight months.

"Nothing. I wondered if you were paying attention." She grinned. She pushed his thick mane back from his face, caressing the softness of his curls.

Ty hovered eight inches above her as he stood, looking down into her dark eyes. "You like to scare me, don't you?"

"Were you scared?" She placed her hand on his chest. He took her hand, kissing her palm.

"You're damn right."

"Good." Alexis grinned, continuing toward the bedroom door. As she walked away, Ty swatted her. "Ooh", she cooed. "Promises, promises."

Ty reached out to swat her again. She dashed through the door, laughing as she slammed it behind her.

Ty returned to the table, glancing once more at the closed door with a serene smile on his face.

"Can you imagine me a father?" He lifted his wine glass to his lips.

"Can you imagine me a husband?" Geoff countered, receiving the reaction he fully expected. Ty froze, the glass held an inch from his mouth. He stared at Geoff as if he had grown a third eye. When Ty didn't respond, Geoff continued. "How long did you live without Elsbeth after

you met her, when you thought you knew she was the one for you?" Ty raised his eyebrows as he lowered his glass to the table.

"Why bring her up? Kind of a bad example, don't you think?" Ty's first marriage ended painfully in less than a year and he didn't want to think about it, much less discuss it, ever again.

"Because I know you didn't live without Alexis once you two met. Lightening bolts, fireworks, gunfire and all that. With Elsbeth, you at least thought about what you were doing—not that it hasn't worked out a lot better this time round." He picked up his glass and toasted the lady beyond the closed door before draining the dark red liquid. He refilled the glass, taking another long swallow.

"Let me think." Ty pushed back from the table, lifting his glass to his lips. He sipped thoughtfully before he continued. "I first saw Elsbeth at a meet and greet in—oh, hell, I can't remember where we were. It was one of those small dives we played in the early days. I remember it was a warm evening. She was wearing a white dress, very summery and sexy. She was absolutely beautiful." Ty closed his eyes for a moment before frowning. "I'd rather think about Alexis, you know."

"Could you have left Elly behind, say—if we had to tour another country or another continent? Could you have walked away from her and been happy about it? Or even Alexis. Could you have left her in California when we went home?" Geoff sat his glass down and leaned forward, lacing his fingers.

"I had a hard enough time leaving her in the hospital for those five days while we went on. I know what you're thinking. And, believe me, I agonized over the decision that I had to make about leaving either Alexis or ShadowsForge.

I wanted what was best for me at the time.” Ty sipped from his glass.

“You’ll probably think I’ve gone over the edge. I know it doesn’t sound like me but I think I want a wife, kids—the family thing. I want to perform and then go home with the same woman every night. Like you do.” Geoff slouched in the chair. “I want to be one man—the man that I really am. Not what Nigel and the ‘Managers Elite’ want us to be. You know what I’m saying. You said it, too, about eight or nine months ago. I’m proud of who I am and want to be myself for a change. I guess I’m getting tired of this ‘bad boy’ routine.” Geoff rose to pace about the room.

Ty watched as his friend retrieved a pack of cigarettes from the table by the sofa. Geoff dropped back into his chair, filling his empty glass before lighting a cigarette. He swallowed the wine and poured out again, sitting back, thoughtfully staring into the glass.

“That does surprise me. I thought you liked your bad boy image. You do it so well.”

Geoff smirked. “Yeah, thanks.”

“I know what it’s like. I was as restless as you are and I can understand. I also know how I felt when I found Elsbeth wrapped up in my bed sheets with Jake. I was pretty damned empty inside. Empty and, at the same time, full—of pain. It took four years to be able to trust a woman again. And it took a special woman, at that.”

“I get such a rush from what we’ve done with ShadowsForge.” Geoff placed his cigarette in the ashtray. “The thrill, the excitement, not to mention the physical work-out that gets my blood boiling. The money. But none of this,” he held up a clenched left fist as if he had gathered all that ShadowsForge was into his hand, “can compare to the rush when I’m with Valerie, when I hear her say my

name. Geoff Richards, not ShadowsForge. When she puts her hands on me or when I kiss her hand, which is about the only thing she's let me kiss." He rolled his eyes.

Geoff took a deep breath before he continued. "Attention from her is more than equal to the thrill of being on stage. I'm sure that nothing we can ever accomplish can be as meaningful as having a wife or someday to have a kid." Geoff retrieved his cigarette, taking a draw. He blew it out slowly before he swept his hand through the gray cloud. "It's a dream as tangible as smoke. I don't even know if she'd have me. It's taken most of a month and near death to get this far."

Ty gave Geoff a reassuring smile. "In time, you'll get your dream. Look how far we've made it, when the band was only a dream six years ago. What we're doing now will make a better future to live our dreams in. ShadowsForge is popular right now. We give people escape from their everyday lives, if only for a couple of hours. Some of those girls spend a lot of time dreaming about you. It makes them happy. So, okay, we make them happy, they make us happy. For now. And then, we move on with our lives. Then we find the one, like I told you. Do you remember?"

Geoff nodded, a silent brooding in his topaz eyes.

Ty continued. "I'm all for you and Valerie getting together. But I think that one of us getting married on this tour was enough. It might damage popularity if two of us did. Why don't you wait until after it's finished? When we're out of the public eye every night for a while. The fans will think there's no one left worth having if you do this now. What? And leave all those skirts to Jordan, Jon and B.J.? I'm afraid our fan base would drop like a gold brick." They both laughed.

“Yeah, ShadowsForge is hot right now. Real hot. But how long will I have to put my life on hold to make them happy?”

“About two more months. Listen to me.” Ty leaned his arms on the table. “In time—if you’re sure this isn’t a hero thing because you saved her life—if you really love her, it won’t seem long. Can you imagine what Nigel will say? He keeps trying to get me to take off my ring. Bad for publicity, he says. I told him to get used to it. Now you go telling him you’re getting married, he’ll be a raving loony. Clock tower sniper. Probably lock J.C., Jon, and Brian in a monastery between shows.”

Geoff stood. “Each night, without Valerie here, I’m afraid of going out on the prowl and losing her because of it. I’ve been sleeping alone for weeks. Bloody hell. I’m not used to that, y’know? I’m only human.” Geoff grimaced in pain—the kind of pain Ty understood.

“So you want to marry her so you don’t have to sleep alone?” A note of sarcasm crept into Ty’s voice.

“I want to marry her because I love her.” Geoff’s countenance softened as he admitted something to Ty that he had hardly admitted to himself. Geoff smiled. “Can you imagine that? Geoff Richards in love? Freaking hell.” He laughed at himself. “Hey, thanks for listening. I think I’ve had too much wine. I need some air. I’m going down to the lounge for a while.”

“Get some entertainment. You’ll feel better for it. I’ll call Gary for you and...”

“I want to be on my own tonight. I’ve had enough muscle around lately.” Geoff crushed out the cigarette. “Who knows? Maybe I can get lucky and find someone warm and feminine to spend some time with—just for the evening. To take the edge off.”

Geoff pocketed his cigarettes and left the suite. Ty heard his friend's shuffling footsteps wandering down the hallway toward the elevator. Alexis came out, laying her hand softly on Ty's shoulder as he sipped his wine.

"The fate of ShadowsForge rests on the shoulders of Geoff Richards." He spoke to the closed door, raising his glass toward his departed friend. "May his burden be lightened by the events of this evening."

Chapter 2

BANG. BANG. BANG.

Geoff groaned as he folded the pillow around his head.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

“Aaugggh, again.” Geoff growled, trying to bury his head into the mattress. He had a massive hangover and the pounding on the door almost matched the pounding in his head, but not quite. He decided that who ever it was would probably not go away unless he told them to. He needed to sleep for a few more hours, at least. Or days, the way he was feeling. He plucked himself from the tangle of sheets and blankets, not willing to open his eyes to the daylight. It took the greatest of effort to wrap a sheet around his hips. He shuffled to the door, attempting to move his head as little as possible.

He unlocked the door, grasped the knob and turned it. Even the squeak proved to be painful. He opened bloodshot eyes to see who had intruded on his sleep and put him through this misery so early in the day. Pete Stranton, the road boss, stood at the door with a deep frown. Behind him stood Jon Wiles and Brian Cummings, both trying to look past Geoff. Geoff groaned as he adjusted his grip on the sheet.

“What the hell do you want?” Each word was a chore to get out. He looked down, trying to knot the sheet at his hip.

Pete said nothing. Geoff looked up at the silence. Pete was staring into the room, doubling up his fist. Geoff caught the punch in the jaw, sending him tumbling back onto the bed in brain shattering pain.

“What the freakin’ hell was that for? I don’t appreciate your wake up call, roadie.” He pulled himself upright on the side of the bed, holding his thundering head. He was in too much pain to fight back. He made a mental note that scotch was a bad choice after wine and vodka.

“I don’t appreciate you treating her like this, either.” Pete entered the room.

Geoff looked up at his two band mates who remained by the door. Yeah, he had brought someone back with him. Too drunk to walk alone, he found a willing volunteer in the elevator to help. It was a vague memory but he knew he hadn’t come back alone. Unfortunately, he couldn’t remember anything else after staggering into the room with someone tucked under his arm for support. He didn’t even remember undressing. Well, at least if he passed out, he probably didn’t do anything he had to lie to Valerie about. That was one consolation.

“I didn’t think anyone would know she was here. Besides, since when do you care who I sleep with? Did Valerie tell you to baby-sit me or something?” Geoff thought about someone telling Valerie and was immersed in regret.

“Don’t you think I’d care about my sister?” Pete stepped around behind the bed. “Didn’t I tell you to leave her alone?”

“Your sister?” Geoff stood up, too quick, by the message that his suffering brain sent to his stomach. Through blurred eyes, Geoff watched Pete help the dark haired girl stand up behind the bed. “Diane? Is that Diane?”

Pete pulled Diane to her feet. Her shoulder length hair was in a tangled fury, covering part of her face. Her eyes widened as she looked up at Geoff. She was wearing his shirt from the night before, half buttoned, and had a scarf tied around her neck. The other end was tied to the corner post of the bed.

“What the hell...”

“Shut up, Geoff.” Brian growled. “Pick up your sheet. I think the lady’s seen enough of you.”

Pete untied the scarf from Diane’s neck as tears began to trickle from her eyes. She pushed her hair back with one hand, holding the shirt closed with the other. She looked from Jon to Brian, meeting his eyes, before she hid her face against her brother’s chest.

“I ought to beat the hell out of you, Richards.” Pete guided Diane toward the door. “Diane, where’s your clothes?”

She pointed toward the bed. Brian stalked to the bed, glaring at Geoff as he passed by. He dug through the tangle of bedding, retrieving a tattered piece of material, holding it up.

“That’s my dress.” Diane turned to Geoff. He looked at the torn material.

“What happened to it?” Geoff tried to clear his head, to remember what he had done.

“You happened to it,” she said quietly. “You said you always wanted to do that. Then you did it. You said if I wanted to keep my job...” Diane hesitated, turning pleading eyes to Pete.

“I can’t remember any of it. Why didn’t you leave when I passed out?” Geoff gathered his sheet around him before sitting down on the bed with a bewildered look.

“You told me you didn’t want me to leave, to be here in the morning. In case you wanted more—uh...” She hesitated, casting her eyes down. She bit her lip.

Geoff was grateful that she had stopped there. After all that, he hoped she didn’t want him dead. Judging by the look on Pete’s face, it could happen at any moment.

“Richards, if you didn’t have a show tonight, you’d be a cripple.” Pete guided Diane by the shoulders. “You still might be before this is over, and it’s not over yet. You remember that.” He pushed Diane out the door.

Brian dropped the tattered material in Geoff’s lap as he walked to the door. “Have a souvenir. You really screwed up this time. If Pete doesn’t kill you, Valerie should.” Brian left the room.

Geoff sat with his head in his hands, trying to think. He realized that Jon was standing in the doorway with a smirk on his face.

“What do you want?”

“I want to remember what you looked like before Pete beat your head in. You can only play the dominant if the girl consents, y’know? Bad move, mate, really bad move.” Jon turned to walk away, jerking the door to slam as loud as possible.

“Aw, bloody hell.”

Chapter 3

Pete was furious. “I don’t know if we should have him arrested or if this should be handled just between us. If we lock him up—if the band doesn’t work, neither do the roadies.” He was too angry to make sense. “Damned celebrities. Think they can do any damn thing they please.” Pete ranted, opening the door to Diane’s room. He led her toward the sofa.

“I need a shower.”

Pete tried to make her sit down. “You need a medical exam first, to have proof.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? You have to have evidence when you have him arrested.”

“I don’t want him arrested.”

Pete stared at his sister. “You must be in shock. Are you going to let him get away with this?”

“He already has. Arresting him won’t change what happened. I don’t know what I want to do.” She thought for a moment. “I only know I want to take a shower.”

As Diane headed toward the bathroom, Pete intercepted her. “You’ll be washing away evidence. That’s stupid.” He pulled her by the arm to face him.

“It’s my business, not yours.” Diane shouted in a burst of anger. “Let go of me.” She wrenched her arm from his grasp. “I can take care of myself.”

Pete stepped back, staring at her. “I see how you take care of yourself. Look where you ended up last night.”

Diane glared at her brother. She slapped him as hard as she could.

* * * *

Geoff toyed in the ashtray with his cigarette. He had sucked down a handful of aspirin, showered and dressed, only coming out of his room when Ty knocked on his door, wanting to know what happened. Jon and Brian met Ty down in the hotel restaurant where he, Alexis and Jordan were having breakfast with Nigel. They mentioned that G.R. had done something exceptionally stupid. Geoff had a difficult time facing Ty, who sat across the table from him. Ty wore a combination of sympathy and puzzlement on his face.

“What were you thinking?” Puzzlement finally won out.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Geoff said. “I can’t remember a damned thing about last night.”

“Jon said Pete’s going to report this to the law.”

“Wonderful.” Geoff smashed out his cigarette and dropped his head into his hands. His muffled voice could be heard from between his fingers. “Free publicity. Geoff Richards rapes wardrobe lady.”

“Well, you do have a rep, y’know.” Ty shrugged as Geoff glared at him through his fingers.

“I hope Nigel is happy I’m keeping it up,” Geoff commented with sarcasm, hiding his eyes again.

“You might not want to talk to Nigel about now.”

"Why?" Geoff peeked at Ty again. "Don't tell me that Nigel is..."

"Contemplating having you drawn and quartered—publicly," Ty finished. "He's trying to figure out how to do it without breaking up the group."

"Tell him to stand in line right behind Pete. I wouldn't doubt that Valerie would be there as well when she finds out. And let's not forget Diane." He threw his hands up to emulate great excitement. "Party Time." He felt like screaming.

"Well, there's no reason to worry about it now." Ty clapped him on the shoulder. "Wait to see what Diane and Pete want to do. Then go from there. But I'd suggest you avoid Nigel today."

"You think I can?"

The door slammed open. "RICHARDS."

Ty shrugged. "Guess not." He headed toward his room. Geoff looked after Ty as if he were being deserted.

* * * *

Jordan paced the hallway from the elevator to Diane's door several times before he decided to knock. He wasn't sure how he would be received but he knew he needed to speak with Diane. He had a weak feeling in his stomach that this whole situation would be the undoing of ShadowsForge. And the last thing he needed was for ShadowsForge to fold, or to be unable to withstand this kind of publicity. He couldn't wait around for Diane to make up her mind. He had to know if she was going to have Geoff arrested or not.

Pete jerked the door open. "What do you want?"

"To see how Diane is." Jordan felt rather uncomfortable.

"I don't think she wants to see any of you right now. Go away and leave her alone." Pete scowled as he began to push the door closed.

Jordan put his hand out, stopping it. "Pete, let me see her. Please?"

"Get the hell out of here, Cantrell," Pete snapped.

"Let him in." Jordan heard a voice from somewhere within the room.

"But, he's..."

"He's not Geoff." Diane sounded tired. Pete glared at Jordan as he stepped back, allowing the guitarist entrance.

Diane sat on the sofa in a long terry cloth robe, her hair wrapped up in a towel. She pulled her legs up beneath her as she pulled the robe closer to her neck. Jordan kept his distance. Pete gave a huff of annoyance and left, slamming the door. Jordan jumped at the loud noise behind him. He ventured to take a seat in a chair across from Diane.

"You have to forgive my brother," she commented. "He's a bit upset because he got me this job. He feels responsible."

"Geoff's the one responsible. Are you all right?" He folded his hands as he leaned his elbows on his knees, keeping his voice low.

"As well as can be expected." She kept her eyes lowered as she spoke.

"I have to be honest, Diane. I don't really know what to say. I need to know what you're going to do to Geoff. I'm not here to defend him and I can't—won't—apologize for him. I am worried about what's going to happen to the group."

"The group?" She raised her eyes.

“Well, if Geoff gets deported or goes to jail for any length of time, that kind of puts an end to my employment, y’know what I mean?”

“Is that all you’re concerned with?” She frowned with a hurt look.

“No. I mean, I’m concerned for you, too. But what you decide will affect us all.” He fidgeted with his hands.

“What would you have me do?”

Jordan was surprised that she would ask his opinion. He didn’t know what to say. He wished that he could make the whole situation go away. For everyone’s sake.

“You have to do what is right for you. Geoff was wrong. No doubt. He’s kicking himself about it. He knows he was wrong.”

“I bet he doesn’t feel as bad about it as I do.” She rolled her eyes.

“True.” He stood. “I only want you to think about it before you make any decisions. I’m behind you, what ever you decide. I want you to know that. But think really hard first. Make him pay for it for the rest of his life. That’s all right with me.”

He stepped around the table that separated them, kneeling before her, taking her hand in his. Diane was surprised to see fear in his dark eyes. “Damn it. I’m scared, Diane. I don’t know anything else but music and I don’t want to start over again if ShadowsForge folds.”

“ShadowsForge can’t go on without Geoff Richards,” she concluded. “I hadn’t thought about that.” She lowered her eyes again, looking at Jordan’s hands folded around hers. “Tell Mr. Patton that I want to speak to him. I’ve made my decision.”

After searching her dark eyes for a hint to what she was thinking, Jordan nodded. "I'll do that." He patted her hand before standing. "I'll tell Nigel right now."

"Thank you." She gave him an uncertain smile.

"Let me know if you need anything." Jordan left the room, feeling a little better than when he had entered.

Chapter 4

Jordan delivered the message to Nigel, who in turn cursed Geoff Richards again before heading to Diane's room. Jordan pulled on his baseball cap and a pair of dark glasses before he headed to the elevator. Greg fell in step at his side as he approached the doors.

"No." Jordan waved him off. "You stay here."

"Sorry, sir, but Gary said..."

"I don't care what Gary said." Jordan turned to face the burly man. He looked him in the eye. "I'm paying you and Gary. I don't need a babysitter. Stay here." He was not loud, but his threatening tone told Greg to back down.

Jordan continued to the elevator, punching the button with the side of his fist. He listened to see if Greg was following, turning around only when he stepped in and watched the doors close.

Once he reached the ground floor, Jordan walked briskly toward the front doors and out into the bright daylight. Having collar-length hair made it easier for him to go out in public without being noticed. Ty and the others had too much hair to hide under an ordinary baseball cap as Jordan could. He considered it an advantage. He stood on the sidewalk, looking left and right before deciding to turn right. He seemed to remember from the previous night

some sort of park, although it had been hard to see clearly through the darkened limo windows. They had been transported to a radio interview and it had caught his attention on the way to the hotel. He hoped it wouldn't be too far of a walk.

It took Jordan about ten minutes to reach the park. It wasn't very large, but it was an open grassy square, and there were a few children playing on the slides and swings in the sandy area. A group of vigilant mothers sat on a string of benches closest to the play area. On the far side were several more unoccupied benches.

Jordan followed the walkway around the sand-filled playground and plopped down on a bench, watching the children. He missed being at home, wondering what his family were doing this very moment. He let out a heavy sigh, letting his mind wander back to the situation at the hotel.

The up side of Geoff getting arrested would be that Jordan and the others could take a trip home while things were sorted out. The down side was that ShadowsForge could fold and Jordan would have to begin all over again. Music was all he knew. If this got out, it could mean the end of the group. Jordan was unsure if their popularity was strong enough to withstand this kind of publicity. Yes, they were billed as the "British Bad Boys" but this might prove to be a little too much for them to weather. Sexual conquest was one thing; rape was another.

Jordan sat back on the bench. He stretched out his legs, crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned back while allowing the sun to warm his face. As Jordan relaxed, he heard a female voice cry out.

"Hey. Watch your feet."

Jordan sat up, pulling his legs back as he saw the pretty strawberry blond that had tripped over him. She stumbled, catching her balance. Jordan stood, reaching out to steady her.

“I’m so sorry.” Jordan looked down on the young woman. “I didn’t see you.”

“Of course. You couldn’t when you weren’t looking.” The girl’s words did not seem to convey anger. Her lips wore a frown but her eyes were smiling. In less time than it took for her to steady herself, her frown turned to a flirtatious smile. She pulled herself up in conceit to her full five and a half feet as she flung her hair teasingly over her shoulder and walked away.

Watching her, Jordan sat down. She walked around the play area to the far side before crossing the street. Once or twice she looked back but continued on. Jordan realized that he didn’t need to base his attitude on what was going on with Geoff and ShadowsForge. There were other things that he could base his happiness on, and one of those things had just tripped into his life. His gaze followed her. She looked back as she disappeared into a coffee shop.

“Why, yes. Thank you. I’d love something to drink.” He stood once more, cutting across the playground.

* * * *

Jordan wanted to remove his sunglasses as he stepped into the dim shop. He kept them on, though, to remain anonymous as he looked around. It was a small place with four occupied booths on one side and a counter on the other. Although not small enough to assure he would remain unrecognized. As his eyes became accustomed to the dimness, he saw the young lady sitting at the far end of the counter against the wall. She looked up when he

entered, and bit her lip to control a smile as she turned back to her cup.

Jordan took a seat at the counter, leaving three places separating him from the young lady.

“Hot tea, please.”

Jordan kept his head down until the waitress set his order before him and walked away. He took his time preparing the tea. Stirring it absently, he glanced casually toward the young lady. She kept her eyes on her own cup, but Jordan could see anticipation on her face. He wondered if he should be so forward as to move down the counter a space or two, closing the gap between them. As he thought about it, the door opened.

A tall young man in ragged jeans, a worn t-shirt and bright red hair falling in his eyes, entered, allowing the door to close with a slam. He walked past Jordan to the end of the counter, giving the girl a quick peck on the cheek before dropping into the seat next to her. He sat with his back toward Jordan, sitting sideways on the stool.

Good thing I didn't make my move. Oh well. No reason to waste a good cup of tea.

By the time he had almost finished, his attention was drawn to the conversation at the end of the counter. The young man stood abruptly, seething with anger.

“As if you'd have a chance,” he said to her. He stormed out, once more allowing the door to slam.

Jordan watched the guy leave before looking toward the young lady. Whatever the disagreement had been about, it didn't seem to be bothering her very much. She was now sitting sideways, smiling at Jordan. Unsure of the situation, Jordan looked toward the door again where the angry young man had exited, then turned back to her smile.

She doesn't know it's me and she's making advances. Let's see if she knows who I am.

Jordan smiled at the girl, sliding his glasses down his nose, giving her a wink. He was amused as recognition shone upon her face. He put one finger to his lips, indicating for her to keep their secret. He gave her a sly grin as he pushed his glasses into place.

Looks like the coast is clear.

Jordan stood, took his cup and moved down to the stool the young man had vacated. As he sat down, he glanced toward the door. He started to speak before turning back to her, removing his glasses.

"Hey, babe."

"You're Jordan Cantrell, aren't you?" She kept her voice low.

"Yeah, that would be me."

"What are you doing in here?"

"I was out for a walk, taking in some of the local sites." He allowed his gaze to travel up and down her frame for emphasis. She responded to the obvious hunger in his eyes. "It would seem that you've upset him a bit." Jordan looked into her green eyes.

"Drew? It's not the first time but I hope it's the last." She rested one arm on the counter and the other on the back of her seat. She inhaled deeply, slowly, straining the blue gauze material that covered her well-endowed chest.

"Having a little trouble with the boyfriend?"

"He's only a friend. He doesn't think that I can accomplish anything in my life on my own."

"What do you want to accomplish?"

"I don't know. I want to make a name for myself somehow."

“Well, babe, before you can make a name for yourself you have to have a name. So, what do I call you?”

“You could call me anything you like and I’d answer, but use Crystal.” She leaned a little closer.

“Well, Crystal, for lack of a better line, what’s a hot babe like you doing in a dive like this?” His gaze took inventory of her shape a second time.

“Waiting for a man like you,” she stated without missing a beat.

“I’m here. So what’s the next move?”

She put her finger to her chin, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling as if in thought. “I believe the next line would be ‘your place or mine’.”

Jordan smiled, looking down at his cup, quite amused with her. “Well, since I don’t have a private place in town, it’ll have to be yours.”

“Perfect,” she said, standing up. She slid her fingers into the hip pocket of her form fitting jeans. Jordan took the opportunity to caress her hip on the way to stopping her hand.

“I got it.” He pulled out a couple of bills, tossing them on the counter between the two cups. “Take me home,” he instructed, stepping back to allow her to lead the way.

Chapter 5

Diane pulled the towel from her hair, allowing the brown curls to fall to her shoulders and over her face. She flipped her hair out of her face before pulling her robe tight around her body.

She saw how much the situation had already affected Jordan's usual easy-going, happy nature. What she decided would affect them all; that was certainly true. To hold the fate of so many in her hands was more than Diane wanted to deal with. She bit her lower lip, thinking about what the guitarist said. She had thought hard about the situation as she showered, scrubbing her body until her skin burned. She cried, allowing her tears to be washed away, again picturing the bewildered look on Geoff's face when he realized she was the one. He didn't even know that it was she.

A light rap at the door interrupted Diane's thoughts. She took a deep breath as she reached for the knob.

"Mr. Patton, please come in." She greeted Nigel, stepping back to allow him entrance.

He smiled uncertainly. "Jordan said you wanted to talk." He spoke in a clear, compassionate voice.

Diane gestured for the manager to have a seat as she closed the door. She took a place on the sofa as Nigel sat in a chair.

“I wanted to talk to you about—well, you know.”

“I can’t apologize enough for Geoff’s behavior,” Nigel began.

“You can’t apologize for something you didn’t do.” She gave Nigel a weak smile, trying to put him at ease. “I don’t hold anyone responsible except the obvious person.”

“Tell me what you want done and I’ll see to it that it is handled the way you want.”

“I want the group to go on,” Diane said, point blank.

Nigel blinked, unsure. “Without a singer?”

“Let me put it this way.” Diane shifted uncomfortably.

“I want Geoff Richards to continue his career. I want ShadowsForge to fulfill their itinerary. I’ll think about what I want from Mr. Richards, but I don’t see why the entire band and entourage should pay for one man’s—indiscretion.”

Nigel let out a relieved sigh. He’d stopped breathing as she explained. Apparently, it wasn’t what he expected to hear. Nigel smiled.

“Thank you.” He put his hand to his heart. “You don’t know what a weight it is off my chest.”

“The weight should be on him not you, Mr. Patton. I’ll let you know what I want done. I assure you that jail isn’t in his future, at least not because of me. It wouldn’t make what happened change so I don’t see that it would do anyone any good. I would like to keep my job and continue with the band.”

“No problem,” Nigel said, obviously overjoyed.

“Thank you.” Diane stood to indicate the meeting was over. Nigel took the hint.

* * * *

Jordan snaked his arm around Crystal's shoulders as they walked down the street. She reciprocated by wrapping her arm around his waist. Jordan kept his head down, trying not to be recognized as they walked down the busy sidewalk several blocks to a residential area.

"Do you think someone's going to be looking for you?"

"I'm reasonably sure that everyone is probably looking for me by now. I created a major security breach." He looked around the tree-lined neighborhood that they were walking through. The houses were neat and simple, reminding him of his home.

Crystal laughed. "Do you think you should be going home with me?"

"I see no reason why I shouldn't. Do you?"

"If you're not worried about the Shadow Team tracking us down, breaking down the door, then why should I be?"

"That settles that." He looked up at the tall trees. "Lovely day for a walk, isn't it?" Crystal laughed once more.

They came to a white two-story house that looked out of place; it was larger than the others on the street. Jordan headed up the walk to the front door when Crystal pulled him to the side.

"Not there." She led him around the side. A narrow walkway led to the backyard and a small guesthouse. It was white with a lavender trim, matching the larger house. "This is where I live."

Crystal unlocked the door, allowing Jordan to enter ahead of her, removing his hat and glasses. She locked the door before tossing her keys on a small table. She moved across the room to a bookcase.

“I’ve got to show you this,” she said with excitement, pulling out a large scrapbook. She sat on the sofa, patting the seat next to her. “I’ve been collecting these the last six years. I’ve always dreamed of meeting you but never thought it possible. So this is all I’ve had of you... until now.” She stroked his body with her gaze. “I never thought I would meet any of ShadowsForge. It’s especially exciting to meet you. You’ve always been my favorite.”

Crystal laid the scrapbook on her lap, opening it so that it also fell across Jordan’s leg. As she turned the opening page, she was horrified. In the center of each of the pictures that she had so carefully preserved, there had been placed a piece of black electrical tape. She quickly flipped through several pages, noting that the same damage had been done throughout her precious book. In frustration, she slammed the book closed and tossed it on the coffee table. She was furious and embarrassed.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.” She stormed out the door, leaving Jordan alone.

He took the opportunity to look around the small apartment. It had a kitchen on one side, a small bedroom off the back of the living room and a bathroom off of the bedroom. He sat on her double bed, testing it for firmness. Geoff, Brian, Ty, Jon and himself smiled down from all four walls. With the exception of the posters, he thought this house was much like most of the hotel rooms that he had been in.

Jordan contemplated making himself at home in the bed to wait for Crystal to return, when he heard arguing outside. He returned to the living room, moving the curtains aside. Crystal was standing toe to toe with the young man, Drew, from the coffee shop. Jordan couldn’t hear what was transpiring between them, but it wasn’t long

before Crystal took a step back and raised an angry fist. Drew stepped back, apparently intimidated.

She shouted, "All of them. I'll show you." She turned and stomped back toward the house where Jordan waited. She slammed the door behind her, locking it with determination.

"Is everything all right?" Jordan allowed the curtain to fall back into place.

"Oh, yes, everything is just fine. He ruined all of my pictures." She was close to tears.

"Well, those are only pictures. Why worry about them when you have me." He put his arms around her, pulling her into a tight hug. "Don't you think that's a better deal?"

"Yes, but, I would have had those pictures longer than I could have had you."

"Are you so sure about that?" He raised his eyebrows suggestively. "You never know how hard it can be to get rid of a Cantrell."

"The concert has been sold out for months. I wasn't able to get tickets."

"That's no problem. If you'd like to go, you can go as my personal guest. Would you like that?"

"You'd do that for me?" She wiped her tears away with the backs of her hands.

"Consider it done."

She threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. "I've always known you were special."

She was full of compliments that Jordan usually heard offered to Geoff or Ty. He had a fair choice of women, but he had always felt that he was fourth choice in the five-man band, right behind Jon and ahead of Brian. Jordan's ego blossomed around this young woman.

“Well, would you like to meet the rest of the lads?” Jordan wondered if he should actually share this acquaintance with the sometimes flesh-hungry members of ShadowsForge. He felt fairly secure knowing that Geoff had enough problems right now and would probably leave Crystal alone. He’d have to watch Jon like a hawk, though.

“That would be great.” Her chest rose and fell against him in excitement.

She was certainly happy that he would get her into the concert. Jordan was interested in seeing how much she really cared for him and not his status. Besides, if the Geoff and Diane situation came to light, it might give other women the idea to accuse. As hungry as his body was, he decided it would be best to be careful for a while.

“Well, let’s go then.” He wanted to get away from that bed before her excitement got the best of both of them. He grabbed his hat and glasses.

Crystal scooped her keys from the table. Jordan opened the door, allowing her to exit ahead of him. He waited while she locked the door and pocketed the keys, before he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. They headed toward the street, making their way back to the hotel.

Jordan looked at his watch. By his estimation, they would arrive in time for a sound check that he would have missed had they gotten involved. At least, they would have a sound check if Geoff had not been hauled off to jail. Jordan held the hope that Nigel hadn’t shot, hung, or otherwise disposed of Geoff Richards for his indiscretions, depending on what Diane had told him.

Chapter 6

Jordan found that he thoroughly enjoyed the concert, being able to glance down at the front row to find the strawberry blond watching his every move with adoration. He was further thrilled with the excitement that he saw in her face when security pulled her from the crowd. They escorted her to side stage during the encore so that when the band rushed from the stage the final time, to be crammed into two limos and whisked back to their hotel, Crystal would be by Jordan's side.

Crystal seemed content to be packed into the elevator up to the tenth floor rooms along with five sweat-drenched band members, one manager, Alexis Synclair, and three members of the Shadow team. Jordan was pleased that the ride was very short as Crystal was sandwiched between Geoff and himself. He half expected that Geoff would take full advantage of the tight situation.

The elevator doors opened, releasing eleven bodies from the confining space. Crystal looked around as they walked down the hallway. Band members peeled off from the group as they proceeded. Geoff, Ty and Alexis at the first two doors, Brian and Nigel at the third. Jon, Jordan and Crystal continued to the end of the hall while the Shadows took positions along the way. Jon walked ahead, singing at full volume, obviously in the throes of the

adrenaline rush that overtook them all by the end of a live performance.

Jordan peeled off his saturated shirt, draping it over his shoulder. His skin glistened beneath the dark formation of curls covering his chest and trailing down his abdomen. He took Crystal by the hand, leading her to the last door.

Nigel dipped into his room for only a moment, grabbing his jacket. He hollered down the hall as he headed back to the elevator. "Don't be mucking about, boys. You have a meeting to attend. Especially you, Cantrell. Play with your new toy later."

Crystal blushed at the remark.

"Pay him no attention. You're more than a toy." Jordan allowed Crystal to enter the room ahead of him.

Jon was banging around in his room, the adjoining door between his and Jordan's room standing open. He continued to sing at full volume. Crystal glanced through the door as she passed. She could see Jon's stage clothes flying about.

"Does he always do that?" She laughed.

"He has trouble dressing himself," Jordan joked. "After we get out of here for the meet and greet, Diane comes around to collect the costumes. By tomorrow, they will be back in the wardrobe, clean, pressed, stitched and ready for the next show."

"Diane must be invaluable to you."

"I'd hate to lose her." He thought briefly of the possibility. "Would you like to sit while I grab a quick shower?" He led her to the sofa. "There's baskets on the table if you want something." A large basket of fruit and another of assorted candies were on the low table in front of the sofa, beside the balcony doors. Gifts from the hotel management and promotional personnel.

Crystal leaned on the back of the sofa as Jordan collected fresh clothes from his closet and headed to the shower. “Would you like me to wash your back?” Crystal grinned mischievously.

Jordan stopped at the door, his dark eyes sparkling at her. “Daddy said to hurry up. That would definitely take too long.” He winked at her, disappearing through the door, closing it behind him.

Crystal walked around the room, stopping to pull back the drapes. The view of the city from the tenth floor at night was something she had never seen and it was fascinating. She could hear the two showers running, and she wished that she didn’t have to stand here alone. She wanted to be with Jordan, sharing the water pelting his body, matting the thick layer of hair to his torso. Her eyes longed to follow the water trailing down his body. She wanted to be taking her time lathering him from head to foot, caressing him, touching him, so he would have no question as to her intent.

Jon’s voice intruded on her fantasy. He was singing again, his voice echoing off of tile.

*“You walked away from me; I guess it’s over now,
This isn’t what I want but it’s too late somehow,
To ask for one more chance, to swallow all my pride,
My tongue won’t form the words; I feel my hands are tied.”*

She crept toward his voice, moving along the wall until she reached the connecting door. His voice told her where he was. She listened carefully to assure herself that Jordan was still occupied before slipping quietly into Jon’s room.

Clothes were strewn all around as if they had been launched over his back as he dug through his suitcase. She

moved with caution toward the open door to the shower area, hugging the wall as the sinewy form encased in clear glass came into view. Jon, standing sideways to her position, stretched his arms above his head, lathering his hair. Eyes closed against the shampoo, he scrubbed at his scalp, allowing the foam to run down his face, neck and shoulders. Streams of white channeled down his sculptured body, taking paths that Crystal would gladly follow. She drew a silent, desirous breath.

Jon moved under the water, rinsing his hair, turning as he did so. Crystal took it all in, her eyes devouring every bit of him. His hair rinsed, he took a bar of soap, beginning at his shoulders, slowly lathering his chest, arms and abdomen.

*"We had it all before I threw it away,
I'd give anything to turn around, back to the day,
When you walked in my life, my heart stumbled and fell,
I lived in heaven then, now it's a living hell,*

*Please take my hand once more and say we'll try again,
Make me the man I was before I fell in sin."*

The heart-stopping show was interrupted by a loud knock at Jordan's door. Crystal dashed to the sofa before the door opened. Brian stopped when he saw Crystal standing in Jordan's room.

"Excuse me." He gave her a friendly smile. "The door was locked next door. I want Jon." He closed the door, moving into Jon's room.

Crystal collapsed on the sofa, willing her heart to slow. She fanned her face sure that she was bright red. She whispered, "So do I."

Chapter 7

Diane collected the foul smelling, sweat-saturated clothing into a laundry bag. She began in Brian's room, as he was always the first one dressed. That is, if they were doing an in-house concert or had to return to their hotel to shower. When they were in an arena, she would have to wait until they were all finished and on their way to whatever event was planned for after the show, before she could go into the dressing room to begin her nightly work.

She knocked at Brian's door, waiting for a response. When none came, she entered the room. She collected the clothing that Brian had always thoughtfully folded and left on the foot of his bed. She scooped them up, depositing them into the canvas laundry bag before heading directly out again. She reached the door as Brian opened it. They stood face to face for an awkward moment.

"You'd think that after all, I'd be used to running into you." Diane couldn't take her eyes from his face.

Brian smiled. Diane noticed a hint of compassion in his honey brown eyes. "It's always a pleasure, though. It's nice to come home to the little woman doing the wash. You know, the wifely things?"

They smiled nervously at each other before Brian stepped out of her way, allowing her to pass. He watched her walk down the hall before he closed the door.

Diane headed to the Synclair room. She took a deep breath, releasing it slowly before she knocked. It took a minute before the door was opened.

“Come on in.” Alexis gave her an inviting smile, closing the door behind Diane. “Ty’s being slow.” Diane stood inside of the door as Alexis walked into the room.

“I can wait.” Diane looked nervously around, relieved that Alexis had been the one to answer the door. With the adjoining room, Geoff could have been there as well. He very often was.

“Why don’t you come have a seat?” Alexis took a seat at the band-sized dining table that had been set up especially for the group. “Leave the bag by the door for now.”

Diane was happy to have Alexis as a friend, since that first day when Alexis had rescued her from the intrusive eyes of Geoff Richards.

“I haven’t had the chance to talk to you. How are you feeling?” Alexis asked with concern.

“As well as can be expected.” Diane glanced at the adjoining door, verifying it was closed. “I haven’t decided what to do other than just go on for now.” Diane couldn’t take her eyes from Geoff’s door.

Alexis nodded her understanding.

“No one else can tell you what’s right in this situation. No one else was there. All of us are on your side, though. I thought Brian was going to throw Geoff off the balcony today.”

Diane’s eyes widened.

“He came in after Nigel had been chewing Geoff a new ass and picked up where Nigel left off. Don’t take this wrong, but I almost felt sorry for Geoff.”

“I can understand. I almost feel sorry for him, too.” Diane fidgeted with her hands in her lap, eyes down.

“How could you feel sorry for him?” Alexis’ eyebrows rose in surprise.

“He was very drunk last night. He didn’t even know I was there. It could have been any girl as far as he knew. I’m afraid that someone will truly kill him. Pete, or Nigel. Now you say Brian threatened him. Valerie. She may want to kill me as well. If only they hadn’t found me like that.” Diane’s eyes grew a bit misty as she spoke.

“Geoff brought this on himself. I don’t think that anyone is going to actually kill him.” She reached over to place a reassuring hand on Diane’s shoulder. “They all want him to understand he was wrong and make sure that it will never happen again. He’s lucky you didn’t have him carted away by the police. Have him deported; and he knows it, too.”

“That wouldn’t have helped anyone.” Diane smiled up at her friend. She felt all right, hearing the shower running in Geoff’s room, knowing he wouldn’t be out too soon. “I only want to go on for now. Not make any rash decisions.”

“You’re kinder than I would have been in your place,” Alexis said.

A door opened, making Diane jump before she realized that it was Ty.

“Hey, babe?” Ty stood in the doorway with a towel wrapped low on his hips. A tumble of wet hair hung down his body in tangled waves. His deep tanned torso was beaded with moisture, glistening in the light of the room. “Diane. How are you, Missy?”

“Fine, thank you.” She averted her eyes.

“Good to hear it. If you need anything, let us know.”
His offer was in all sincerity.

“Thank you.”

“Babe, do you know where my pitch fork got off to?”
Water from his hair dripped down his body.

“Your comb was in the blue case this morning.” She
widened her eyes at his body, raising her eyebrows.

“Thanks.” He gave her a dimpled grin, blowing her a
kiss.

Alexis grimaced as Ty disappeared into the bath,
closing the door. “Modesty was never one of his strong
suits. At least he’s wearing a towel. I saw one of his early
publicity shots. He was wearing a strategically placed
orchid.”

The two women laughed before Diane realized that the
second shower had stopped. Panic crept up on her.

“You know, I think I’ll go down and get Jon and
Jordan’s things and come back.” She stood, collecting the
bag.

“How about I get Ty and Geoff’s things and set them
out for you?” Alexis offered, noticing the uneasiness on
Diane’s face.

“That would be good of you.” Diane smiled her thanks,
knowing that Geoff could walk out of his room at any
moment. She wasn’t ready to face him. “I’ll be back in a
few minutes.”

Alexis opened the door, allowing Diane to slip out.
Once in the hallway, Diane took another deep breath to
calm her nerves.

* * * *

Geoff took his time getting dressed, not in the mood to
go to the after show festivities. He wanted to sit in his

room, alone, and sulk. While drying his hair, he glared at his reflection.

“What kind of a heartless bastard are you, anyway? How could you take advantage of her like that? You knew she was vulnerable.”

He thought back to their encounter in Plymouth. She said then that she felt vulnerable. He remembered her hands on his chest, her body pressed to his. How good she felt and tasted. That would have been the ultimate intimate encounter if they hadn’t been interrupted. Now that he apparently had a second opportunity, he couldn’t remember any of it.

He put the situation out of his mind most of the day. He was too busy to dwell on it after Nigel and Brian finished chewing him up. He concentrated on the show he had to do. Now, regret and guilt rolled in to torment him. He felt sick. Drinking didn’t appeal to him tonight. He didn’t want to have to avoid the variety of women that would be there, each hoping to come back with him. He tried not to think about Valerie. When she found out, it would mean the end of their relationship. It was amazing how one drunken night could change the course of an otherwise perfect life.

As he grasped the knob of the adjoining door, he heard voices. He stopped to listen. Alexis was telling someone about the orchid shot Ty had done five years ago. Geoff thought that the photo was a bit much at the time, not willing to be photographed in less than Speedos, or nude in a bubbling hot tub, himself. Ty was totally uninhibited. That orchid shot turned out to be most popular over the years, reprints selling by the thousands to this day. It re-enforced the bad boy image that the management had thought up. Elsbeth screamed for months over that one.

There was a laugh. Diane. Geoff's heart thudded in his chest. He leaned against the door, pressing his forehead to the wood. Was he ready to face her? Not really. This morning, she acted more hurt than angry. It wasn't as if he could take her in his arms, apologize, telling her everything would be all right.

He'd shredded her dress and tied her to the bed with her own scarf like a slave, and what ever else he might have done. How could he have humiliated her like that? He'd never restrained a woman. He'd thought about it a time or two, when some skirt got out of control, but didn't think he would actually do it. Why did it have to be her? He wished that he could remember.

He could hear her moving to the door. He glanced at his stage clothes in a heap beside the bed, deciding to straighten them, leaving them folded on the bed before returning to the door. He took a deep breath before pulling the door open. Alexis was closing the door to the hall. She smiled at him. Diane was gone.

Chapter 8

Crystal poked at the basket, perusing the choices. Nothing looked nearly as inviting as the treat her eyes had received before Brian showed up. She pushed the basket back, finding a planner peaking out from under it. She pulled the book out, browsing through it. It was the ShadowsForge official itinerary. What a fortune she could get for a copy of this little item. Knowing when, where, and how the band would be traveling, where they would be staying, from now until the end of the tour? Some people would pay a lot for that kind of information.

She heard the door opening behind her as she returned the small volume to the table.

Jordan wore dark dress slacks, socks and shoes. He had a towel that he was running briskly over his hair and down his chest as he walked toward her.

“See anything you like?” Jordan sat on the back of the sofa.

“I saw something that looked good,” she said with a sly grin. “But I’ll save it for later.”

“Hmm. Are you coming with me to the party?”

“Am I allowed?” Crystal thought how great it would be to be seen in public with ShadowsForge.

“If you’re with me, you’re allowed. I’ll have to spend some time with some other people while we are there,

though. Promotional stuff; contest winners, that sort of thing. Would you mind?" He draped the towel around his neck.

"No problem. I'll find something to do while you mingle." She grinned in anticipation.

Standing before the mirror at the dresser, he combed his hair back. He dried his neck once more, laying the towel on the dresser.

"Great. Then we can come back here for some peace and quiet. Get to know each other better." He turned to his closet, pulling on a silky white dress shirt. He buttoned the lower half before tucking it into his slacks. "Jon. You coming?"

A voice from the other room called back. "Not without a skirt in here. I don't do solos."

Jon walked out of his room, dressed in white jeans, sneakers and a white denim jacket. He wore no shirt, as was his habit. Crystal knew from the many pictures she had collected over the years that he rarely wore a shirt, and when he did it was usually hanging open. It was her opinion that a body like his shouldn't be hidden beneath material anyway. Obviously, he thought so, too. He had dried his hair, making it soft and full. He and Jordan were such a contrast. One was extremely formal, the other one extremely casual.

"Looks like I get to go to a party with the two best dressed bad boys." Crystal glanced back and forth between the two.

"Sorry, Jon, this one's mine." Jordan held his hand out to her. She took it, walking around the end of the sofa to his side.

"I wouldn't think of cutting in on your skirt, J.C." Jon gave Crystal a knowing look. "Just don't leave any doors

open for her to wander. She might go shopping.” He winked at Crystal. “By the way, how did you enjoy the show?” He glanced from his room to her, raising one eyebrow for a moment before opening the hall door.

* * * *

Diane finished her rounds, heading down to the laundry located in the basement of the hotel. She carried one bag of clothing and one of detergents, spot removers, her sewing kit and various items needed to keep the hard worked clothes in the best possible condition.

She tossed the bags on top of one washer, opening the two machines on either side. She started the waters, dissolving the detergent before dumping out the clothes on the floor to separate them into loads. As she picked through, tossing the white items into one machine, colors into the other, she found a folded piece of hotel stationary. She leaned against the washer, wondering if she should open it. It had no markings on the outside to indicate where it had come from or who had written it.

“Well, I can’t return it if I don’t know whom it belongs to,” she said aloud to herself. She opened the paper. The printing was very neat, very clear and addressed to her. She was surprised to see the heading, “Diane”.

“Okay, someone is displeased with their laundry. Can’t be too much starch in the underwear. None of them wear any.” She read on:

Diane,

What he did was wrong. Don’t let him get away with it. Make him pay. If you don’t want him in jail, take him for all you can. He can’t be allowed to walk away from this one. I’m behind you all the way.

Brian

Diane was surprised but comforted by the message. As she thought about it, she was filled with multiple emotions. She was thankful for the support, but feeling very wrong about the whole situation. How was she supposed to decide what she should do, if anything? Her stomach burned as she kept thinking about it. She folded the paper, pushed it into her pocket and returned to her sorting.

* * * *

"That was so cool." Crystal flopped on the bed as Jordan closed the adjoining door to muffle the sounds coming from Jon and What's Her Name in the next room. Crystal kicked off her shoes, pulling her feet up to sit Indian-style. Jordan freed the tail of his shirt, unbuttoning the cuffs and the front.

"Glad you enjoyed yourself." He left the shirt hanging. "I was afraid you'd be bored."

"How could I be bored with you there?" She tilted her head as she watched him.

"You're good for my ego." He sat beside her. "You say the things that I want to hear."

"I say what I feel."

"Crystal." He held out his hand to her. She placed her hand in his. He stroked it, eyes down, as he continued. "Would you like to spend some time with me?"

"I thought I was."

"I mean, would you like to travel with me a bit. Say for the next couple of weeks or so. See some of your country with me?" He brought his eyes slowly up to meet hers.

"You're kidding." There was that excited panting again.

"I'd like to get to know you better. Is that all right with you? Can you get away?"

Crystal threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tight. Jordan wrapped his arms around her, feeling her warmth against his body. Crystal released him to look into his face. A serious expression came over her. She leaned forward, pressing her lips to his. He received her, closing his eyes, tasting her sweetness.

She slipped from his arms, lounging on her side, propping her head on her hand. "How well would you like to know me?"

Jordan let his gaze travel over her body. *Oh, very well, but not yet.*

"I thought we'd try something that I don't get the opportunity to try very often." He shifted, trying to tame the stirring he felt inside.

"Is it something erotic?" She raised an interested eyebrow.

"Not really." He laughed. "How about we try talking for a while."

Jordan could see a slight change in her attitude. Not what she expected, obviously. Jordan wanted to give it a go anyway.

"I want to explain something to you." He lay on the bed to stare at the ceiling as he spoke. "I prefer to make a friend of a girl before anything else. I'm not like Geoff Richards or Jon Wiles. I never could be. They pick up a girl; use her for a few hours, all the while making her think she really has something going. But once they turn out the lights, it's over as far as they're concerned. They got what they wanted. She won't know it until morning when they tell her she has to leave." He paused to look at her, checking her reaction to his words.

"I see. Isn't that what some girls that follow you around want? Just one night?"

“Sometimes. And sometimes they think if they get in for one night, they will be permanently attached to the band. But that isn’t true most of the time.” He searched her face, trying to read her thoughts. “Most women wouldn’t be able to handle being permanent with one of us. It’s not an easy life, as much as others think it is. It’s traveling constantly, not having time to relax or to be ill. Not seeing your family, not being in the same place for more than two or three days—usually not that long. It’s traveling around the world, but only seeing the inside of your hotel room, the venue, or a limo. It takes a special woman to deal with the fans and no privacy. Ty is so lucky to have Alexis. His first wife, Elsbeth, couldn’t handle it. She made him miserable over it. That’s when he wrote most of the lyrics for the No Promises, No Pain album. It was great for the band, but it was hell on Ty. It tore him up.”

“So...are you telling me not to get my hopes up?” She reached out to caress his face.

“No, I’m telling you that I want to know you better before it’s a bedroom thing. That’s Geoff or Jon, not me. I hope it’s not you, either.”

Crystal let his words roll around in her mind before she responded. “So, do I sleep on the couch?” Her words were tinged with a shade of disappointment.

Jordan broke into a laugh. “Not unless you want to. I don’t want you to think I’m strange. You can sleep here if you like.” He patted the bed.

“So you’ll be on the couch?” She grinned.

“Uh, no. I pay for the room.” He smirked, playfully swatting her on the hip.

“Okay. Cool.” Her face told Jordan that she was still puzzled. “If that’s the way you want it, fine by me. Which side do you want?”

Chapter 9

Crystal awoke, stretching before she looked around. The room was dark, owing to the heavy drapes. It was necessary for the band, as they didn't usually get to sleep much before five a.m. Therefore, they would sleep later than most people.

She looked over, seeing Jordan asleep beside her. She watched his face, completely at peace as he slept. He had a childlike quality to his features but, oh, there was nothing childlike about that body. It was, however, surely well worth waiting for.

She had hoped to tempt him when she stripped before getting into the bed. She was sure he couldn't really sleep beside her, both of them nude, and not want to do something about the fire that was doing a slow burn in her. He had pulled her against him, wrapping her in his arms, her head on his shoulder. She had stroked his chest, playing with the curls, hoping he would give in to her. At last, he had fallen asleep, leaving her to wonder if he really was a bit strange.

As she watched him now, in the dim light of the early morning, she was unable to resist reaching over to caress his brow. Without opening his eyes, he gathered her to him, fitting her back to his chest, folding her in his arms. He

smoothed her hair, caressed her arm, conforming his body to hers before settling back to sleep. It was difficult not to respond to his body. But it was evident that this was all Crystal could expect—for now. She could wait. Closing her eyes, she fell back to sleep.

By the time she woke up again, the room was bathed in sunlight. The drapes had been thrown open and Jordan was packing his suitcase. He was dressed only in a pair of jeans and socks.

“Morning.” He folded up his dress trousers, dropping them into his suitcase on the stand at the foot of the bed. “Sleep well?”

“Very well. And you?” Crystal sat up, allowing the covers to pool around her hips. She stretched, hoping to entice him to return to bed. She watched his gaze wander over her exposed body.

“Good.” He walked into the bathroom without further comment.

“Hmm.” Crystal threw back the covers, pulling on her clothes that lay on the chair beside the bed. She was dressed by the time Jordan returned. “So, what do we do now?”

“I have the morning meeting with Nigel and the others. You need to go home and pack. The bus leaves in,” he paused to look at his watch, “about three hours.” He pulled a fifty-dollar bill from his pocket, handing it to her. “Get a cab home and we’ll pick you up on the way out. Is that all right?”

Crystal looked at the money. “Sure. I’ll be ready.” She pushed the bill into her pocket. “Do you need a receipt?”

“No. Why would I?” He retrieved his jacket from the closet, laying it into the suitcase. He closed the top, taking care to secure the latches and locking them, pocketing the

key before hauling the large bag up, setting it on the floor by the door.

“Taxes? I don’t know.” She shrugged.

“That’s walk around money.” He stepped into the bathroom, zipping his sports bag closed, stacking it on top of the suitcase. “Are you hungry?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” She combed her fingers through her hair, trying to get it under control. Jordan retrieved a brush from the sports bag, handing it to her.

“We can eat before you go.”

“Great. I’ll be right with you.” She closed herself in the bathroom.

Jordan smiled. She was really trying to hook him, but she wasn’t upset that he hadn’t made love to her. That was a good sign. He couldn’t say that the desire was not there on his part. He was surprised that he had been able to ignore the wants of his body with her beside him. She was very alluring. *Let’s see how long she can hold out. Or how long I can.* Jordan opened the door, closing the sports bag and hefting the suitcase out into the hall, leaving the door open.

He could hear Jon having some trouble with What’s Her Name. Muffled words could be heard coming from beyond the closed door. It escalated, turning into a high-pitched whine and ending with the crash of something glass. The adjoining door was jerked open and Jon, wearing only his trousers, dashed out, laughing and ducking as a beer bottle flew out after him. It missed its target, shattering against the wall behind him.

“You bastard,” What’s Her Name snarled from the shadows beyond the darkened door way.

Jordan crossed his arms over his chest, leaning on the back of the sofa, watching while staying clear of the battlefield.

“That’s not what you called me last night, doll.” Jon laughed, ducking a second bottle before leaning into the hallway. “Security.”

Two shadows dashed in as Jon stepped out of the way. He and Jordan watched security escort What’s Her Name out. Jon casually closed the door. They could hear her screaming obscenities and making mortal threats against Jon’s anatomy all the way to the elevator.

“Sorry about the intrusion. She wouldn’t let me near the door.” Jon pulled his tousled hair back from his face.

“Bit of trouble, that one?” Jordan turned Jon to look at his back. “I like the war wounds. Colorful. Was she strip-mining?”

“Yeah, and it’s painful today. Didn’t notice it last night.” Jon turned to the mirror. “I’ll be scarred for life from that one. She was wild.”

“I can see that. At least this one got dressed before they had to take her out.” Jordan shoved Jon toward his room. “Get packed.”

“Right.”

Crystal emerged from the bathroom, handing Jordan the brush. “What was all the shouting about?” She sat on the sofa, pulling on her shoes.

“Jon’s date was less than co-operative about leaving. Like I told you.” Jordan shrugged. He walked around the room, checking one last time for anything he might have forgotten. He slipped on his sneakers and took his lone shirt from the closet, pulling it on as he returned to Crystal. “Ready to eat?”

* * * *

Jordan and Crystal found a large buffet and dining table set up in the Synclair suite. Crystal appreciated the way the band made her feel instantly accepted as they ate together.

“Everyone, this is Crystal.” Jordan introduced her as they sat down at the table after they had filled their plates.

“Hi, Crystal.” A chorus of voices rang out in unison.

“Sounds like an AA meeting,” she commented, looking around the table. “Hi, my name is Crystal and I’m a ShadowsForge-aholic.”

“Crystal is going with us for a couple of weeks,” Jordan announced. “Any complaints?”

“Good.” Jon slid into the chair beside Crystal. “Keep the boy out of trouble and try to hammer him. He’s a pain in the ass when he goes without for too long.” That brought a round of laughs.

“At least I didn’t have to have her dragged out this morning.” Jordan smirked.

“Jon, did you disappoint another one?” Geoff looked up from his plate. “Boy, you need training. I’ve told you, get her out the door before you let her down.”

“Right. I’ll try to remember that. Uh, Nigel?”

“Humf?” Nigel looked up from the meal he was devouring like a starved animal.

“Accounting will have to deal with glass in the wall.” Jon grinned at the manager. “In two rooms,” he added after a bite of bacon. “The headboard broke off again.”

“I’ll let them know.” Nigel answered without missing a beat or, in this case, a bite.

Crystal leaned over to Jordan. “Does that happen all the time?”

“With Jon, yes. Nigel and accounting’s used to it.”

“Hmm.” Crystal spent the rest of the meal listening to the friendly banter and teasing, feeling as if she were sharing a meal with one big happy family.

Chapter 10

When they finished eating, Nigel stood at the head of the table. “Miss Crystal—uh, you are a miss, right? Don’t want Cantrell taking someone’s wife on the road.”

Crystal felt the blush warm her face as all eyes turned her way. “Miss,” she was able to squeak out.

“Good, well, welcome to the tour. I hope you have a good time. Of course, Jordan is smiling this morning so it looks like you already had a good time.” Wolf calls and hoots followed the remark until Nigel called them to attention once more.

Jordan stood, taking Crystal by the arm, prompting her to stand. He led her to the door.

“Don’t take anything they say personal. They like to joke. You need to get your things together.” He opened the door as he gave her instructions. “We’ll be by to collect you in about two and a half hours.”

“I don’t want to leave.” She pouted. “I don’t want to miss anything.”

“You won’t miss anything for the next two weeks if you get yourself ready to go,” Jordan pointed out.

“You’re right.” Her pout changed to a smile. “I’m having so much fun.”

Jordan gave her a stern look. "Do I have to call security to remove you, miss?" He gave her a peck on the lips.

"No, sir. Don't forget me." She stepped out the door.

"How could I," he said to himself, watching her walk to the elevator.

* * * *

Crystal ran to her bedroom, pulling her suitcase from the closet, throwing it on the bed. She opened it quickly, turning to her closet.

"Oh, damn. What am I going to take?" She bit one nail as she stared at her clothes.

"Take where?"

Crystal spun around to face Drew.

"None of your business." She turned back to the closet.

"I'm sorry about yesterday." There was a meek sincerity in his voice. He leaned against the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. "Can we give it another try?"

"I don't think so." Her voice had a happy lilt to it. She pulled several pairs of jeans from hangers, throwing them in the suitcase.

"You didn't come home last night. Where were you?"

"Concert," was all she offered, as she pulled her overnight case from the closet floor, heading into the bathroom. She filled the case with anything she thought she might need in the next two weeks, continuing to ignore Drew, who watched her in silence.

After a few minutes, Drew pulled himself up, his hands at his sides. The next time Crystal breezed past him, he grabbed her by the arm.

"Damn it, would you talk to me?" He glared at her.

"We have nothing to say. You told me I'd be a 'nobody'. I told you I'd make a name for myself. I'm going

to prove it starting today. I'm leaving with the band." There was an unmistakable defiance in her voice.

"No. You're not," he told her point blank.

"You can't stop me." She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Watch me." He trapped her roughly against his chest. He clamped his mouth over hers as she struggled. Crystal fought only for a moment before she surrendered to his embrace. She wrapped her arms around his neck, returning his kiss with fervor. He scooped her up, dropping her on the bed, bouncing the suitcase to the floor. He knelt on the bed beside her. Crystal reached up to rip open his shirt, pushing it from his shoulders as he descended on her.

* * * *

"The white two story," Jordan instructed. Gary maneuvered the long silver bus down the residential street with ease, opening the door.

"You know we're taking a chance here," Brian pointed out. "What if she called all of her friends? Could be trouble."

"What if she did?" Jordan stood on the step by the door as they approached the house. "Might cost you a few signatures. She's worth it."

"She'd better be." Jon slumped low in the seat with sunglasses on. "We have no security here, y'know."

"Pull up here, Gary. I'll go get her." The airbrakes hissed and Jordan was out the door before the bus had come to a stop. He jogged to the guesthouse, rapping on the door. Crystal opened it with a jerk, startling Jordan.

"Are you ready?" He smiled.

"Let's go." She hefted her suitcase out the door. Jordan took it so she could grab her overnight bag from the table. She glanced at the bedroom, quickly pulling the door closed behind her as she stepped out into the bright sunlight. Her

hair was damp from a shower and Jordan caught the scent of vanilla. She headed toward the bus.

“Aren’t you going to lock up?” Jordan asked.

“No. A friend of mine will be staying here while I’m gone.” She pushed him toward the street. “Let’s go.”

They hurried to the bus as Gary opened the luggage compartment. Jordan tossed her bag in and she placed the overnight case beside it. Gary secured the hatch, following the two up the steps before they drew too much attention in the quiet neighborhood.

Jordan swung into the vacant front seat, Crystal sliding in beside him. Gary closed the door and clipped on his seatbelt, pulling the bus into gear at the same time. As they pulled away from the curb, Crystal glanced out the window behind Jordan, catching a glimpse of Drew standing in the guesthouse doorway, a sheet held around his hips.

Chapter 11

Grand Rapids, Mi.

“What’s the next stop?” Crystal watched out the window as they rolled along Interstate 94.

“Grand Rapids, Michigan,” Jordan told her. “Have you ever been there?”

“No. I’ve never been outside of Chicago.” She shifted more comfortably in her seat, watching as Jon shed his jacket. “This is great.”

Jordan smiled. The hours on the bus had always been long for him. Unless he and Jon got into a furious jam session, it seemed to take days to get from one gig to the next. With Crystal beside him, though, he didn’t care how long it took.

Jon went to the back, returning with two acoustics. “Duel?” He handed one to Jordan.

“Draw.”

Jon ripped into a fiery riff that Crystal had never heard. His fingers danced so quickly on the fret board, they were a blur. Jordan answered with a spicier rendition of the same piece.

Crystal sat listening intently while they practiced, enjoying every note of the private concert. Ty joined them

in an improvisational jam session while Geoff disappeared into the back to sleep. Brian kept time by pounding on the seat with his hands. With acoustic guitars, the make shift percussion and Ty providing the voice, the ShadowsForge sound came through. In no time, the bus was rolling up Interstate 69.

Jordan noticed that Crystal spent time studying each musician with a reverence that he found amusing. As they practiced, she was especially intent on keeping her eyes on Jon as he tried to match Jordan lick for lick.

"He's good, isn't he?" Jordan nudged her, drawing her eyes from the muscles in Jon's body.

"Looks like it." Crystal licked her lips as Jon glanced at her. She smiled, turning her full attention to Jordan.

* * * *

"Geoff?"

Geoff awoke to the thrumming of the road beneath the wheels. It sounded like Valerie calling his name. He felt a twinge of guilt as he looked around for her. Sitting up, he pushed aside the curtain, looking forward. Valerie wasn't there. Puzzled, Geoff dropped the curtain, turning over to return to his pillow.

"Geoff?" Valerie knelt on the bed beside him. He was startled to find her so close, not knowing how or when she had gotten there.

"Val." His heart thumped hard in his chest. "I missed you."

"That's not what Nigel told me." She wore a sad look in her eyes that raised a lump in Geoff's throat.

"What did Nigel tell you?" He raked his fingers through his hair, hoping that the manager hadn't told her everything. "You know how much he likes to embellish things for the sake of publicity."

“He told me that you attacked someone. That you took a girl to your room and forced her.” A tear escaped, making its way down her silky cheek.

“Do you believe him?” Geoff tried to play it off. He wasn’t exactly sure what he had done, making it difficult to defend himself. He’d puzzled for the last day and a half, trying to remember but nothing was clear. Now his foolishness was causing the lady he loved heartache, and he didn’t know what to do about it.

“You lied to me.” Her voice was low, ominous. “You loved me.”

“I do, baby.” He tried to reach out to her. He ached to hold her, to show her how much he loved her. She pulled away, anger clouding her blue eyes.

“You don’t know what love is.” She spat the words out, point blank. “You sing about it every night but you have no idea what it is or how it works.”

Geoff could see her rage building. He pulled himself to his knees facing her, trying again to reach for her.

“Let me explain...”

“NO.” She pulled a butcher’s knife from the edge of the mattress. Geoff felt the blood drain from his face. She stood on her knees, wild eyes targeting him. “You love me. No one else.” She slashed the knife at him, barely missing his chest as he fell back.

“Val, listen to me. I drank too much. I was missing you.” He tried to explain, afraid to run; afraid she would stab him in the back if he attempted it. The words poured in a frantic string from his lips. “I don’t know what happened. I didn’t even know who she was until morning.”

The words rolled off his tongue with the hope that she would understand how drunk he was. If she knew that he wasn’t coherent enough to know what he was doing,

perhaps she would forgive him. He wanted to make a go of this relationship, hating himself for making such a mess of it.

"I was too drunk to walk straight so I had someone help me to my room. I don't remember anything after that. I swear. If I did anything to her, I don't remember." His heart tried to pound its way out of his chest.

"You swear that you didn't know it was Diane?" Valerie lowered the blade to a less threatening angle.

"I swear it, baby." Geoff stood on his knees, spreading his arms in surrender, hoping she would believe his sincerity. He felt even worse that she knew it was Diane.

She worked his words over in her mind.

Her eyes softened and the hint of a smile touched her lips, inviting him to relax.

"No." Lightning crackled in Valerie's eyes. "I don't share."

Before Geoff could react, Valerie lunged at him blade first. He panicked as he felt the blade slice along his ribs. He threw himself backward through the partition.

* * * *

Geoff thumped to the floor of the bus. He crawled away from the partition before he pulled himself to a sitting position, searching his side for blood. Nothing. He looked forward. Jon, Ty and Crystal stared at him as the music faded.

"What are you doing back there?" Jon laughed. "That bed not big enough for you by yourself? You need a skirt to hold you in?"

"Funny, Wiles." Geoff smirked as he closed his shirt. "Are we there yet?"

"About another hour," Ty informed him.

Geoff picked himself up, carefully opening the curtain. He looked at the empty bunk before climbing back in, ignoring the laughter behind him.

* * * *

"The package has arrived." Gary spoke into a small hand held FM radio.

"You're covered," came a crackling reply. "Shadows are ready. It's going to be a close game."

"At the pitch." Gary returned the radio to a clip on the console, cranking the wheel to bring the long silver bus into a driveway. The bus swayed as it turned, making Crystal grab a hold of Jordan.

"Don't worry. It does that on the driveways. It would take a lot for it to go over." He patted her hand in assurance as he packed his guitar away, preparing for arrival.

Jon picked up an empty soda can, stood in the isle and threw it with all of his strength at the partition. The can struck and clattered to the floor.

"What are you doing?" Crystal asked; her eyes swept over his muscled stomach.

"Waking up the bear." Jon smiled down at her before returning to his seat.

"The bear?" She hadn't finished her question before there was a roaring from behind the curtain that separated the bunk from the isle. "Oh."

The curtain parted and a tousled, bare-chested Geoff put his feet out on the floor. He raked his fingers through his hair, stretched and yawned. "We're there?" He rubbed the sleep from his eyes as the bus rocked through another turn.

Gary swung the bus around the building to the stage entrance. Security men opened a gate, allowing Gary to pull through. He moved the metal behemoth slowly

through the fence, trying not to run over any of the excited fans that slapped the sides of the bus and called out to the band. The Shadows did their best to close the gate as Gary gunned the bus forward toward the side entrance. Everyone was packing away their gear, preparing for the rush of activity that met them at each new venue.

Alexis touched up Ty's hair. Jon packed away his guitar and pulled on his jacket, tossing his hair a bit. Geoff had disappeared into the restroom. Brian always seemed ready for anything. He was the first one up front as the others made ready for their public.

Crystal noticed Alexis and Ty, wondering if she should do the same for Jordan. "Should I be doing something for you?"

"You've made the trip more enjoyable. That's enough." Jordan squeezed her hand. "Now the fun begins. Can you run?"

With a puzzled look, she echoed, "Run?"

"Yeah. We have to do that sometimes." He smiled. As if on cue, there was a tumult of sound as the bus hissed to a stop. Jordan looked out the side window. "Here we go," he announced.

"Geoff. We have to go now," Ty shouted, taking Alexis by the hand. The band members crowded to the door, Gary in the lead, radio in hand.

A wide-awake Geoff joined the group. "Let's do it."

Gary keyed the radio. "Play ball."

Jordan took Crystal by the hand, smiling at her as Gary clipped the radio to his belt and opened the door. In a rush, the band disembarked, hitting the ground running. As the band cleared the bus, two Shadows boarded, securing it. Crystal glanced toward the sounds of shouts and footfalls to

see a huge group of people, mostly girls, thundering toward them.

“Gate crashers,” Jordan said, laughing. “We have to beat them to the door.”

Crystal turned her attention to the set of steps leading up to the door. They were on the far side of several vehicles. She tightened her grip, afraid of losing her hold on his hand. Several security men were posted along the route they ran, but there were obviously not enough of them to stop the throng closing in.

Taking the steps two at a time, Gary reached the door first, holding it open as ShadowsForge dashed inside. Once they all made it, the Shadows from along the route made a human barricade as the gatecrashers converged on the steps.

Crystal panted to catch her breath.

“I wondered why a dressy guy like you would wear sneakers. Wow. Now I know.” She huffed.

“That was only step one.” Jordan hugged her. “After the sound check, we need to get to the hotel. Geoff and Ty are doing a little promotional at a radio station, then we need to get back here again for the show tonight.”

Crystal stared at him in disbelief. “You do this all the time?”

“Depends on the fans. Fun, huh?”

Crystal rolled her eyes. As Jordan laughed at her reaction, he took her hand, pulling her down the corridor where the rest of the band had gone.

Chapter 12

Montreal, Canada

Crystal stayed at Jordan's side while keeping her eyes on Jon every chance she got. Because Jon and Jordan usually shared a suite or at least had adjoining rooms, she had plenty of opportunities.

Sometimes, it was all she could do to lay silent beside Jordan, watching him sleep while the sounds of passion rolled on like thunder through the night in the next room. It didn't happen every night, but when it did, Crystal imagined herself to be the lucky lady of the night. In little over a week, she regretted her fantasies, knowing that she could expect no relief from the frustration that came with them. What she could expect was warm and tempting flesh pressed against her as she slept in Jordan's arms. Something had to change—soon.

* * * *

Jon found Jordan lounging on the sofa, humming. He went to the bar, pouring out a drink before shoving Jordan's feet off the sofa so he could sit down.

"What's up?" Jon sipped his drink.

"Nothing." Jordan stared at the ceiling.

"Something on your mind?"

“Yeah.”

“A real conversationalist, you are.” Jon sat his glass on the table. “What do you think?”

“I think I’m in love.”

“Thanks for not saying that when I had a mouth full. I’d hate to waste vodka on the carpet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Where is the lady, anyway?” Jon redirected the conversation. Jordan didn’t seem to notice Crystal spent a lot of time checking out every man in the band. Jon thought her loyalty seriously lacking.

“Ladies night out. She was invited to hang out with Alexis and Diane. I think it’s a good thing they get to be friends. She’s only been with me about a week, but I think she’ll be around for a long time.”

Jon rolled his eyes, suppressing a groan. “You need to think about it before you do anything permanent, mate.” Crystal clearly wanted to be making the rounds for a long time. How could he explain without insulting his best friend?

“What do you think of her, Jon?” Jordan sat up, turning his eyes on his friend.

“Doesn’t matter what I think. It’s what you think that counts.” Jon evaded the question. He drained his glass, setting it on the table. “Let’s get a drink and think about it.” He stood, pulling Jordan up by his shirt. “Maybe several.”

* * * *

Geoff sat in a booth in a shadowed corner of the room. He had chosen a bar a block from the hotel, wanting to be away from the others. He drank slowly, his eyes roaming from one woman to the next around the room. He measured each one against thoughts of Valerie. None of them measured up to her. One was too short—the next,

too tall. He found some reason to reject each woman who came into his range of vision.

He smiled into his glass, draining it, raising his hand for the second to be brought. He was content to sit alone. He had left Jon, Brian and Jordan behind. Ty was writing lyrics in the suite. All he needed was his glass and his memories of Val.

With any luck, she'd be joining him in the next week or two. He couldn't wait. She looked perfect, smelled perfect. She even tasted perfect, as he remembered the parting kiss she had allowed him in London.

Yes, he had it all under control. He could sit here enjoying his drink with no problems, no temptations, everything great.

Until they walked in.

Geoff blew out the candle on his table and moved further into the shadow. The waitress brought his drink, wiped the table and collected his empty glass. His confidence faltered as the three women took a table directly across the dance floor from him. They were laughing, having a great time. He was miserable but couldn't leave.

As his eyes searched for the flaws, he immediately dismissed the first two. No question there. The third was impossible to dismiss. Her height was perfect. Her curves were equal to Valerie's. Her hair was soft, brown. He knew all too well that she was more warm and responsive to his touch than Valerie had ever been. Why did she have to be here, so close and so far away?

He sipped his drink, his eyes riveted on Diane. He slumped in the booth as a tall young man moved to her side, motioning to the dance floor. She gave him a kind smile and Geoff could see that she was not sure if she wanted to dance. The guy leaned down, speaking into her ear. She

smiled again, giving him her hand, allowing him to lead her to the dance floor. Geoff ached watching her in that man's arms as they slowly turned, swaying to the music, making their way around the floor.

The music was agonizing. Geoff was relieved when the song was over and Diane walked toward her table. As the next song began, another slow one, the man grabbed her hand, pulling her to the center of the floor. Geoff could see the nervousness in Diane's face as the man refused to let her go. Diane bit her lip, looking toward Alexis and Crystal who were talking, not paying attention. When the man pulled Diane roughly against him, Geoff was on his feet.

Brisk strides carried him to the center of the dance floor where he tapped hard on the man's shoulder with one finger.

The man held Diane captive as he turned to face Geoff. "What the hell do you want?"

"You have my girl." Geoff stared daggers into the man. Geoff stood at least two inches taller. He held out his hand to Diane, not taking his glare from Romeo.

The man recognized Geoff. His lips curled in a nervous smile. "Geoff Richards, right?" He attempted to sound cordial as he released Diane.

"That's me." Geoff pulled Diane to his side.

"Wow, you're awesome," the man sputtered.

"Yeah, I know." Geoff took Diane into his arms. "Go away."

The man slipped away as Geoff continued the dance with Diane, holding her lightly. Not too close—certainly not as close as he would have liked. She was wearing lavender and vanilla again. She smelled so good and felt even better. He could sense her tension as they moved

around the floor. The song would end too soon. He didn't have much time.

"Are you all right?" He looked into her eyes. They held a combination of confusion and appreciation.

"Thank you." She watched him as they moved around the floor. "He was a bit pushy."

"Like me, right?" He felt ashamed at the confession.

"No. You're just—um." She shrugged. "You're Geoff Richards. You take what you want." Her eyes searched his face. "I thought you wanted me." She spoke with uncharacteristic boldness that surprised Geoff, leaving him speechless. "I guess I was wrong." Her words stung.

"Could you at least tell me what happened?" He moved them further from Alexis and Crystal, who were staring open-mouthed at who Diane was now dancing with. He had to take this opportunity to apologize. He didn't know when he'd have another chance. "I'm so damn sorry."

"Because it happened or because it was me?" Her face was emotionless.

"Because I hurt you. I'm sorry because I can't remember. Because, given the opportunity, I should have made love to you proper. I wish I could go back and make it right." The words spilled from his lips, surprising them both. He felt her body stiffen.

"It doesn't matter now." She lowered her eyes, following his lead in silence.

He wanted to kiss her. How could he with Alexis and Crystal watching? Would she even allow him to? He wanted another chance. His mind was in such turmoil that he didn't acknowledge that the song had come to an end. He continued to dance with her, not willing to give her up.

"Geoff." Her voice broke into his thoughts.

“I know.” He reluctantly released his hold on her, taking a step back. “I didn’t want you to go.”

“If you knew, you wouldn’t feel that way.” She walked away, leaving him standing on the dance floor, his heart bleeding.

As she made her way to her table, Geoff stalked off the dance floor. He went to the bar to order a bottle of vodka. He walked back to the hotel, Valerie the furthest thing from his mind.

Chapter 13

The bartender threw Jon and Jordan out at closing time. Jordan was liquored up to the stumbling stage, but Jon was far beyond that. The two had seen Brian leaving earlier with a fresh young thing close to his side. They joked about it, knowing that Brian didn't often entertain ladies after hours.

As they fell into the elevator, two women joined them before the doors closed. Jon and Jordan stood at the back wall, running their eyes over the shapely backsides of the women who kept their eyes on the rising numbers above the door.

Jon whispered, "Do you think they noticed we're here?"

Jordan grinned. "I don't think so. Do you want to get their attention?"

"I wouldn't mind but you're the one that's in love, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Do you think Crystal's back yet?" Jordan looked at his watch. After a few tries to bring it into focus, he gave up.

"Well, if she is, you could make it a threesome." The idea struck them both funny. They burst into laughter.

“She’s been listening to you knock holes in the walls for the last week. She might like it.” Jordan fell against the wall.

“Which one of you wants a threesome?” The voice of one of the women broke through their laughter.

As they regained their composure, Jordan straightened up. “That would be my friend, Jon, here.” He patted Jon on the chest. Jon was hanging on to the rail to keep from sliding to the floor.

“That would have to be me.” Jon nodded toward Jordan. “He’s got a doll waiting in his room already and she don’t act like she’s likely to share.”

One woman turned around while the other hit the button to hold the elevator. As it floated to a stop, Jordan’s stomach lurched. Both women eyed the prospect. Jon tried to stand up straight, having a difficult time focusing. He twisted his hair, curling it behind his ear as he took a better look at each of them.

Through his foggy eyesight, both were medium height. One had dark eyes and dark hair. The other had dark eyes but blondish hair. They moved to each side of him, caressing his chest, down his abdomen and thighs. He wrapped his arms around them for support as they checked him out.

“You think I could get off this ride before you three get too involved?” Jordan moved to the door. “I’d hate to interrupt.”

“How about you drive and keep your eyes on the road.” Jon winked.

“Right.” Jordan released the hold, the elevator rising again. It stopped at the eighth floor where the women had been going. Before the doors could close again, Jordan

stepped out, allowing the elevator to continue on to the tenth floor without him.

He waited until the numbers stopped at the tenth floor. He pressed the call button on the second elevator. In his mind, he could picture arriving at their floor, the doors opening and Crystal standing in the hall finding him with Jon and two bimbos. He decided that if he arrived in a different elevator, he'd be less likely to upset her. After all, he owed it to her to be faithful.

He rode up to the tenth floor, the door opening to reveal Jon lying in the hallway face down. Jordan ran to his friend.

"What are you doing down there?" Jordan laughed, pulling up on Jon's shoulder to roll him over. "What happened to your dates?"

"Damn." Jon pulled himself to sit up against the wall. "They hit me."

"With what?" Jordan sobered, looking up and down the hallway, wondering where the Shadows were.

"I don't know, but it hurt like hell." He pressed his hand to the back of his head, checking for blood. "They pushed me out of the elevator ahead of them, so I started to the door. Before I got to it, I got hit on the back of the head. When I hit the floor, one stuck her knees in my back and the other went through my pockets."

"Did they get anything?" Jordan pulled Jon to his feet and helped him to his door.

"Nothing but about eighty dollars and my dignity." Jon entered his room, sitting on his bed, while Jordan turned on the light. "Where the hell is security?"

"That's what I was wondering." Jordan closed the door. "You want some ice for your head?"

“I don’t think it’s that bad.” He checked for blood again, finding none. “Do me a favor?”

“Yeah?” Jordan put a reassuring hand on Jon’s shoulder.

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“I’m going to find out where security is...”

“Just let it go. I don’t want that kind of publicity, y’know?” Jon looked up at Jordan as he curled a strand of hair through his fingers. “Let it go.”

Jordan saw humiliation in Jon’s eyes. “All right.” Jordan pushed Jon over on the bed, turning toward the door. “Get some sleep. I’m going to lock your door in case they come back.” Jordan turned off the light, locking the door before pulling it closed behind him.

As he walked to his room, the elevator opened. He turned to see two of the Shadows they had picked up in the States step out.

“Where have you guys been?” Jordan walked toward them.

“Mr. Patton sent us to get you and Mr. Wiles out of the bar.” Sabin, a large man with wide shoulders, explained as he and Ben took up their posts along the hall. “He didn’t want anything to happen to you on the way up.”

“Thanks.” Jordan smirked. “Jon’s in his room.” Both Shadows nodded. Jordan returned to his own door. “Goodnight.” He heard their echoed replies as he stepped into his darkened room.

* * * *

Jordan closed his door. There were candles burning along the entry. One was placed on the table, three on the dresser, several more at each side of the bed. He walked through the room to the bath. The door was partially open and more candles lit the bathroom; their reflection in the mirror added to their luminescence.

Jordan pushed open the bathroom door. He found Crystal standing beside the tub wearing one of his white dress shirts. With the flickering candlelight behind her, it was apparent that it was all she was wearing.

“What’s this all about?” He returned her smile.

Without a word, Crystal took his hands, pulling him into the room. She knelt, removing his shoes and socks, setting them to the side. His eyes were allowed to feast on her body, visible as she knelt before him. She stood, taking her time unbuttoning his shirt, pushing it from his shoulders. She kissed his chest, stroked his arms, as she let his shirt fall to the floor.

Jordan had a difficult time not reacting to her attentions, breathing deep to calm the flames that burst into existence within him. She stroked his chest, taking her time working her hands down to the waistband of his trousers. She released the button, then stepped back, turning away.

“Please get in the water.” She waited silently.

For the first time, Jordan noticed the tub full of bubbles.

“This is different.” He stepped out of his trousers and into the warm water. As he slipped beneath the bubbles, Crystal folded his shirt and trousers, setting them aside. She rolled up her sleeves, her eyes on his as she did so. She collected a large sponge and body wash from the counter, kneeling on a folded towel.

Jordan watched her with hungry eyes as she dipped the sponge into the water beside him, running it over his shoulders and down his chest, saturating him. She applied the body wash to the sponge and spent the next twenty minutes taking her time sponging his shoulders, chest; his entire body.

Between the drinks, the flickering candles and her soft touch, Jordan was lulled into dreamy relaxation he had not known in some time. She directed him how to move as she bathed him, water splashing now and then on the white shirt, turning it transparent as it clung to her skin.

“This is great.” He groaned, leaning forward as she worked her way down his back. “I could get used to this.”

“You could.” She rinsed his back. “Lean back.”

He relaxed as she placed the sponge on the counter. She perched on the side of the tub.

“Did you ladies have a good time tonight?” He loved the way her hair glowed in the candlelight. He placed his hand on her thigh, fingering the hem of the shirt.

“Mmm. More since you came back, though.” She smiled. “I wanted to do this the first night I stayed with you, remember?”

“Nigel would have killed me for missing the party.”

“Nigel isn’t here.” She drew her fingers through the water, the thick bubbles covering the surface.

“No, he’s not.”

Jordan wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her into the water on top of him. He devoured her mouth, fanning sparks of desire into a flame beyond control. Their bodies entwined in the warm water, bubbles spilling over onto the floor.

Crystal gasped as they broke the kiss. “We’re getting your shirt wet.”

“Take it off.”

Chapter 14

Jordan was alone at the side of the stage, sitting on a shipping container. He wore a far away, distressed look, not paying much attention to the sound check. Alexis noticed him and crossed the stage, taking care to step over markers and cords not yet secured. She sat beside him, nudging him with her shoulder to get his attention when he didn't acknowledge her presence.

"What's up, J.C.?" Alexis didn't take her eyes from Ty as he ran through a few bars.

"Nothing." Jordan's tone did not convince her.

"Want to try again?" She turned her full attention on him. Jordan looked up at her, their eyes meeting—hers compassionate, his pained and confused. "Trouble in paradise?"

"I don't know. Not sure." He sighed, his confused thoughts showing in his words.

"Where's Crystal?"

"Don't know that, either." He smirked, turning his eyes back to that distant whatever he was staring at before. "She said she wanted to take a walk, do some thinking. She wanted to be alone for awhile, so she said."

"You two are getting kind of serious, aren't you?" Alexis hoped that Jordan had found someone to make him

happy. If anyone in the group needed a sincere woman, it was Jordan.

“I thought so, but last night...” He shrugged.

Alexis frowned at his long silence. “Last night?” she prompted.

“I had her last night.” It was an emotionless statement. “First time.”

“You don’t sound very happy about it.” Alexis’ surprise was evident in her voice.

“She wasn’t really there.” He looked up at her again. “Know what I mean?”

“I think I do.” Her heart was breaking for him. “Where do you think she was?”

“I’m not sure, but if she didn’t want me, she should have said so.” Jordan’s anger bled through his hurt like an open wound. He stood up, making his way to his guitar case, pulling out his Gibson.

Alexis watched him, wishing there was something she could do. As she turned her attention to Ty adjusting his headset, she heard laughter at the side auditorium door. Jon came in with Crystal. They were hanging on each other, both laughing. Crystal was enthralled with Jon. That was clear by the look on her face and her hand on his chest. A sour look spread across Jordan’s face.

“Oh, Lord.” Alexis watched Jordan staring a hole in Jon.

* * * *

Jordan sat up on the edge of the bed, turning his back to her, his body satisfied, the sweat of passion adding a luster to his skin. His mind was in turmoil. He raked his fingers through his hair, leaning his elbows on his knees.

Crystal reached out to caress his back lightly. “What’s wrong, lover?”

Jordan smirked, contemplating if he should tell her what was weighing so heavily on his mind. He decided that he needed to for his own satisfaction. He needed to confront her before he lost the courage, not turning to see her face as he asked the dreaded question. "Does he look like me?"

Her long silence compelled Jordan to turn to her. She looked so good as she leaned casually against the pillows, her hair splayed out framing her beautiful face. She pulled the sheet up, covering the body that he had taken such pleasure in for the past two nights. It was clear now that her heart hadn't been a part of the deal.

Jordan could have taken her sooner, but he had really hoped that he could win her affection. He wanted to fall madly in love, not madly in bed. That was Geoff's gig. Ty had gotten over that mentality, very happily, too. So if Ty could do it, so could Jordan. Not that it was really his way in the first place.

"What are you talking about?" She laughed off his question, trying to achieve an innocent look. "I'm here with you."

Jordan shook his head. "No. You're not with me. Your body's here, but you're thinking about someone else. I was wondering if he looks like me." His heart ached as he asked the question that he really didn't want to know the answer to. "So it follows, if I'm not what you want, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here for you." It was an emotionless statement. "You worry too much."

At tonight's concert, Jordan had watched her as much as he could without being obvious. Her eyes didn't seem to be on him much at all. She was watching Jon; his good mate, Jon. He wondered if Jon had been the one she was

thinking of as she used his body as a substitute. Was Jon the one she was really after?

Jordan consoled himself. *Yeah, Jon's a nice looking guy, crazy on stage. Of course he catches the attention of the audience. That's his job. Why should Crystal be any different than anyone else?* As he sat on the side of the bed thinking, Crystal moved to lean against his back, reaching around to toy with the dark curls on his chest and abdomen. He felt that this was all wrong.

Jordan turned to her, pulling her across his bare thighs, claiming her mouth. He kissed her long and hard, biting her lips, her jaw line and neck attempting to put some of his hurt on her as he accepted the truth. He lay down beside her once more, folding her in his arms. He pulled her body against his, enjoying the warmth of her until he fell into an uneasy sleep.

* * * *

Morning came too soon. The hustle of packing and getting ready would have been a relief from the worry, but the wall that he felt between them as they packed up was obvious and fairly solid.

Perhaps he was only a conquest; maybe that was all she wanted. Now that Crystal had gotten what she wanted, Jon was next on her hit list.

Damn it. It's not supposed to work this way. We're the celebrities. We break the hearts. We use 'em and leave 'em behind. No promises, no pain.

Jordan tried hard to convince himself that he didn't care. He didn't like being a badge of achievement—a trophy. Some girls got a kick out of moving from celebrity to celebrity but Jordan didn't like being used. Sarcasm took over.

ShadowsForge 3: Retaking America

She's probably climbing the ladder of ShadowsForge to reach Geoff. Maybe I should tell her that all she has to do is ask Geoff and he would gladly comply.

Chapter 15

Nigel tapped on his glass at the morning meeting to get their attention.

“ShadowsForge is too popular, boys. We’ve landed a squeeze-in in Semantica.” He grinned at the announcement.

“Great.” Geoff lit a cigarette. “Where’s Semantica? Sounds like somewhere in the Arctic.”

“Not that far away. It’s on the way to New York City. It’s actually in the state of New York. You boys are getting fat and lazy lately so I thought you could use an extra workout.”

Groans emanated from the group.

“You have three days to get to New York City, so I’m sending the stage rigs and crew along ahead of you. You can take Gary, Sabin, and Ben, the equipment rig, a rack of costumes and a detour. It’s a small venue, no merchandise or anything heavy. Just go in, do it and get out.”

Jordan nudged Brian. “It scares me when he makes it sound that simple.” Brian nodded his agreement.

* * * *

“Here we go, again.” Geoff climbed into the bus. He tossed himself into the second row seat behind Gary, beside the window, reclining the back.

Jon stopped at the second row of high back seats, passenger side. “Y’know, if you did something like sleep at night, you could enjoy the scenery along the way.” He slid into the seat, setting his acoustic guitar on the floor, leaning it against the wall with care.

“Sleeping at night is for babies.” Geoff folded his arms across his chest, preparing for the long drive. “Cantrell, get your ass in here. Let’s go.”

Geoff watched Crystal climb aboard, giving her a visual assault as she walked past. He sat up, turning to watch the tight fit of her slacks as she moved to the fourth row on the passenger side, collapsing into the aisle seat.

Two rows of seats behind her, a rolling wardrobe rack was secured to the wall of the bus. On the drivers’ side, there were storage compartments and a kitchenette. Behind the open rack of costumes was the restroom/shower combination and across the back of the bus was a curtained area housing a large bunk.

Jordan climbed in, tucking his acoustic in the first seat behind Gary before flopping down. Geoff noticed the seating arrangement, looking from Jordan to Crystal. *Honeymoon’s over?* Geoff pondered the possibility of hitting on Crystal—that is, if Jordan was through with her. But if he were, he would have given her a one-way bus ticket to wherever it was Jordan picked her up. She wouldn’t be here at all. Then there was Valerie to consider. If she was still interested in him once she found out about Diane. *Well, time will tell.* He settled in, crossing his arms and putting chin to chest, closed his eyes.

“Do you think it would be all right?”

He heard Diane’s voice near the door. It made the hair on the back of his neck bristle.

“No problem. You have work to do. That’s what you’re here for.” Alexis Synclair’s voice followed. “Ty, do you think there’s any reason she can’t?”

“Should be fine,” Ty spoke. “Up you go, then.”

Geoff peeked beneath his thick lashes to see Diane climbing aboard, eyeing him as she moved toward the back of the bus. She carried her sewing kit. Alexis entered next, followed by Ty. As Ty moved past Geoff, Geoff quickly grabbed him by the shirttail.

“What’s Diane doing here?” He kept his voice to a whisper. He had done his best to avoid her since the night they danced, knowing that he made her nervous. Why the hell did Valerie have to leave him alone? If she had been here, nothing would have happened. His emotions were so scattered now. He was horrified at the thought of Valerie finding out about it. What would she think of him? His heart sank at the prospect.

“She needs to sew up your trousers. You split the damned things again jumping from the drum riser. She got them washed last night but didn’t get all of the repairs finished. All of the costumes need a good going over, she said, so I told her she could do it on the way. Since the main costumes are in here, she needs to be here, too, don’t you think?”

Geoff and Ty looked back to watch Diane pawing through the rack. She pulled Geoff’s trousers from the hanger along with several shirts, laying them on the last seat beside her sewing kit.

“Well, if she is going to be here, I’ll go sleep in the back. Three or four hours of us not looking at each other is a little hard to deal with. Y’know, I still think she’s quite a dish.”

“That’s what got you in trouble in the first place.” Ty slapped Geoff on the shoulder, moving on to take the seat beside his wife.

Geoff swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. He watched Diane checking through the rack, noticing how graceful her hands were as she ran her fingers across the variety of materials.

Jordan’s silk shirts and Jon’s few cotton blends. Geoff, of course, wore what ever he came across that was bright and flashy. Ty was into either shiny, leather or shredded. Brian liked loose and light muslin. Eight or ten pairs of leather, denim or spandex trousers were dispersed throughout the rack, a small selection from the stage costumes that were her charges. He watched as she smoothed each garment before moving on to the next. It had been a few shows since she had gone over the lot and these guys were hard on clothes.

Pulling his eyes away from her, he rose from the seat.

Brian leapt aboard, stopping to watch Diane before taking the seat behind Crystal, who was flipping through a magazine while taking alternate glances at Jordan and Jon. He glanced at Diane’s things in the seat behind his.

Geoff headed to the back, not sure how he could get around Diane without her noticing him. Best to just go, he decided. As he stepped behind her, Gary lurched the bus into gear, causing Diane to lose her balance. Geoff reached out, catching her as she stumbled against him. She turned at his touch.

* * * *

Diane found herself pressed against Geoff, looking up into his topaz eyes. Those eyes had a way of melting her, making her feel queasy. Queasy and ashamed. She averted her eyes, pressing her hands against his chest to stand.

“I’m sorry.” She looked down at Ty’s red rayon shirt in her hand. Geoff’s nearness unnerved her and it showed. “I should be more careful.”

“Not a problem.” Geoff spoke softly. “You don’t have to be afraid of me. I promise.”

“Thank you.” She heard the meekness in his voice and it melted her heart. She avoided him at all cost, but her job had to be done, and there would have been no time to really go over the main costumes once they met up again. As it was, it would take her two days to go through them all and she only had until tonight. She didn’t like to intrude on the band bus, but she had no choice.

Now that she found herself leaning against Geoff, an overwhelming feeling of guilt surged through her. When he spoke her name it was with reverence. Geoff Richards hadn’t shown any great measure of respect to any woman in the last six years. It sounded unnatural. She felt as if she had broken the spirit in him.

Diane thought briefly of the day they met on the roof and ended up in the room. His touch, his taste, his scent. The powerful man that he truly was, ready to fulfill both of their desires. She thought about what could have been if they hadn’t been interrupted. Their relationship could have been so much more than the tense, aggravating situation that it now was.

Geoff let his hand linger on the small of her back until she was steady. When she looked up into his eyes, he backed away. He slipped past her, crawling into the back bunk and pulling the curtain closed.

Diane closed her eyes, turning to the rack. When she opened them, she found Brian watching her. He looked as if he were going to say something, but changed his mind. A new wave of guilt washed over her as Brian turned away.

Chapter 16

Jordan stared out of the window, watching the scenery flash by. Three hours of this had become monotonous. Memories of the night before, another uncertain night spent with Crystal in his arms, played through his mind. Yes, she was there with him. She once more made love to him—with him. It was all too obvious that she wasn't thinking of him. He could tell when he looked in her eyes.

Even now, as they traveled, Jordan sat alone. He eyed Crystal sitting toward the back, talking with Diane. Being alone was okay, but she hadn't been beside him since they boarded. He didn't expect her to be there every moment. Besides, he needed time to think about what he wanted to do. He watched her as she talked, smiled, the beauty of her face when she laughed. He had hoped to spend more than only a few weeks gazing into that face.

He had asked her to travel with him for about two weeks, but it hadn't taken long for him to realize that he wanted to extend the original offer. He wanted to have the security and happiness that Ty enjoyed with Alexis. He watched them and it was comforting to see that a musician could find someone sincere.

Jordan was pulled from his thoughts by the tone of a guitar string. Jon, sitting across the aisle, began plinking

away on the acoustic. Jon's slender, talented fingers danced their way through a flamenco style piece and Jordan wondered if Jon's hands would be the next to be caressing Crystal's body—or if they had already.

"Come on." Jon nodded to Jordan. "Draw your weapon and let's have a duel." Jon stood, holding the guitar to his shoulder like a rifle, aiming at Jordan.

"Do me a favor and just shoot me now." Sitting sideways in the seat, Jordan folded his arms as he glared at Jon.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jon was puzzled. "I mean a guitar dual. We need to practice. What's the matter? Don't want to share anymore?"

The comment rubbed Jordan the wrong way, adding to the anger that was building to a boiling point. "Sure, Wiles, I'll share. How about starting with Crystal?"

Alexis looked up from her magazine, her attention drawn to the two sitting in the front. Ty, who was leaning his head on her shoulder, reading the same article, sat up.

"Wonderful," Ty whispered with annoyance.

"What do you think they'll do?" Alexis closed the magazine.

"I don't know." Ty unlaced his arm from hers, prepared to break the two up if need be. "But this isn't the place for a fight."

Jon set his guitar on the seat, a surprised look on his face. "What's up with you two?" Jon's voice held concern.

"She didn't tell you when you were walking about together the other day, or what ever you two were doing? I hoped that she told one of us what was going on."

"I met up with her coming to the auditorium. We were walking down the hall and I tripped on my shoelace. 'Bout killed myself, if she hadn't caught me. We thought it was

funny.” Jon was puzzled. “She asked me why I can bounce all over the stage all night with a guitar but can’t walk down the hall empty handed without tripping. She tied my shoe for me and we came in laughing. That’s all.”

“Like having her at your feet, Wiles? She’s not your servant, y’know.”

Jon narrowed his eyes. His puzzled expression changed to one of annoyance. “I didn’t say she was, Cantrell. She offered to tie my shoe.”

“What else did she offer?”

“Oh, this is getting stupid.” Jon turned to Ty. “Ty, did I miss something here? Alexis?”

“I think we all did.” Ty looked at Jordan. “What’s up, J.C.?”

“Ask Jon and Crystal.” Jordan continued to glare at Jon.

“Ask Crystal what?” came the feminine voice from behind Ty. Crystal stepped forward between Ty and Brian.

“Jordan thinks we have something going on.” Jon turned his attention to her. When their eyes met, he recognized something that he didn’t like. “Aw, damn it, Crystal. You’re with Jordan. Tell him that, would you.” He put his hands on his hips.

“I tried to but he didn’t believe me.” She kept her eyes on Jon, an unmistakable desire flickering in them.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’d believe you, either.” Jon turned to Jordan. “I had nothing to do with this.” He was on the defensive.

“I don’t see you trying to avoid it either. That’s okay. Take her, Jon. Help yourself. I’m done with her anyway. She’s not too bad, once or twice. I’ve had better.”

“You bastard.” Crystal glared. “You think you can hand me off like that? What do you think I am?”

“It’s called roundheel, Crystal. That’s exactly what your kind are for, handing off when we’re done with you.” Jordan’s voice was ice cold. “If you’re planning to work your way up to Geoff, I’ll give you some advice. Just ask him. He hammers anyone. He’s in the back bunk. You could probably take him there right now and get back to Jon later.”

Jordan stepped into the aisle, facing her. “By the way, are you trying for the complete set? Ty is taken, in case you hadn’t noticed. But, hey, four out of five is exceptional. I think that beats any other skirt. Or you could clear it with Alexis for a full set. You’d be the first to do us all.”

Ty and Brian exchanged glances as Jordan continued.

“Ty was always the number one choice. Brian likes a roundheel now and then. He wouldn’t be any trouble for you. Hey, then you can start on the stage crew.” Jordan shrugged indifference but his eyes held unmistakable pain.

“Aw, come on, Cantrell. Don’t talk to her like that.” Jon stressed the point. “You’re only in a paddy because she finished with you before you finished with her.”

Jordan lunged, jabbing a fist into Jon’s face, sending Jon slamming into the seat. Ty and Brian collided getting around Crystal, both up in an instant. Ty tried to get between them as Jon came up swinging. Jon connected a few times with Jordan and once or twice with Ty. Ty shoved Jon toward Brian before grabbing Jordan by the shoulders, pushing him into his seat. Jordan landed dangerously close to Gary’s back before rebounding to his feet, ready to charge Jon again. Ty grabbed the front of his shirt to block him. Brian scrambled to get a hold of Jon, holding his struggling band mate first by the jacket, then by his shoulders.

Ty pulled Jordan by his shirt to face him. "Sit down before someone gets hurt." Ty tried to force him down again.

"You girls want to take your fight somewhere else?" Gary asked over his shoulder, negotiating a curve in the highway.

Crystal pushed around Brian to get to Jon. His lip was split. He wiped the blood with the back of his hand as he glared at Jordan. Ty stayed between them, holding Jordan's shirt with both hands.

"You're an ass, Cantrell," Jon commented. "You give your heart away too easily and blame everyone else when it doesn't work out. No promises, no pain, remember that? It's not just lyrics—it's the code to live by on the road."

"I don't need advice from you, Wiles. Take her and shut up."

Crystal turned to Jordan, opening her mouth to say something. She met a cold glare from Ty. He stared her silent before turning to Jordan.

"Sit down and shut up, Jordan," Ty commanded. "This isn't doing anyone any good. Cool off."

"Go sit with your wife, Ty. You seem to be the only one who can find a faithful woman. Better keep an eye on her so she doesn't end up in Wiles' bed, though. Or if you're so sympathetic, Jon can do Alexis while Crystal does you." Jordan narrowed his eyes. "Or just make it a foursome. You're used to doing two at a time."

"I ought to beat you myself for that one." Ty gave him a shake.

Jon had heard enough. He pulled from Brian's grasp, swept Crystal out of his way, grabbed his guitar and swung it. As he misjudged the angle, the instrument connected first with Ty's shoulder. Jordan saw it coming and turned

his back to the blow. Alexis screamed as the guitar splintered around the two guitarists, pieces flying past Gary, ricocheting off the windshield. The force of the blow pushed Jordan off balance. Ty tried to hold on but Jordan's weight pulled the material from his fingers. Jordan fell on Gary's back, pushing Gary down on the steering wheel.

Ty, Crystal, Brian, and Jon grabbed for any handhold as the bus swerved several times, throwing all of them around. Diane fell into the seat beside Alexis and the two women held on to the seats in front of them. Gary was able to roll Jordan off his back, trying to regain control of the skidding bus but at sixty miles per hour, it was a wild ride.

Jordan fell head first into the floor, sliding down the two steps on his back. His head hit the door, leaving him watching the ground flashing by on the other side of the glass. Instinctively, he wrapped his arms over his face.

Gary stepped carefully on the brakes. The bus left the roadway and careened into a field. A plume of white at the passengers' side front announced a blown tire as the bus lurched sideways, the back swinging around the passenger side. Gary thought he had it under control when the bus swayed at a dangerous angle. It tripped over its flat foot as the rim dug into the earth.

* * * *

Ty realized that the bus was going to go over. He pulled himself down the aisle toward Alexis and Diane. Before he could reach them, the delicate balance of the bus was lost. He saw the ground coming up to meet the windows as he listened helplessly to screams and curses of those around him. He grabbed a hold of the seat on the driver's side, hoping to be able to hold himself up.

Geoff's voice came from the rear of the bus. "What the hell's going on?" He fell through the curtain trying to stand in the aisle.

"We're going over," Ty shouted.

When they hit, Ty fell victim to gravity and momentum, losing his grip on the seat, falling toward the oncoming ground.

Ty's boots hit the side of the bus below window level, but he was unable to keep his balance, collapsing, twisting to land on his back on the broken window. He felt the ground beneath him slipping by. He held on between two seats, feeling something grab a handful of his hair, plucking it from the back of his head. His shirt caught beneath a cross bar from the window, was shredded and ripped from his body. Gravel scraped and scratched its way across his shoulders and back.

Time seemed to move in slow motion as the bus hit and skidded some distance before coming to a creaking halt. The engine raced for a few seconds before it died. A horrible silence followed. Shattered glass had flown all around during the collision with the ground, followed by a cloud of dirt as the bus slid to a stop.

Chapter 17

Ty pulled himself to his feet, looking around the dirt-filled interior of the bus.

“Alexis.”

He waved his hands in the futile attempt to clear the air. He stepped between Jon and Crystal, moving carefully toward the back.

“I’m here,” Alexis called out, panic in her voice.

Ty found her, like a rag doll, hanging by a seatbelt. Ty reached her in an instant.

“Where’s your shirt?”

“It got run over by the bus. Are you all right?”

“Perfect.” She reached for him. “Get me down.”

“You look pretty good up there.” He put his hands on her waist, holding her up. “Unhook that belt.”

Alexis unclipped the seat belt, dropping into Ty’s arms. He stood her on the wall of the bus, hugging her. “I may have to kick Jordan’s ass myself for this.” He looked around. “And Jon’s.”

“Diane.” Alexis pushed away from her husband, looking around the seats.

“Where is she?” Ty looked forward, seeing only Jon lying by the seats. Brian and Crystal were scattered along the edge of the ceiling.

“She was right here. I looked down to clip the belt. When I looked up again, she was gone.”

Ty moved toward the back, taking care not to step on Diane. He found the costumes in a pile of dirt and glass. Diane lay on the costumes, her arms wrapped around her middle section. She was on her side, curled up with her eyes closed. Severe pain distorted her features. Ty knelt beside her.

“Diane.” Ty brushed her hair from her face. “Where are you hurt?”

“My side,” came a breathless reply.

Alexis stood over her husband as he helped Diane to a sitting position. There were no windows this far back but glass and dirt were everywhere.

Alexis knelt beside Diane, wrapping an arm around her friend. “Did you hit something?”

Through the dusty air, Diane saw Geoff crawling across the shower door, letting himself down behind Ty.

“I hit the seat. My ribs. It’s hard to breathe.” She drew a ragged breath, coughing hard from the dirt in the air. “Oh, that hurts.”

“Can you stand?” Ty slipped his hand under one arm. Alexis supported her under the other, helping Ty lift Diane to her feet.

* * * *

Jon lay on a broken window, glass exploded all around him. The back of his head felt wet, gritty. He was wedged between two of the seats. As they went over, he dropped to the floor. When they hit the ground, he slammed backward into the wall, his head hitting the window that was broken by the impact. His legs were forced under the seat that broke loose, wedging him in place.

Crystal tried to hold on to a seat on the driver's side. With the impact, she lost her hold, falling full force on Jon. She tumbled over him, sliding through the glass field where the windows had been, stopping at the ceiling above Jon's head.

"Brian," Jon coughed out. He could see Ty standing farther back. He knew that Brian had to be between them. He found a handhold to pull himself upright, pushing his hair from his face. Once he was upright, he saw Brian. Brian had taken the same ride as Crystal, landing against the ceiling. Jon took several painful steps to get to him.

Brian was face down on the rippled, glass-strewn metal. Jon dropped to his knees, putting his face close to Brian's. He could hear Brian breathing, a wave of relief washing over him.

"Brian?" Jon spoke into his ear. He was rewarded by a groan as Brian pulled his arms under him. "Don't move if you're not ready to."

"Get me off the glass."

Brian pulled his arms under his chest and, with Jon's help, pushed over onto his back. There was a red peppering of bloodspots on the side of Brian's face. Jon pulled his jacket off.

"How're you doing?" Jon knelt beside him, using his jacket to brush the dirt and glass from Brian's cheek.

"I banged up my shoulder. My face hurts. No jokes."

Brian took a minute, moving with caution before he took Jon's arm to sit up. As he did, Alexis and Ty stepped out of the dusty gloom. Geoff followed, supporting Diane.

"Is she okay?" Brian's concern made Jon stand, stepping over Brian, moving out of the way for Geoff to ease Diane down beside Brian. Jon sat down, trying to knock some of the dirt and glass from his hair. Brian took Diane's hand.

“She hit her ribs,” Geoff offered, frowning at the gesture. “She thinks they may be broken.”

“It’s all right—as long as I don’t—breathe.” Diane gave Brian a weak smile.

Brian squeezed her hand. He turned to Geoff who looked dusty but uninjured. “How about you?”

Geoff shrugged. “I went into the bunk. It was there or the loo. The mattress fell before I got tossed back in there.”

* * * *

Crystal moved slightly, giving a weak cry. “Jon?”

Jon felt anger flaming through him. Brian gave him an odd look when he didn’t respond to her.

“We’re all right, Jon. Go check her out.”

“I’d rather knock her out,” Jon muttered as he pushed himself to his feet. He found her lying on her back, the right hip of her slacks in shreds and stained dark red. Her hands were bloody. It was obvious that she had pushed her hair from her face, leaving streaks on her forehead and through her hair. Jon knelt beside her.

“Can you move?” He kept his voice calm.

“I hurt.” She sobbed, holding her hands for him to see.

“Yeah. Me, too.” Did he have to state the obvious? Everyone was hurt. Jon hurt more than the others, knowing he had caused this. She’d helped, but he was the one to swing the guitar. Jordan had...

Jon stood, looking forward at the crumpled metal that had been the front corner of the bus.

“Jordan?”

No response. Jon’s heart thudded in his chest, Crystal forgotten.

“JORDAN.” He shouted again, moving with caution and dread toward the wreckage.

Jordan lay with eyes closed, his body tangled in the mangled metal frame of the door. Gary was beside him, trying to pull the wreckage from around Jordan's legs without moving him.

"Is he dead?" Jon choked on the words.

"He's alive," Gary assured him. "Help me get him loose."

As they worked, Sabin and Ben, who had been following in the equipment rig, appeared at the windshield. They held crowbars, going to work on popping the glass out. Jon and Gary were able to free Jordan but decided not to move him.

By the time the windshield was removed, Alexis, Ty, Geoff, Diane and Brian made their way forward. They all stepped around Jordan and climbed out of the bus as sirens blared from the highway.

Chapter 18

*St. Lukes Memorial Hospital
Semantica, New York*

Jon hobbled down the hallway, intent on signing himself out. He was sore, but x-rays of his hips showed nothing broken. He refused to use the wheel chair as the doctor suggested. He'd been twisted when Crystal rolled over him, jamming him further under the seat. He had several slices on his scalp, leaving streaks in his hair that Ty would have been proud of. What he really wanted right now was a hot shower. Hopefully everyone would be deemed whole and they could get to a hotel to clean up.

"Jon."

He heard his name screamed from a room several doors behind him. He stopped, contemplating if he really wanted to answer Crystal. To see what she wanted. As if he didn't already know. She was crying and making a scene. The entire emergency ward had to know what she wanted.

"Jon, I need you."

Jon felt obligated to help Crystal at the scene of the accident, returning to lift her, carrying her out of the wreckage. He rode with her in the ambulance, doubting

that her injuries warranted transportation. He felt he had done his part.

She kept calling his name, as if his presence could make the situation better. At this point, she was the least of his concerns. He kept walking.

* * * *

Diane was moved to an examination table. She wondered where they had taken Jordan. She saw them wheel him past as she lay on a gurney, waiting in the hallway of the busy emergency ward. She smiled at him, happy to see he was conscious, but he turned away from her and Brian. It was a while before they came to roll her through those same doors, but Jordan was no longer in the examination room where she now found herself.

Brian rode to the hospital with her. She was touched by his concern. He stayed with her, standing in the hallway, holding her hand almost from the moment she was loaded into an ambulance until the attendant rolled her into this room.

A nurse was sorting instruments or something over at the counter. Diane lay quietly, breathing shallow so it wouldn't hurt. After a few minutes, a man in dark blue scrubs entered the room.

"I'm Dr. Larson. How are you feeling?" *Why did doctors always ask that question?* He held the chart that the nurse had written Diane's vital signs on as he pulled up a stool, sitting beside her.

"I'd feel great—if I didn't have to—breathe." Diane took several breaths to get the comment out.

"We'll take care of that in a few minutes. I want to get some x-rays. I need to ask you some routine questions first. Do you have any allergies to pain medications?"

"No."

“Antibiotics?”

“No.”

“Any implants?”

“No.”

“Pregnant?”

After a long silence, Dr. Larson looked up from the chart. Diane looked unsure. As the doctor waited, she shrugged.

“You are, or you don’t know?”

“Not sure.”

“We’ll find out first.” He returned to the chart, continuing down the list of questions. Before long, Dr. Larson drew a vial of blood, sending the nurse to the lab with instructions to wait for the results. “We’ll get those pictures if you come back negative. If not, we’ll tape you up and hope everything is in the right place. You’ll have to use Tylenol for the pain, nothing stronger.”

He helped Diane sit up. He felt her ribs while having her raise her arms and move in several uncomfortable positions.

* * * *

Geoff arrived in the patrol car with Gary. Ty and Alexis were brought by patrol car as well. Ty and Gary were shuffled into examination rooms while Geoff searched out a phone. After Geoff called Nigel, listening to the high-strung manager scream for what seemed to be half an hour, he found Brian in the waiting room.

“What happened?” Geoff looked around the waiting room, wondering what kind of reaction he would get if he lit a cigarette. He patted his pockets, realizing that he didn’t have any.

“Jon and Jordan had a bit of a tiff and we tipped over.”

Geoff smirked. “Is that what you told the officers?”

“No. I told them there was a fight and someone fell on the driver. I didn’t want Gary to lose his permit.”

“That would be a problem.” Geoff slouched in his seat. “What were those two fighting about?”

“The skirt. It got pretty nasty. Jon punched Ty when he got in the way.”

Geoff whistled. “He’s still alive? Ty must be mellowing. Lucky for Jon.”

“Ty didn’t have the chance to pay him back yet. It may still be coming. Jordan made a stupid remark about Jon doing Alexis. Ty may have a busy night.”

“Great. I’ll try not to miss it this time.” Geoff noticed a nurse heading through the doors at the end of the hallway. “Do you think Diane is all right?”

“The bloke in the ambulance thought she broke a rib or two. She was in a lot of pain and so scared she had trouble breathing. Her panic didn’t help.” Brian pulled up the collar of his shirt, wiping the grit out of his eyes.

“Did the doctor check you out?”

“I’ve banged up my shoulder but not too bad. I’m cut a bit, though. Playing might be difficult for a few days.” He grimaced, shifting uncomfortably.

“Nigel is only going to postpone tonight’s show until tomorrow. Are your hands cut up?” Geoff took one of Brian’s hands, looking it over.

“No.” Brian shifted again. “I cut my ass. I’ve got a few stitches. It hurts to sit.” He grinned at Geoff.

“And I was worried.” Geoff dropped his hand in annoyance. “Shh...” he huffed. “I think I’ll go see if I can find out how everyone is.” Geoff stood, looking down the hallway toward the examination rooms.

Jon was coming toward them, trekking slowly. He made his way to the chair that Geoff had vacated, lowering himself into it with some stiffness.

"You do good work, boy," Geoff commented.

"Bite me." Jon slumped in the chair.

"No thanks. I don't like the taste of glass." Geoff smirked at him. "By the way, Nigel said we'll be walking from now on. That's two buses we broke on this tour."

"Tell Nigel to kiss my..."

"Tell him yourself. He'll be here in a couple of hours."

"Great." Jon leaned his head back, shaking his hair over the back of the seat.

Geoff nodded at Brian. "You coming?"

"I think I'll stay here. Come back—let me know."

"Right." Geoff wandered down the hall.

* * * *

Ty lay face down on the examining room table, his arms above his head. Alexis stood at the end of the table, holding his hands as he locked his jaw. The nurse took her time removing bits of glass and chunks of dirt and gravel from the bassist's back and shoulders.

"This has got to be the highlight of the tour," Ty commented through his teeth, his blue eyes dulled with pain.

"You think this is fun?" Alexis smiled, trying to be cheerful. "You have a strange sense of humor."

"You need a strange sense of humor to survive with this bunch." He grimaced, feeling the tug on his skin. It felt like a two-inch nail was pulled from his flesh. "Did I tell you this would be an adventure?" He relaxed when the nurse dropped the forceps in the basin, setting it on the counter.

"You did." Alexis kissed his forehead. "You didn't mention the roller coaster, though."

“That’s all of it,” the nurse announced. She placed several rolled towels at Ty’s sides.

“What are those for?” Ty continued to hold Alexis’ hands, giving her a reassuring smile, before turning to see what the nurse was doing.

Alexis was so concerned about him that she neglected to tell anyone about the belt-burn around her waist. Ty demanded that Dr. Larson check Alexis over before he would allow the doctor to work on him. Alexis had no choice but to submit to an examination.

The good doctor had since moved on, decreeing Alexis was only scraped around her waist. Ty was cut and scraped across his back and had lost a patch of hair on the back of his head that no one would miss except him. Dr. Larson left the nurse to clean and bandage Ty’s back.

“I’ll be cleansing the area with some mild soap and water.” She ran a basin of warm water. “I’ll be as careful as I can. I apologize now for the pain. I’ll give you some pills when we’ve finished.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Ty adjusted his hands in Alexis’ as he turned back to his wife. “I’ll apologize to you now, too, babe.”

“For what?”

Alexis watched the nurse putting a liquid soap on the wet cloth, beginning at Ty’s shoulder. Ty flinched as the nurse made small circular motions with the cloth. He clenched Alexis’ hands hard.

“For this,” he ground out, through clenched teeth.

* * * *

Gary had a few lacerations on his hands but nothing that warranted stitches. His seatbelt kept him from falling on Jordan. As they went over, he watched Jordan’s body flung over, hitting the full length of the door. The door

forced open with him lying on it. Gary was sure that Jordan would end up under the bus, until the ground skidding beneath pushed the door closed. The front corner of the bus crumpled, the glass shattered and the metal curled around Jordan's body like aluminum foil. When they stopped, Gary held on to the window, released the belt and lowered himself beside the twisted wreckage that trapped Jordan.

* * * *

It was the longest twenty minutes Diane had ever spent. After the stretching, though, she relaxed and found she could breathe easier.

"Even if we can't x-ray, everything feels fine. Looks like you've only bruised a few. Nothing feels out of place." He gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll put you in a brace. You'll be sore for a while but you should be fine."

The nurse came in with a slip of paper that she handed to Dr. Larson. Diane held her breath, though not due to pain.

"Congratulations." The doctor smiled happily at Diane. "Looks like you're going to be a mother."

"Perfect." The deep voice startled Diane. She looked toward the door that the nurse had left open when she returned. Geoff stood in the doorway. His face was pale, his eyes locked on her.

Dr. Larson turned. He walked toward Geoff, hand extended. "You must be the father?"

Chapter 19

Jordan stood on the curb leaning against a mailbox, his arm in a sling. His left shoulder was bruised and his back was a mass of open wounds. The left side of his face felt fat along the hairline, down his cheek and jaw. His legs were fairly untouched though a little weak. His trouser legs now had a post-apocalyptic look.

They had taken him to a room, leaving him alone to change into a gown when he refused help. He'd had a better idea. He noticed a side door as they wheeled him through the hallway. He called Nigel to find out what hotel they were registered in. The damned doctor wanted him to stay overnight but he had a show to do. He'd get better his way. Nigel had only given him twenty-four hours to do it. He wasn't about to let them stick him with another needle. As if he didn't have enough aches and pains, the injection the nurse had given him earlier burned like hell.

A cab would take him to the hotel. He didn't bother to tell anyone that he was leaving. He was disoriented and had no desire to talk to anyone, especially Jon or Crystal. He could hear Crystal screaming somewhere down the hall. It wasn't easy for him to ignore her cries—until she cried out for Jon. Jordan took the time to wrap his heart in a thick layer of bitterness as he slipped out the door.

His thoughts were a chaotic mass of painkiller, anger, hurt and concern. He had seen Diane in the hallway earlier. She looked like she was all right but she was lying on a gurney. Brian was with her, holding her hand. What a nice guy. The only nice guy in the bunch, as far as Jordan was concerned. Maybe Geoff. Geoff had stayed clear of Crystal, surprisingly enough. Diane and Valerie hanging over his head was probably the only reason. Jordan watched out the window of the cab, bitterness and a shattered ego eating at him. *Face it. You work with a bunch of skirt chasing bastards.*

Jordan fished around in his pockets until he found a fifty-dollar bill. He handed it to the cab driver.

"I can't break that," the man said in a gruff voice.

"So don't. Keep it."

Jordan pulled his tattered shirt around his body as he staggered into the lobby. The torn and filthy condition of his clothing drew a lot of attention.

"Jerry Clark." Jordan gave his code name to the clerk. He kept his head down, not in any mood to deal with anyone.

The clerk had Jordan sign in. "You're in room 220 with Jim Williams." The clerk held out a key.

"Move me to a single room." Jordan leaned on the desk, his head swimming as he waited for the clerk to make the arrangements.

"I have 208. Would that be satisfactory, Mr. Clark?"

"Fine. Send up a bottle of vodka. No—make it two."

The clerk eyed him with apparent doubt. "Are you sure, sir?"

"Just do it."

Jordan snatched the card key, staggering toward the elevator. His head was spinning and his stomach churned by the time he reached the second floor. His vision blurred as

he opened the door, stumbled in, slamming it behind him. The room was dark and cool. All he had to do was wait for room service. He dropped the card key on the table that separated two chairs. He sat on the side of the bed, painfully pulling off the sling and his shirt. He kicked off his sneakers, hoping for his stomach to settle so he could get a shower. No such luck. Jordan lunged through the bathroom door.

Once his stomach was empty, leaving him weak and light headed, he pulled a towel from the rack, wrapping it around his battered body. He curled up on the tile floor allowing the comfort of unconsciousness to overtake him.

* * * *

Geoff took the doctor's extended hand although he couldn't take his eyes from Diane. She grimaced in frustration, looking away from him.

"And you are?" Dr. Larson interrupted Geoff's shock.

"Geoff Richards. Look, could we have a couple of minutes alone?" Geoff dropped the doctor's hand.

"Sure." Dr. Larson smiled. "This must be a special moment for you two."

"Oh, you don't know how special." Geoff's words were flat, emotionless.

The doctor dismissed the nurse with a nod before following her out of the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

Geoff was frozen to the floor. He didn't know what to say or do. After a long silence, he narrowed down the multitude of questions in his mind to just one.

"Did you know?"

"I thought maybe."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

“It’s not your problem.” Diane refused to look at him, bracing her hands on the table.

“What?” The question hissed from his throat. “Then whose problem is it?”

“What do you care? Leave me alone.” Diane frowned, sliding her legs to the opposite side of the table, turning her back to him.

Geoff walked up behind her, placing his hands lightly on her shoulders. He didn’t try to turn her, only wanting to touch her. She drew a deep breath at his touch, followed by a groan.

“That hurt.” She let it out slowly.

Geoff stroked her arms. “I want to know. If not me, then who?”

“Why are you so concerned about it?” Her back stiffened at his touch.

“Because your brother is going to want to know who to kill. I’m number one on the hit parade.”

Diane turned a harsh look on him.

Geoff continued. “If I can give him a name, it might save my ass. Is he one of the crew?”

“I’ll tell Pete when I’m ready.” She shrugged his hands off her shoulders, staring him down. “You don’t have to worry about it. Now, please, just leave me alone.”

Geoff backed away in surrender, feeling a twinge of disappointment. “All right. I want to be there when you tell him. I don’t want him coming after me with no warning.”

“Why would he if I tell him it wasn’t you?”

“Just in case he doesn’t believe you either, babe.” Geoff returned her glare for several heartbeats before turning to leave. He reached the door, unsure of the mixed emotions he was feeling. “We *will* talk about this later.” He flung the

door open, walking with determination toward the waiting room.

Jon, Brian, Ty, Alexis and Gary looked up as he approached them. At the last minute he decided he needed some fresh air, veering his course toward the outside doors.

Brian stood up, calling out as Geoff passed them. "Hey. How's Diane?"

Geoff reached the door, pausing as it shushed open. He took a deep breath before he shouted.

"Pregnant."

* * * *

"What do you mean, you lost him? You don't just lose a whole guitar player." Jon couldn't believe what he was hearing.

A nurse, Mrs. Hatcher, had come to the waiting room, asking if they had seen Jordan. "Your friend seems to have wandered off." She was apologetic but that didn't make Jon feel any better. "He was to undress and get into the bed. The switchboard shows he made two phone calls, but we don't know what happened to him after that."

"Do you have the numbers he called?" Brian had a feeling he already knew one but wanted to confirm it.

"One was long distance, I believe."

Brian and Ty spoke at once. "Nigel."

Ty took charge. "Brian, you go get Diane. Jon, find out where Geoff went. Alexis, could you see if Crystal can be released? I'll call Nigel to see what J.C. called him for. Meet back here." He kissed Alexis' hand as they all headed in separate directions.

"He's had a pain shot that could have knocked him out," Mrs. Hatcher called after them. "He has a mild concussion."

Ty and Alexis exchanged a quick glance.

“Wonderful.” Ty sighed, shrugging against the gauze bandages covering his back. “This ride just keeps getting better.”

Chapter 20

Jordan groaned, rolling on his back. He blinked his eyes into focus, staring at an unfamiliar ceiling. He was cold, lying on a tile floor hugging a towel. He could hear something. It took a minute to realize someone was knocking on the door. He pulled himself to a sitting position, then to his knees before the knock came again.

“Coming.” It took a lot of energy that he couldn’t spare to call out. It took another minute to successfully get to his feet. He made his way slowly to the door.

“Yeah. Who is it?” He leaned his face against the door, feeling the cool surface on his cheek.

“Room Service, you dolt.”

Jordan unlocked the door, leaving Geoff to let himself in. He crawled onto the bed, curling up on his side.

Geoff closed the door. “You’re supposed to tell someone when you leave a hospital. When they said they lost you, we thought you died.”

He walked to the side of the bed, setting down a bottle of vodka, clicking on the bedside lamp. He cringed. Jordan’s back and left shoulder were a mass of dirt, dried blood and open wounds.

“I did die. Can’t you tell?”

“Damn. Why didn’t they clean you up?” Geoff went into the bathroom, filling the wastebasket with warm water, gathering all of the washcloths and grabbing two towels.

“They tried. I told them I’d take my own shower.” Jordan flinched as Geoff began the process of cleaning his injuries.

“You should have taken one when you got here. What have you been doing?” Geoff tried to go light over the worst of the cuts and tears in Jordan’s skin, several of which he was sure should have had stitches.

“I took a nap. How long have I been here?” Jordan held his breath for most of the process.

“We’ve been looking for you for about two hours. Nigel said you came here, but you weren’t in the room you were supposed to be in. It took us a while to think to ask the desk if they’d seen you.”

“You don’t look like you got hurt.”

“I didn’t. I bounced around in the bunk; like a padded cell. That’s where they should lock you and Jon up for being stupid. Fighting over a skirt?”

Jordan rolled on his side, glaring up at Geoff. Geoff pushed him firmly down.

“Don’t give me that look. I’ve already been stared down by a pro today. Give me any crap and I’ll throw vodka on you and watch you squirm like a salted snail.”

“Who did you have it out with?” Jordan was not quite successful at suppressing a groan.

“Diane.”

“She’s small. You could take her.”

“That’s the problem. I already did.”

Jordan was puzzled at the response. “She looked all right when I saw her.”

“She looked okay when I saw her, too.”

Geoff patted Jordan’s back dry before collecting up the soiled washcloths. He took them and the towels into the bathroom, leaving the washcloths in the wastebasket. Jordan rolled onto his side, doubling a pillow under his head. Geoff collected his bottle and sat in a chair, putting his feet up on the bed. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket, lighting it.

“She’s going to change over the next few months.” Geoff removed the top from the bottle, tossing it across the room. He took a mouthful.

“Started a family, did you?”

Geoff smirked. “She says it was someone else. I think she’s lying.”

“Pete’s going to kill you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

* * * *

Jon turned off the shower, and grabbed a towel. He felt one hundred percent better with the filth off his body and out of his hair. Before he finished drying, there was a knock at his door. He pushed his dripping hair back from his face, wrapping a dry towel around his hips as he went to the door. Dread crept through him as he found Crystal standing in the hallway, looking up at him.

“What do you want?” *Stupid question.* As much as he wanted to, Jon couldn’t bring himself to close the door in her face.

“I don’t know where to go. Could I come in?” Her suitcase and overnight bag were sitting at her feet.

“Why? So you can cause more trouble?” Jon leaned on the doorframe, crossing his arms as water from his hair created rivulets down his chest.

“I didn’t mean to cause any problems.” Her eyes traced the water dripping down his body, stopping at the towel. As she brought her eyes up to meet his, she smiled. “Could you blame me for changing my mind?”

“I could blame you for a lot of things.” He stepped back, pulling the door open for her. “There’s an extra bed in here; you can use it.”

Crystal limped past him into the room. Jon looked down at her bags, took a deep breath of annoyance, and brought them in. He dropped them at the foot of the second bed where Crystal settled herself.

“How’d you get your luggage?”

“Sabin and Ben waited around at the bus until a wrecker pulled it up. They got all of the luggage and most of the costumes before the bus was hauled away. It’s all sitting in the hallway.”

Jon returned to the door, stepping out into the hall. The luggage and sports bags were in a stack by the elevator. The costumes were in a dusty pile beside the luggage. Jon left his door open as he walked down the hallway. When he reached the stack, he heard a door open behind him.

“Mr. Wiles, I think you have violated public laws in this country. Indecent exposure, to be exact.”

“Too bad. You’re just jealous, B.J.” Jon grabbed his suitcase in one hand, sports bag in the other, as Brian knocked on a door.

“Ty. Luggage is here,” Brian called, moving to the next door.

Jon started toward his room, grinning at Brian. As they passed, Brian snatched Jon’s towel from his hips, tossing it over his shoulder.

“Perfect.” Jon kept walking as Brian knocked on Geoff’s door. Ty’s door opened as Jon reached it. Alexis

stepped out, then fell back laughing. Ty emerged to see what was going on.

“Suppose you could put something on?” Ty laughed.

“Yeah. Now that I *have* something to put on.” Jon disappeared into his room, slamming the door.

Ty looked over his shoulder at Alexis. “Sorry, babe.”

“Suppose we should get that man an orchid?”

* * * *

Diane collected the costumes with the help of Alexis and Crystal. They carried them down to a laundry room in the basement of the hotel. It was a small white room with three washers, three dryers and a table for folding. Diane threw herself into her work as best she could, starting the waters. The brace was restrictive, although it kept her from hurting so much. She breathed easier but it was difficult to bend.

“Why don’t you let us do this?” Alexis took Brian’s shirt from Diane’s hands. “You go up to your room and rest. We’ll get them washed and bring them up.”

“But this is my job.” Diane protested, reaching for Brian’s shirt. Alexis held it out of reach.

“You need to rest. You know how to use a needle like no one I’ve ever seen. I know how to do laundry. Go take a nap. You can sew later.” Alexis shuffled Diane out of the room, pushing her toward the elevator.

“Thanks.” Diane smiled, walking down the hall, knowing she was wasting her time arguing.

Crystal separated the costumes using only her fingertips. Her palms were bandaged, making it difficult to close her hands. She shook dirt and glass from Geoff’s dark gray and silver dress shirt, checking it over for damage.

“Looks like other than a lot of dirt, they’re not in too bad of shape.”

Alexis frowned. "Unlike the men who wear them. Tell me; what did you think was going to happen between Jordan and Jon?" Alexis turned her attention to Ty's favorite red dress shirt.

"I didn't think they'd care. Guys like them don't. Don't they usually pass a girl around?"

"Not Jordan. He's a gentleman for the most part."

"I noticed. It took me a long time to nail him. It took candlelight and a bubble bath."

Alexis rolled her eyes. "I don't really want to know. You picked on the wrong man for an easy conquest."

"Who did you go through before you made it to Ty?"

Alexis narrowed her eyes. "Watch it. You're ignorance is showing. I'm not like you." She spoke in a calm, authoritative voice.

Crystal threw a pair of leather trousers on the dryer, glaring at her. She tilted her head, an insulted look on her face. "What do you think I am?"

"Didn't Jordan establish that on the bus?" Alexis dropped the trousers she was holding, standing up to Crystal. "I think Jordan was right, and I'll tell you this, little girl. You even think about my husband, or about hurting any one of the other guys, and I'll stuff you in a dryer. Are we clear?"

"Don't worry about me." Crystal gave Alexis a sweet smile. "I'll be busy with Jon for a while. So put your claws away." Crystal picked up a pair of denim trousers, pushing them into Alexis' hands.

"What makes you think he'd have you?" Alexis narrowed her eyes, dreading what she was about to hear, knowing Jon.

"I'm staying in his room. Don't worry. He'll have me for as long as I want him to." Crystal turned to leave. She

stopped at the door, grinning deviously. “By the way, Ty is one hot looking man. I’ll bet he’s quite a lover.” She licked her lips before disappearing out the door.

Alexis fumed.

Chapter 21

Diane made her way down the hall to her room. She smiled at the thought of Alexis playing mother to her. Alexis enjoyed playing mother to everyone. Diane found it to be a comfort.

Diane reached her door, pushing it open. Each table around the room and each end of the dresser held an arrangement of roses, each in a different pastel color. She stood staring at the display, surprised and a little self-conscious.

After the initial shock wore off, she moved into the room, closing the door securely behind her. She went to each arrangement, searching for a card or some hint as to where they came from. Nothing. The warm feeling she experienced at first began to fade as she thought about it.

“Geoff.” She sat on the foot of the bed. “He’s trying to charm me.”

The more she thought about it the angrier she became. Finally, she decided to confront him. She jerked her door open with the intent of going up to his room. She found herself instead running into him, literally.

“Oh.” She bit her tongue as her hands raked through the curls on his chest again. Her stomach knotted at the

touch of his skin. She could feel her face warming. “Damn it.”

“Whoa. Are you in a hurry?” Geoff caught her by the shoulders again, bringing back memories of the rooftop in Plymouth.

Diane stepped back. “What do you think you’re doing?” Her tone was harsh as she crossed her arms, pulling from his touch.

“I was coming to ask...wow. Where’d you get all the flowers?” Geoff pushed past her, entering the room. “Did someone die? You’ve got enough arrangements to hold a funeral. If you need a body, you could use mine.” He winked at her.

“Nice.” Diane sneered at him. He walked from one arrangement to the next. “They were here when I came in.”

“Someone paid a fortune. Roses are too expensive. Carnations are more my style.” He turned to her, apparently remembering his purpose. “Oh yeah. I was wondering if my gray and silver dress shirt survived the trip. Have you seen it?”

Diane allowed her anger to melt into perplexity. “I didn’t go through all of the costumes. Alexis sent me to rest. I can let you know later. She and Crystal are going to bring them up after they’re washed so I can tend to any repairs.”

“Good. I’d like to wear it tomorrow night.” He looked around the room on his way to the door. He paused, one hand on the doorframe, his back to her. “Would you like to talk?”

“About what?”

“Parenthood?”

“You don’t listen, do you? There’s nothing to talk about.”

Geoff turned to face her but remained at the door. “I think there is.”

“I have to get some rest. If you would excuse me.” Diane held her ground, hoping that he would take the hint and leave.

Geoff nodded at the roses. “Are they from Daddy?”

Diane felt a lump in her throat. “Yes.” She tried to sound nonchalant about it. “Probably. He’s romantic that way.”

Geoff’s topaz eyes caressed her frame. “Well, if he’s a roadie, he just blew his entire paycheck from this tour. I’ll just have to look for the one that quit smoking and playing cards.” Geoff walked down the hall, leaving Diane in frustration and complete confusion.

* * * *

Crystal slammed the door as she entered the dark room. She hoped that Jon would be there. After her go round with Alexis, she was more determined than ever to fulfill her plans. She only had about a week left with them, unless she could get one of them to extend her stay. She had wasted the last week on Jordan.

She smiled at the thought of adding Ty Synclair to her list of “accomplishments”. Every man had his breaking point, no matter who he was. She was sure Ty would take the opportunity if it was presented in the right way, and she was determined to find the right way.

“Crystal, that you?” Jon’s voice came from the darkness.

“It’s me.” She answered with a soft seductive tone. “Shall I turn on the light?”

“I don’t think you want to do that.”

What an odd thing to say. “Why not?”

Crystal clicked on the light to find Jon in his bed. Someone with dark hair, lying beneath him, hid her face in Jon's neck.

He smiled. "Suit yourself."

* * * *

Crystal left the room. *Okay, so this was going to be a little more difficult than she thought.* She stood in the hallway, wondering what she was going to do. She didn't want to sleep in the same room where Jon was "entertaining". It was hard enough listening to his lovemaking through the walls for the last week. She didn't want a front row seat. What to do?

She leaned against the wall, thinking. Voices floated down the hall. Geoff's door opened and Ty stepped into the hall as he finished his conversation. Crystal bit her lip, thinking. Down the hall the other way was the stairwell. *That'll work.*

She worked up a few tears before Ty pulled the door closed. As he turned toward her, she went into hysterics.

"Crystal? What's wrong, girl?" Ty took a step toward her.

"I've made such a mess of things." She poured on the sorrow. "I just want to die." She ran to the stairwell, pushing through the door, knowing he would follow.

She made it down half a flight of steps before she heard him following.

"Crystal, wait."

With less grace than she intended, she allowed her legs to fold under her as she slid down the remaining steps to the landing. She skidded on her already shredded hip, making the pain more real than she wanted. It was only seconds before Ty reached her.

“What are you trying to do? Break your neck?” He knelt, helping her to sit up against the wall.

“I twisted my ankle.” She looked into his eyes, never realizing before how blue they were. *Wow, was he gorgeous.* She licked her lips.

Ty wiped the tears from her cheeks. “What is it with girls and ankles? Alexis injured her ankle the first time I met her. I had to carry her for over a mile in the snow.”

“How horrible.”

“It was one of the best days of my life, actually.” He smiled. Her stomach knotted with excitement.

Ty moved her ankle, working it slowly as she “reacted” to the pain. “It’s not broken. Did you hit your head or anything else?”

“No. Just my ankle and my hip.” She took his hand, placing it firmly on her hip, holding it there. “It hurts—right here.” She stroked her hip with his hand.

“I don’t think it’s broken either.” He gently pulled his hand from beneath hers.

“I was telling Alexis what a wonderful man you must be. She’s so lucky to have a real man like you.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Let’s get you up, then.” He pulled her to her feet, wrapping one arm around her to steady her. “Can you make it up the stairs?”

“I don’t think so. See, I told you I should just die.” She squeezed off a new set of tears as she clung to him.

“Not to worry, girl. I’ve done this before.” He took her in his arms, lifting her easily. She wrapped her arms around him, hugging his neck. Ty carried her up the steps. “Where are you staying?”

“With Jon, but he has company. I can’t go back in there.” She sniffed, hoping for his sympathy. Ty smelled warm and spicy. Good enough to eat, and she intended on

making a meal of him. She leaned her head on his shoulder, his curls brushing her forehead.

Ty stopped at his door. “I suppose you can stay here for now. Alexis is helping Diane, but I don’t think she’ll mind.” Ty carried her into his room, closing the door behind them.

Chapter 22

Alexis looked at her watch. "It's twelve thirty already." She stood and stretched. "Ty is going to think I ran off with a good looking man."

Diane laughed, her fatigue audible. "As if you could find a better looking man than Ty?"

Alexis gave her a serious look.

Diane hid behind a pair of trousers she was working on. "I promise not to touch him."

Alexis grinned. "I didn't tell you."

"What?"

"Little Miss Crystal made me angry when she decided not to help us. She asked how many of the guys I had to do before I caught Ty, and she remarked on how good looking my husband is and what a great lover he must be. Then the cheesy little devil licked her lips. I told her if she even thought about Ty I'd stuff her in a dryer."

"Maybe you should have done it. I don't think anyone would miss her."

"I wanted to tie a knot in her tongue. You'd think with everything that happens, all of the girls sneaking into the dressing rooms and shower rooms, I'd be used to round heels making offers to Ty. This one gets under my skin."

“This one is traveling with us and has access to the band. What is she still doing here, anyway?” Diane concentrated on the stitches in a pair of Geoff’s trousers.

“Jon invited her to stay with him.”

“Well, that won’t last too long. Mister Meaningful One Night Relationship? She’ll get dragged out in the morning by security just like those before her.”

Both women laughed. “Let’s hope so. I’ll see you in the morning.” Alexis hung the shirt she’d finished, placing it on the rack. “Get some rest. We’ll finish tomorrow.”

“Thanks for your help,” Diane called. Alexis left the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

* * * *

Ty sat on the side of the bed, his jeans opened at the waist. He brushed her hair aside as he stroked Crystal’s back from the base of her neck to the sheet covering her from the hips down. He held a glass of wine balanced on his thigh as he lightly caressed her smooth skin.

Crystal had one arm dangling over the side of the bed, her fingers caressing Ty’s ankle. She held her glass on the pillow beside her head, her eyes closed as she spoke. “You think I’m a bad person, don’t you?”

“You have an odd way of getting what you want, I’ll give you that.” He took a sip, setting his glass on the nightstand beside the half empty bottle.

“But I do get—what I want.” Her words came in a contented breath as she smiled. Her glass slipped from her fingers as her smile faded. Ty caught the glass, setting it on the nightstand. He leaned close to her face.

“Crystal.” No response. He spoke louder. “Crystal?” He smirked. “No stamina, this one. Can’t handle the good stuff.” He clicked his tongue. “Synclair, you’ve still got the magic.” He looked around at the scattered clothing on the

floor. Ty checked his watch on the nightstand. Twelve-thirty.

“Must tidy up a bit before the wife gets home.” He gathered the clothes into a pile, separating his shirt from her clothes, draping it on the chair before he kicked shoes and socks under the table.

He padded barefoot to the bathroom with her glass, rinsing the remains down the sink. He returned the glass to the nightstand, tucked Crystal’s arm beside her and pulled the sheet up to her shoulders.

* * * *

Alexis tapped on Geoff’s door. It took a minute before Geoff answered. His hair was tousled and he smelled of wine and tobacco, dressed only in his trousers.

“Does Ty need more wine?” He stared at her with glassy eyes.

“I don’t think so. You don’t look like you need any more either. Diane wanted me to tell you she found your gray and silver shirt. It’ll be ready for you to wear tomorrow night.”

“Okay, good. Good job. That girl does a good job, don’t you think?” Geoff leaned against the doorframe, more of necessity than comfort.

“Yes, she does.” Alexis agreed with Geoff as his eyes focused somewhere beyond her.

“I’ll tell you a secret. She did a good job on me.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He stepped back, flinging the door open for her. The room was dark. Geoff had several pillows propped up against the headboard. There were two bottles on the nightstand and the curtains were open, offering a view of the distant night sky.

“What are you doing alone in the dark?” Alexis gazed out at the view as Geoff closed the door. He crawled across the bed to his pillows.

“I was watching the stars. Ty told me once that if I wished on the stars, I could have anything I want.”

“He told you that?”

“When we were lads.” He filled his glass. “Would you like a bite?”

“A small one.”

She clicked the lamp on as she sat on the bed beside him. He held out the glass. She took it, sipping the sweet red liquid.

“So, what are you wishing for?”

“I’m not sure. I think I love Valerie. I don’t really know why. She’s too cold and too far away. Diane is right here.” He pointed to his chest.

“In your heart?”

“No. Right here.” He tapped his chest again. “She ran into me tonight and I can still smell her perfume on me. Right here.” He smiled his media smile, his eyes sparkling in competition with the stars.

Alexis laughed. “How much did you drink tonight?”

“Too.”

“Two glasses? No. It had to be more than that. Two bottles?”

“Too much.” Geoff slipped down the wall until his hip touched hers. “Ty took the third bottle that I had. Did I ever tell you that Ty has great taste in women?”

“No, you didn’t.” Alexis found it difficult to not laugh at the way his eyes devoured her form.

“Mmm. He always got the most perfect women. He probably didn’t tell you about them because he’s like—a real gentleman—like. You probably wouldn’t want to hear

him talking about them anyway. But, yeah, he always had the hot ones.” Geoff sat up, his chest touching her arm. “He has a really hot woman now.”

“You need to sleep.” Alexis turned, pressing her hand to his chest. The mat of curls felt intriguing. She stroked them a time or two before firmly pushing against him.

“Are you going to tuck me in?” He snaked an arm around her, placing a light kiss on her shoulder.

“Sure. Just like your mum used to do.”

Geoff frowned. “Damn. That hurts.” He brushed back a few wisps of her black hair, his eyes caressing her face. “You’re too beautiful to let walk away. Are you sure?”

“You’ll thank me for it in the morning.” Alexis was flattered, but Geoff Richards was Geoff Richards. She couldn’t read too much into the compliment.

“I could thank you for everything in the morning. I’m not above saying thank you,” he cooed, his face close to hers.

“Well, then you can thank Ty for not having to murder you.” She pushed him firmly onto his pillows, taking a sip from the glass before setting it beside the bottles.

“You’re not going to tell him, are you?” Geoff pulled his pillows down, curling one under his head. He stretched out, puffing up his chest before relaxing.

“If you don’t tell him I played with your chest.” She ran her fingers through his curls again before she stood up.

“You’re a real lady, Mrs. Synclair.”

“I do my best.”

Chapter 23

Alexis opened the door quietly, in case Ty was sleeping. She found him instead in the bathroom, to the right of the door. He was shirtless and barefoot, his trousers opened at the waist, rinsing his face as she paused to watch.

When he turned to her drying his face, she winked at him. “Hey, baby, give your number one fan a tumble?” She walked past the door, intending on diving onto the bed, knowing he would accept her offer. As soon as she entered the room, she stopped—stunned.

In the dim light, Alexis saw Crystal on the bed. Not only was she on the bed, she was *in* the bed, her eyes closed. Sleeping. Her clothes were piled on the floor and the bedspread and blanket were pushed down, leaving her covered by only the sheet.

Alexis swallowed hard, choking on the words attempting to erupt from her throat. There were two empty glasses beside half a bottle of wine on the nightstand. Alexis took a deep breath, gathering strength as she returned to the bathroom. This was not happening.

Ty met her with his heart-melting smile and mirth in his eyes. He started out of the bathroom.

“Sure, but I’ve got to tell you something.”

“I can see that.” Alexis pressed her hand to his chest, pushing him backward into the bathroom. Following him, she closed the door behind her.

Ty’s smile melted away and his eyes grew wide as he looked at her face. His voice was deeper than normal when he spoke. “No. Not even.”

“Not even what?” Alexis snapped at his response, surprised at the rage she was feeling.

“I’ve seen that look before. It bloody well isn’t what you’re thinking.” He stood up to her.

“What am I thinking, Taylor Synclair?”

“Don’t call me that. You’re not my mother.” He folded his arms across his chest and leaned on the counter in casual defiance. “You’re thinking that Crystal added another name to her book.”

Alexis could feel herself shaking as Ty voiced her exact thoughts. As much as she felt it coming on, she’d be damned if she would cry in front of him. Afraid to open her mouth and lose control, she nodded.

He smirked. “Yeah, right here. In our room—where you could walk in at any time? That’s my style, is it? To see how bad I can hurt the woman I love? Waste my time and risk my marriage on a round heel?”

Alexis could see the hurt in his eyes. It sounded ridiculous when he said it, but Crystal was apparently nude, and Ty was one garment away from it, not counting the bandages. She struggled to speak in a calm voice. “Why is she here?”

“Jon had company. She was upset and fell down the stairwell. I picked her up and brought her here.”

“Why? Why not take her back to Jon. He’s the one who’s keeping her.”

“He had *company*.” He stressed the word. “Crystal already walked in on him once. I won’t humiliate either woman like that, not even Crystal. It wouldn’t bother Jon at all.”

“So you felt compelled to undress her and have a few drinks to make her feel better? What a bloody nice guy you are.” Alexis narrowed her eyes, crossing her arms.

“Let’s start over.” Ty sat on the edge of the tub, forcing Alexis to sit on his lap. “Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a very bad little girl named Crystal. As an actress, she sucked, but that didn’t stop her from tumbling down some stairs to catch the attention of the Prince.” He paused, tapping himself on the chest. “Remember me? The Prince?”

Alexis shrugged, arms still crossed.

“All right. She tried to catch the Prince by doing the dying butterfly routine. The Prince could see right through her act but carried her to his lair. He had no sympathy or interest in her but listened to her whining for a while. She pretended to be cold in order to get in his bed. He complied by tucking her in—fully dressed, I might add. She tried to entice him to join her, to warm her up. Now, the Prince has this lovely Princess that he took a bullet for, so there was no temptation there.” He pecked Alexis on the lips, wrapping his arms around her. Alexis ran her fingers across the scar on his shoulder.

“When the Prince refused to do the bad little girl, the bad little girl turned into a dragon. She threatened to tell the Princess some awful things if the Prince didn’t give her a hammering. The Prince had to do something. He knew that the best way to get rid of a dragon was to poison it. So that’s what he did.”

Alexis tried to jump up. “You poisoned her?”

Ty held her on his lap, laughing. “No. I offered her a glass of wine while we discussed the possibilities. When I went to get the wine from Geoff, the bad little girl took off her clothes and got back in the bed. After half a glass and a slow back rub, some stalling on the part of the Prince, she passed out.”

“What a lightweight. I can drink about four before I go under.” Alexis eyed her husband with suspicion. “What did you do?”

Ty dug into his pocket, pulling out the bottle of pills that the hospital had given him. He rattled the bottle, smiling. “A little trick I learned from the Princess. Jon had better come get his dragon in the morning. I still owe him an ass kicking anyway. So—would you like that tumble in the tub or on the floor?”

* * * *

Diane tried to concentrate, finding it difficult to focus on the tiny stitches. Her eyes grew teary as she thought about her situation. She wished that Rory were there to help her, to tell her what to do. But if Rory were there, she would never be in this situation in the first place. She would not be working for ShadowsForge, and the whole situation would never have happened.

How desperately she wanted Rory back in her life. She pressed the needle through the thick material, succeeding in stabbing herself in the finger for the umpteenth time. As she blinked away the tears, the stress overcame her. She put aside the trousers, deciding to save them for the next day. She was too tired and sore to deal with it anymore.

She placed her thread and scissors in her sewing kit, closing the top. She folded the trousers, being careful of the needle that was still attached, and placed them atop her

sewing kit. She felt queasy as she walked to her bed, hoping to find escape in a few hours of sleep.

Diane changed into Geoff's shirt, now her nightgown, before climbing into the bed. She turned on her side, placing one pillow beneath her head and hugging the second pillow to her body. Before long she fell into a restless sleep.

* * * *

"Don't worry, Di, Geoff will take care of you. I promise, babe."

"How can you be sure?" Diane held tight to Rory's hands, looking up into his dark eyes.

"Because if he doesn't, I'll haunt him." He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. He smiled one of his million-dollar smiles.

"I'm not sure I want Geoff Richards to take care of me," Diane said. "Why would I want to? I don't know if I could ever love someone like him, and you're suggesting that I allow him to be a permanent part of my life."

"I didn't say that you had to love him. You need to let him take care of you. I want you to be taken care of." He gathered her into his arms, holding her so close that she could hear his heart beating. Diane wrapped her arms around his waist.

Diane shook herself awake. If only this could be real. She knew that this was only a dream. Rory was gone, Diane was seamstress for ShadowsForge, and that night she ended up in Geoff Richards' room was a reality.

Chapter 24

Jordan leaned against a stack of speakers. He held his Gibson by the neck, the body resting on the toe of his shoe. They had cut the play list down to a dozen and a half of their top hits, planning to give an exceptional but abbreviated performance. Since it was a squeeze-in gig, it was not expected to be as long as a regular booking. Jordan swallowed hard, gulping air, trying to stave off the dizziness he was feeling.

He decided to wear street clothes—black slacks and a white dress shirt—so that he didn’t have to spend any time around the others. Diane made adjustments to their stage clothes earlier that day. Alexis helped with the repairs last night, but as usual, Diane didn’t want anyone else to “dress her men”, as she put it once in Manchester.

He wanted to save her some work too, as she didn’t look like she was feeling her best. The black brace she was wearing around her waist got in her way as she knelt and tried to bend.

Jordan tied a black bandana around his head, covering the bruising that crept like ink from his hairline across his forehead, down his left temple and cheek. He couldn’t cover the cheek but at least part of the damage was hidden. It looked kind of sixties but he didn’t care.

* * * *

The band was ready. Diane made her last minute touch-ups as usual before they took the stage. She worked in silence, moving around each man, not speaking unless it was necessary. She felt Geoff watching her as she created a decorative lightening bolt from the rip in the thigh of Jon's black denim jeans. She and Alexis repaired eight pairs of trousers the night before and Jon had to choose the pair with the rip in them.

"Hey, Ty. Looks like everyone wears shredded tonight." Jon admired the new cut.

Diane smiled up at Jon as she stood. "Nice tan you have on that thigh. Now you can show it off."

When she gave Geoff a last minute going over, she avoided his eyes, tending only to his clothing.

"We need to discuss some things." Geoff held up his arm as she clipped some strings from his sleeve.

"No." She pushed him to turn, as she tugged at the side seams of his trousers, assuring that they were secure.

"Diane..."

"No." It was a flat refusal. "You're ready." She dismissed him, turning to Brian. She kept her back to Geoff as she checked Brian's seams and gave him a nod. "You're looking good, considering."

"Thanks. You look pretty good yourself." Brian touched her on the nose with one finger, bringing a smile to her face.

Geoff moaned in surrender, moving to the side of the stage. He jumped high several times to get the blood flowing. He shook out his arms and rolled his head, loosening up. He peeked through the edge of the curtain as Ty walked up behind him.

“How’s it look?” Ty adjusted his headset, pressing the earpiece firmly in place. He arranged his hair to conceal the headband and wiring.

“Not the biggest crowd, but they’re packing in right up to the stage. We don’t have a dead man zone. It would be perfect if anyone feels like stage-diving.”

“If any of us dive, I don’t think we’d get up again.” Ty slapped Geoff on the back. “Except maybe you.”

“You don’t look bad. How’s your back?”

Ty shifted his shoulders with a grimace. “The strap is right across one of the bad spots. I hope this goes quick. My hair hurts.” He gave a dimpled grin.

“Tell Brian to pick up the tempo and we can do some speed metal for one night.” Geoff glared at Brian, who was talking with Diane.

“Tell Jordan he has to play speed metal. You’re the only one he’s talking to, I think.”

Geoff shrugged, turning his attention back to Ty. “Well, how dare you try to keep him from killing everyone. You cad.”

“He’s lucky I haven’t killed him for his mouth.” Ty glanced over at Jordan. “I think he’s suffering, though. He’s looking gothic.”

“I’ll check on him.” Geoff strolled casually toward Jordan. As he passed Brian and Diane, he backhanded Brian on the seat of his trousers. Brian flinched in pain, spinning around. Geoff smiled at him.

“Stitches, you bastard.”

Geoff pointed an authoritative finger at him. “Watch your mouth around the lady.”

Brian grimaced as he turned back to Diane.

* * * *

“So, J.C. You think you can do some speed metal to get us out of here sooner?”

Jordan stood, facing Geoff. “You’re kidding, right?” He adjusted the bandana.

“Yeah, I’m kidding. I’d like to get out of here early. I think we all would, but you do what you can do. Are you feeling all right? You look washed out.”

“I’ll do my job.”

“I have no doubt. How’s your back?”

Jordan lifted his Gibson, throwing the strap over his head. “I’ll tell you in about an hour and a half.” He adjusted the strap, taking a deep breath as he slid the guitar into position.

“You know, if you’re not up to it, we understand. Jon could handle it.”

Anger clouded Jordan’s dark eyes as he glared across at Jon. “I think he’s handled enough for me. I can do my job.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t.” Geoff held his hands up in surrender. “I’m just trying to help.”

“Well, don’t.” Jordan pushed past Geoff, walking to Nigel, who was discussing the departure with Sabin and Ben. “Could we get on with this?”

* * * *

The house lights faded, bringing the chant. One side of the room thundered “Shadows”; the opposite side responded with “Forge”. As the chant echoed back and forth like an invisible ping-pong ball, the band took their places on the dark stage. Brian gave a four count. The axe men of ShadowsForge ripped into the opening notes of Surrender, announcing their presence in the dark auditorium.

Jordan fired into and through the lead in, surprising Geoff as he reached center stage. He had barely enough time to grab his microphone from the stand.

*I don't need your love, just your body will do
You'll never forget what I'm giving to you
Surrender to me, you'll be please when it's done
When ecstasy dawns with the rise of the sun*

Cued on the word “sun”, the stage exploded in lasers, lights and sound, bringing the roaring crowd forward. The too few security guards were trapped at the edge of the platform. Keeping his distance, Geoff decided this gig had turned into an all around bad idea.

*I gave up emotions, stopped risking my heart
I take what I'm offered; give no love from the start
I'll rock your body, your mind, bend your soul
When you make me the master, surrender control*

Jordan concentrated on the music. He closed his eyes against the brightness of the lights. His fingers took over, dancing across the fret board in a blur of motion.

*There is no question, I'm selfish, that's true
Prove what I am, pleasing me pleases you
We'll both walk away, never meeting again
Your desires fulfilled. Mine, committed to sin*

Jon leapt to the drum riser, matching Jordan's hammering pace. From his vantage point, he watched Jordan sway. He didn't seem to be moving in time with what he was playing, though. Jon only took his eyes from Jordan during the complicated riffs throughout the song. He had a bad feeling.

ShadowsForge 3: Retaking America

*See the truth in my eyes in the cold light of day
I won't remember your name after I walk away
Tonight brings another; warm flesh against mine
I give passion free flight one night at a time*

Chapter 25

After an hour, Jordan was exhausted and feverish. He had been running around the stage, forcing himself to maintain the expected energy level of a ShadowsForge concert. Now he was drained. Before Brian cued up the next song, J.C. set the crowd screaming as he ripped the front of his shirt open, buttons scattering in all directions. He ripped it from his body, flinging it into the audience along with the bandana. The fans were on the shirt like piranha. Sweat ran down his back, making it burn.

Once the shirt was gone, he felt cooler, relieved to settle into the relaxed pace of Forever, Goodbye. Only two more songs to get through. He could make it. In half an hour, they would be out of here, and he could sleep on the new bus that was waiting outside. He was pouring sweat and reeling under the heat of the lights. It was getting difficult to keep his eyes open as he stumbled toward the edge of the stage.

*I look upon your sleeping face,
Your mask of innocence erased,
I know the evil that you do,
That makes my one desire come true,
You lure me here, time and again,*

*To fulfill your lust, to commit my sin,
You leave me crushed once more when,
You leave my bed to return to him,*

Jon moved to Ty's side, drawing his attention. He nodded with concern toward Jordan, across the stage. Ty headed toward Jordan, trying to get to him quickly without running, without drawing anyone's attention from Geoff.

*I need to learn to tell you no,
To turn and walk away,
To close the door to what you sell,
'Cause I know my heart will pay,
The price of loving you is too rich.
It's getting much too high,
It costs you nothing more than time,
But I lose each time I try,*

Ty covered his microphone, moving close behind Jordan. "J.C."

"Wha'?" Jordan slurred.

"You still with us?"

"I'm all right."

Ty backed away while Jordan moved through his solo, losing the timing once or twice. Not enough for the audience to notice, but the band caught it. Geoff shot a concerned look at Ty. Ty shook his head. Geoff turned to Jon, nodding toward Jordan's amp. Jon made his way to the stack.

*You'll call me back to you again,
Don't care how bad I ache,
To keep you by my side someday,*

*It's a chance I have to take,
Each time I fall into your arms,
Serve your every call,
We ride desire's sweet crest by night,
But by day I'm the one to fall.*

Jordan watched the audience. They swam before his cloudy eyes, flowing in multi-colored pools of light. Watching the swirling image before him, he lost his train of thought, knowing he needed to pull himself back to the music. He struck the chord, then a note that didn't sound right. He stopped, looking down at the strings. He struck another chord, not able to hear it above the crowd. He turned, puzzled, focusing on Ty who stood several paces from him. Ty had a bass solo going, playing the lead arrangement. That wasn't part of this song. Where was Jon?

He caught movement at the back of the stage. Jon was beside Jordan's amp, reaching toward the switches, his eyes on Jordan. Jordan's anger flared. Jon was trying to take over. He struck another chord as a black tunnel formed around Jon. The tunnel became smaller and smaller, silence surrounding him. Jordan turned toward the audience as the tunnel blinked into darkness.

*I need to learn to tell you no,
To turn and walk away,
To close the door to what you sell
'Cause I know my heart will pay,*

Jordan hit the edge of the stage and rolled into up stretched hands. Jon threw the switches to cut any sound that the Gibson made. In an instant, he made the

adjustments on his Fender, taking over the lead. All the audience noticed was a stage-diving guitarist that they were having a grand time passing further out into the crowd.

*The price of loving you is too rich,
It's getting much too high,
It costs you nothing more than time,
But I lose each time I try.*

Ty moved to the side of the stage. He kicked a water bottle, sending it to get Nigel's attention without his leaving the stage. The bottle struck Nigel in the back of the leg. When he turned, Ty nodded toward the audience. Nigel gasped inaudibly as he saw Jordan being carried about on a sea of hands like a dead man. He pushed Sabin and Ben toward the door to the auditorium. Gary headed around the far side. Ty moved across the stage without missing a note.

*I need to learn to turn around,
To run from your sinful embrace,
To know what you do means nothing to you,
To remember that mask on your face,*

Sabin and Ben tried to push their way through the crowd that surrounded the stage and packed the auditorium. Geoff knew that it would take them the rest of the night to catch up with the floating guitarist. What did they think they could do if they did get to him? In their excitement, this crowd wouldn't just hand him over. *For God's sake, don't drop him.* Geoff gave Brian the thumbs up to pick up the pace. He had an idea, but they needed to finish this song before Jordan reached the back wall.

*My heart is shattered; you've stripped love from my life,
You laugh as you leave me to cry,
Now I'll take my last stand, a proud, wiser man,
Smile and tell you forever, Good-bye.*

Geoff tried to keep Jordan in sight as the music died and the lights went down. The applause was so loud he couldn't hear himself shouting for houselights. Somehow the message got to the lights technician and the houselights blazed to life. Jordan was about halfway to the back wall, afloat with his guitar on his chest.

Geoff shouted for attention. It took a minute to get the crowd to respond, everyone watching Jordan. *Don't they realize he's out of it?*

"Here's the deal," Geoff shouted. "We have two songs left to do." The crowd quieted, emitting a collective moan of disappointment. "But, here's the deal. We'll play anything you want for an extra half an hour if..."

He paused to make sure he had their attention. Once he was sure they were listening all the way to the back, he continued. "If you get J.C. back to the stage without dropping him or his guitar. Otherwise, we quit now. Your choice."

Geoff placed his microphone on the stand. He waved Ty and Jon to meet him on the riser. The band collected around Brian, watching the crowd as they milled about, murmuring.

"Big decision for them, isn't it?" Geoff folded his arms across his chest. "Remind me to kick Nigel's ass for this gig."

Jordan began to move toward the stage. In the relative quiet of the auditorium, it took several minutes to propel him to the edge of the stage. He was rolled carefully onto

the platform as Sabin, Ben and two emergency medical technicians, in attendance for the fans, rushed from the wing. They lifted Jordan, carrying him off stage as the band took their places.

Jon took Jordan's place, watching Geoff for his cue.

Geoff pulled his microphone from the stand. "Good choice. Now, what do you want to hear?"

* * * *

Jordan awoke to the thrum of tires on the highway. He was in a large bunk, surrounded by a heavy curtain. His clothes were gone and he was wrapped in a sheet. His head was wrapped up and pounding. He tried to sit up but his body wasn't ready for the move. He had a sling on his left arm.

He rolled on his side, pushing the curtain aside. He could see several sets of legs at the front of the bus. Bench seats ran on either side, facing the center. It was more of a social set up for traveling. Jordan didn't feel very social. There were three narrow bunks on his right and the bath/shower on his left. He could also see that Gary had a high backed seat and a grill partition between him and the rest of the compartment.

The bathroom door opened. Jordan dropped the curtain, hoping not to be noticed. He rolled on his back with a groan, pushing the sheet down to his waist. It was warm in the small area and the vibration actually felt good. He doubled the pillow under his head.

"Jordan?" Alexis' voice drifted through the curtain.

"I'm awake." He could use someone to talk to, but how could he face Alexis after his cruel remarks? She had to want to slap him for his stupidity.

"Can I come in?"

"Are you sure you want to?"

In answer, she pushed the curtain out of her way, sitting on the bunk and pulling her legs up to allow the curtain to close.

“It’s good to see you awake.” She smiled.

“How long was I out?” Jordan felt like he had been asleep for days.

“You’ve been stage-diving, had an ambulance ride, spent the night in a hospital, had your back sewn up like it should have been, deemed suffering from a mild concussion and extreme fatigue. You’ve been sleeping from Semantica almost to New York City. It’s been about sixteen hours total.”

“I was in the hospital? How did I get there?”

“You fell off the stage, hit your head and shoulder again and went fan surfing. Geoff had to negotiate to get you back. I hear it was pretty spectacular. Once they got you back, you were taken to the hospital, and the doctor only let you out this morning because Nigel signed papers promising to make you rest.”

“I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck.” Jordan covered his eyes with his arm.

“Well, you look like you’ve been hit by a bus.” She placed her hand on his thigh, giving it a light squeeze.

“Funny.”

Alexis leaned over him, reaching into a small shelf beside Jordan’s head. “They gave you these.” She rattled a bottle. “Pain pills if you need them.”

Jordan peeked at her. “Thanks. Can I take the whole bottle at once?”

“No. You’re under contract, and Nigel would drag you out of the casket to finish the tour and you know it. You’re good, but you can’t play when you’re dead.”

After a long silence, Jordan had to ask. “Where’s Crystal?”

“Up front. Do you want to talk to her?”

“No. Just wanted to know if he kept her.”

Chapter 26

New York City, NY

Jon tapped on Jordan's door, not quite sure of the reception he was going to get. He hoped that Jordan would talk to him. When they arrived, Jordan requested his own room again. He was right to be angry Jon was keeping Crystal around. Jon had his reasons, and he needed to tell Jordan what those reasons were.

When he received no response, he knocked again. The door was jerked open. Jordan stood on the other side with a frown on his face. The bandage was off of his forehead, revealing a laceration and some very ugly bruising down the left side of his face along his hairline. Jon flinched at the sight.

Jordan stared at him, hooking his thumb in the top of his sweatpants before turning to walk away, leaving the door open. Jon took it as an invitation, noticing the scrapes, gouges and stitches across Jordan's back. He closed the door behind him. Jordan dropped into a chair, pulling a new practice guitar across his lap. The drapes were closed against the brightness of the day. Although it was cool in the room, Jordan wore only sweatpants and socks. His left shoulder and upper arm were discolored, heavily bruised.

Jon dropped into the chair across from Jordan, who was silently watching him. The sling was tossed on the back of the chair.

“Thought you were supposed to have that arm in a sling.” Jon tried to ease into conversation.

“Can’t play with it on.” Jordan’s words were emotionless. “Besides, nothing’s broke, just badly bent.”

“What’re you playing?”

“Thought this would be a good time to do some writing.” Jordan sighed, scrubbing at his face with his hands, totally exhausted. He winced when he pressed too hard on his cheek. Jon winced with him, hating to see the pain in his friend’s eyes.

“Yeah?” Jon was hopeful that Jordan was coming around about rejoining the group. He was afraid that the separation Jordan put between himself and the band was his first step on the way out. Nigel mentioned his fear at breakfast when Jordan was absent from the meeting. “What are you writing—if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Thought I might write something for Crystal. How is she?”

“A pain in the arse mostly.” Jon gave a slight smirk. “She keeps complaining about her hip. It could have been worse. She landed on something soft.”

“What was that?” Jordan sounded more interested in the conversation.

“Me. I was already on the window when we hit and she hit me. Bout made me a bloody eunuch.”

Jordan smirked. “She can be a pain.” Jordan picked up a half empty bottle from the table and took a mouthful, swallowing hard. He held the bottle out to Jon, raising his eyebrows. “Pain killer?”

“Sure.” Jon took the bottle, looking at the label. Vodka. “That’ll work.” He took a shot. “Are you taking the pills the hospital gave you?”

“No. I like this better. Wouldn’t want to mix the two. You kind of get dead that way, I hear.”

A silence settled over the conversation. The expectancy in his eyes told Jon that he was waiting for Jon to say something. Anything. Jon sat the vodka on the table, looking around the room, trying to think of something to say. He was pleased to hear that Jordan didn’t want to risk mixing the drink with medication.

After an uncomfortably long silence, Jordan let out an exasperated sigh.

“Hell, Jon. I’m sorry. I feel like an idiot.” Jordan frowned, setting aside his guitar. He took another shot of vodka, holding the bottle to the bruised side of his face as he leaned back, his eyes on the ceiling. “She just—I don’t know. I thought she’d be around for a long time. I thought she was sincere and it hurt when she pushed the wrong buttons. I couldn’t deal with it.”

“I know what you mean. She likes to push buttons. She didn’t even thank me for breaking her fall. I’m still picking glass out of my scalp. I pulled her out of the bus, carried her to the ambulance, been playing fetch and carry for her since we got here. Do you think she said thanks? No.” Jon held his hand out for the bottle. Jordan handed it across. Jon turned the bottle up, taking a long swallow before handing it back. “Thanks.”

“So what are you keeping her for?” Jordan smiled. “She’s not that good.”

Jon laughed. “Wouldn’t know. I didn’t touch her—yet. Too sore is a good excuse. I hear Ty got her altered while Alexis was helping Diane with the costumes. She

stayed in his room all night. I still don't have the whole story on that one."

Jordan's eyebrows shot up, followed by a pained look. "Does Alexis know?"

"Either she doesn't know or she owes me a tumble, according to you. I'll have to leave myself open for her tonight. There's something to look forward to." Both guitarists laughed.

"Ty would have your ass and you know it."

Jon shrugged. "She'd be worth it. Anyway, I have an idea but I need your help to pull it off. I want to show Crystal our side of the picture. You game?"

"Sure." Jordan sat forward, raking his fingers through the hair on his chest. He grinned. "What do you have in mind?"

Jon was thrilled. "Welcome back, J.C. I missed you." The friends shook hands across the table. "Okay, here's the idea."

* * * *

Geoff paced up and down the hallway outside of Diane's door for some time before he worked up the courage to knock. This was probably the hardest thing he'd ever faced. Standing in front of an audience of ten thousand was a piece of cake compared to what he had to do now with an audience of one.

Diane opened the door. As soon as she saw Geoff, she tried to close it. He pushed the door firmly open but didn't enter the room. Diane was wearing his shirt over a pair of slacks. How ironic.

"We're going to talk." He announced his intention but remained in the doorway, waiting for her response.

"All right. What do you want to hear, Geoff? Tell me." Diane sat in one of the chairs beside the table. Geoff took

the second chair with his back to the open door. He hoped that leaving the door open would make her feel more comfortable.

“What I want to hear is the truth. I’m the father of your baby. I want to make it right. I want to marry you.”

Diane’s mouth dropped open. His words hit her hard. The color drained from her face.

“You’re kidding, right? Geoff Richards—married?” She tried to laugh.

He stared at her. There was no trace of mirth in his eyes. He placed a small box on the table between them, sliding it to her. Diane swallowed against the sudden dryness of her throat. Her eyes misted and she began to tremble. She stared at the box.

Geoff nodded. “Open it.”

“I can’t.”

“I’ll open it for you.” His voice was soft, caring. He reached for the box. “Would you like me on one knee?” He slipped from the chair.

“Bloody hell. You’re serious.” She stopped his hand on top of the box. “I told you...”

“I’ve talked to everyone in the crew. No one has been with you. No one has had time to be with you. Your brother threatened everyone with unemployment if they came near you. No roadie could have afforded those flowers. I still haven’t found out where they came from, but I will.”

“Geoff...”

“Hear me out. I wish I had sent them.” He pressed the box open, revealing an emerald cut engagement ring. “I want to marry you, give you a house, a home, everything you want. For you and for the baby. My baby. Even if it was

conceived in wrong intentions, I want to be the father to my child.”

He placed the ring on her finger and kissed her hand.

“Don’t answer now. Think about it. Let me know. Even if the answer is no, I want you to have this ring. It’s my promise to take care of you both. I won’t lie and say I love you. I care deeply about you. Diane, you would be so easy to love. I enjoy your company, and feel that I could spend a lifetime with you if you want me.”

Diane took a deep breath, looking into his topaz eyes. His sincerity was frightening. He stood, looking down at her.

“I’ll think about it.” Diane gave him a weak smile.

“Think about what? What’s going on?”

Diane watched Geoff’s eyes grow wide. He tore his gaze from her, turning to the door.

“Valerie.”

Chapter 27

Valerie Leonard stood in the doorway with suitcases in hand. She wasn't prepared for the scene she walked into.

"May I come in?"

"Val. It's good to see you." Diane stood, smiling as she stepped around Geoff to take one suitcase. She moved past Geoff again, placing it by the second bed. "How's your hip?"

"Much better. Thank you for asking." Valerie gave Diane an uncertain smile. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No." Geoff found his voice. "Actually, you came at a perfect time."

"Really?" Valerie and Diane spoke at once, one voice hopeful, the other doubtful.

Valerie continued. "I checked at the desk to see what room Diane was in. We shared before so I thought we could again. I was happy to see the door open when I got off the elevator." She sat her carry-on and laptop on the chair, her gaze roaming over Geoff's shirt that Diane was wearing. "I've been worried since I heard about the accident on the radio. They didn't give any details. Only that you were continuing the tour."

Valerie placed her hands on Geoff's shoulders, expecting a hug. She expected a kiss—a smile—something.

Geoff looked over her head at Diane, taking a deep breath. He looked down, kissing Valerie on the cheek.

Valerie was confused, trying to cover her discomfort with a continual string of words. "My first thought was to get here, to be sure you're all right. A phone call wouldn't have done it. I needed to see you. I booked the first flight I could get."

Geoff turned to Diane, reaching for her hand. "I'll talk to you later. I need to have a talk with Valerie." Diane's face tinged pink as Geoff kissed her hand. He took Valerie by the arm. "Let's get a drink." He led her out the door, a puzzled look on her face.

* * * *

Geoff and Valerie stepped silently into the elevator. As the door closed, Geoff spoke.

"Would you like to go to the lounge or to my room? I think we need to be alone, actually." His tone was quiet, without emotion, not the Geoff Richards she knew.

"Your room would be all right, I suppose. What's this all about?"

"Give me a minute to get it together, okay?"

"All right." This was getting more frightening by the moment. Valerie stared at the numbers as they clicked from the sixth to the twelfth floor. They walked silently to Geoff's room. The silence continued as Valerie took a seat, watching Geoff pour a short glass of something, handing it to her. He poured himself a tall glass.

Geoff sat on the foot of the bed, sipping his drink as he let his eyes travel over Valerie's frame. She was uncomfortable with the extended silence and the pensive look in his eyes.

"So, how have you been?" Val initiated the conversation.

"I've been better."

"Were you hurt?"

"No. I was in the bunk with a lot of padding. J.C. got the worst of it." He took another drink.

"And the tour—how has it been?"

"Up until Semantica, it was great." He stared at the floor.

Frustrated, she forged ahead. "Then how have you been better?"

Geoff sat with his shoulders hunched, a sad look on his face.

"I need a good kick in the ass. I wasn't out of your sight for a week and I fell off." He stood, pacing like a caged animal. After several passes, he went to the window, throwing open the curtains to the fading light. He leaned one arm on the wall, watching the first of the stars winking in the darkening sky.

"You fell off of what?" Her voice was soft.

"I woke up with a woman." Geoff didn't turn as he made his confession.

Val felt a twinge in her stomach. It didn't hurt as much as it should have. It surprised her.

He continued when she made no response. "Not just any woman. I woke up with Diane."

That cut a little deeper. "Is that why she's wearing your shirt?" She blinked away the burning in her eyes. "I did notice." She sipped her drink.

"Yeah, a souvenir. Don't be angry with her. It was my fault. I was too drunk to make it to my room and she helped me. Somewhere along the way, I got out of hand. I don't remember it."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I asked her to marry me."

That poured salt in the wound. It took her some time to form any coherent words in her mind, a little longer to get them to her tongue.

"Aren't you getting carried away? She's not the first woman you woke up with after a night of drinking." What difference did it make? She was off the hook. Why was she trying to forgive him? Probably because he made her feel something she hadn't felt in years.

"No, but she's the first one to have my baby."

Maybe they should stop the conversation altogether before it went from bad to total devastation. "So she wants you to marry her?" Val sat her glass on the table before she dropped it.

"No, it's my idea."

Valerie felt hurt and relieved all at once. Her emotions were scrambled and she needed to do some serious thinking. "What should I do now?" The question came out in a near whisper, the words halted, catching in her throat.

Geoff faced her. Dropping to his knees, he set his glass beside hers. He caressed her thighs, looking up at her with sorrowful eyes.

"I don't know what to say. I can't blame anyone else. I don't remember anything so I can't even defend myself."

"So it's your word against hers that anything happened at all? That it's even your child." *Shut up and just accept it. Why are you fighting it?*

"It's obvious. I checked around."

Valerie stood, Geoff rising with her. He placed his hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off. She needed to think. She tried to keep her mouth closed before she said something that she didn't mean. It was hard not to tell him how hurt she was.

"I don't mean much to you, then." It rolled off of her tongue before she could stop it.

"Believe it or not, I was talking to Ty that night about proposing to you. You can ask him."

"That's a strange way to show you want to get married. Were you celebrating your decision by having a tumble?" The anger in her words came from deep inside. She felt as if a floodgate were about to open—one that she didn't want let loose until she had time to think. Valerie pushed Geoff away, heading for the door. He caught her by the arm.

"Don't run out on me. Please." His fingers were firmly clamped around her upper arm.

"You've made your decision. I'll finish the biography, but I don't have to stay around to watch you make a fool of yourself." She jerked her arm free, opening the door.

"What makes you think I'll make a fool of myself?" His voice escalated.

"You can't keep the dragon in its cage now. What makes you think you'll be faithful because you're married? You'll make yourself miserable and Diane, too." She stepped out into the hall.

"Valerie. Wait." Geoff followed her as she turned toward the elevator.

She called over her shoulder, not slowing her pace. "Leave me alone. I'm not the one you want."

"Yes, you are, but I have no choice." Geoff shouted as Valerie reached the elevator. She hit the call button, turning to face him. Whatever it was that she had planned to say went right out of her head.

Brian stood in the open door of his room, Diane in the hall. She stared at Geoff as if she had been struck.

At the silence, Geoff turned. His eyes met Diane's.

Brian stepped into the hallway, glaring at Geoff. He placed his hand on Diane's back, ushering her into his room, closing the door.

The elevator doors opened and Valerie stepped in. She only hoped that the doors would close before the tears began to fall.

Chapter 28

Brian closed the door as Diane sunk to the sofa. Her distressed appearance pained him. Her hands trembled as he sat on the low table, folding them in his.

"It's going to work out." Brian spoke quietly, angry at Geoff's harsh words.

"I should quit and go back to Southampton." She sniffed.

"I'd hate to see that happen. I like having you around. Who would get my laundry just right?" She smiled a little. "Would you like me to walk you to your room?" Brian stroked her delicate fingers, hoping she would stay.

"If it's all right with you, not right now. Valerie might be going there. She dropped her bags there before she came up with Geoff."

"You could stay here. You can have the bed." He patted the sofa. "I'll sleep here."

"How would that look?" Diane's dark eyes glistened. "I don't want to look like Crystal."

"The only ones who know you're here are Valerie and Geoff. Besides, I don't care what others think. Do you really want to room with Valerie over me right now?"

"She might cut my throat in the middle of the night. I wouldn't blame her."

“I’ll take care of it.” Brian left her long enough to send Sabin to tell Valerie to use the room. He returned, taking a more relaxed position beside her, his elbow on the back of the sofa, his chin supported by his hand as his honey brown eyes searched her face. “Now Sabin knows, but we pay him to mind his own business.”

“Val hates me. I know it.” Diane’s warm eyes returned Brian’s gaze. “I can’t face her. I’ve expected this since the morning I woke up beside Geoff.”

Brian frowned, raising his head. “You were on the floor. Not beside him.”

“I woke up beside him.” Diane dropped her eyes. “I heard Pete asking about me. I knew he’d be furious. It didn’t matter what the circumstances were. He would be out of control. I played the innocent. I’m a grown woman, a widow. I should have defended Geoff and stood up for myself.”

Brian stood. “Would you like something to drink?” He walked to the bar, hiding his surprise at her confession. She had such self-condemnation.

“Do you have soda?” Diane sat back, pushing her fingers through her hair. “Or something stronger?”

The room fell silent, except for ice dropping into glass and crackling as Brian poured the drinks. He offered her the soda, sipping his gin as he sat beside her.

“You don’t need anything stronger.” He patted her on the thigh. “You’re tougher than you think you are.”

“So tough that, instead of being caught where I didn’t belong, I ripped my dress and shoved it into the bed beside him. I found Geoff’s shirt. There wasn’t enough time to button it. I didn’t know you and Jon were at the door, too.” She sipped her drink, setting it on the table.

“I noticed.” Brian thought back, wondering why she was wearing Geoff’s shirt now.

“I found the scarf from my dress, tied it to the headboard and around my neck. When the pounding on the door started, Geoff moved a bit but woke up slow. I knew he had a terrible hangover because he folded the pillow around his head. I thought he would remember me before he opened the door. I wanted him to think he tied me. I thought he would panic and hide me. It didn’t work out that way. I dropped down behind the bed when he reached the door. I hoped that maybe Pete wouldn’t see me.”

She shrugged, continuing.

“Geoff apparently didn’t remember I was there. When I saw you, it made me cry. Pete mistook it for fear so I went with it. Since Geoff didn’t remember, I used it against him.”

Diane closed her eyes, her mouth pulling into a frown. Brian set his gin on the table, reaching for her. He pulled her close, her head to his chest. He enjoyed her nearness, a part of him reveling in her touch.

Brian found her attractive from the day they were introduced in the dressing room in London. Fear kept him from approaching her at first. Soon after he had, the situation that she now faced was driven like a wedge between them. He couldn’t let her face it alone. He stroked her back, leaning his head on hers, taking in her scent as she continued.

“I don’t know how the situation got so out of control.” She sat up, looking into Brian’s eyes. He rested his arm on the back of the sofa, giving her some space.

“What’s that old adage about a woman scorned?” Brian gave her a weak smile.

“Hell hath no fury,” she recited. “Now I’ve ruined Geoff’s happiness with Valerie. I’ll never have a normal relationship with either of them. His first mistake was that he was three steps past drunk. I took advantage of the situation. I was upset and needed someone. Geoff stumbled into my elevator and offered a shoulder to cry on. His second mistake.”

“Did you tell him why you were upset?”

“No. It’s a secret.”

Brian relaxed. “He loves Valerie. But he’s willing to give her up to marry you. Damn it.” Brian shook his head. “Just when I’m sure he’s a heartless bastard, he does something noble.”

“I’m the one that should be deported. I took advantage of him.”

Brian gasped. “Bloody Hell.”

Diane jumped at his outburst. “What?”

“Diane Starling, you raped Geoff Richards?” His gaze was so accusing, Diane put her hand to her mouth, unable to speak. As they stared at each other, Brian grinned. “Bet that’s never happened before. Blackmail material. I wonder how much he’d pay us to keep it out of the tabloids. This could ruin his reputation.” He wiggled his eyebrows, mischief sparkling in his eyes. Diane relaxed as he laughed. “I shouldn’t joke about the situation.” He took her hand, toying with the ring, the smile still pulling at the corners of his mouth.

Diane smiled, shaking her head. “I needed that.”

“You’re pretty when you smile.” An awkward silence fell over them; his gaze swept over her. Brian cleared his throat. “But really, what do you want to do now?” He turned sideways on the sofa, looking directly at her.

“I don’t want Geoff to do anything against his will.” She smirked.

“Perfect. I have an idea.”

* * * *

Geoff lay awake, listening for Brian’s door. He needed to speak to Diane. What a bloody mess he’d made of the situation. He tried to make her happy and succeeded in breaking her heart. Again.

Confused thoughts played through his mind. Valerie. Diane. Which one did he really love? It depended on which one he was with at the time. *That’s not right.* He couldn’t have both. At this moment, he wasn’t sure he could have either. They were both rightfully angry with him. He was angry with himself, just to complete the circuit. Brian had a share in the anger, as well. Hey, a nice round number. Maybe they could make it a foursome, and everyone could take turns sticking needles into Geoff’s eyes. What an exciting thought.

After what seemed like hours, only Sabin had passed his door. Geoff crushed out his last cigarette of the night, rolled his pillow beneath his head and fell asleep.

Chapter 29

Crystal awoke, feeling one strong arm wrapped around her, holding her against a warm body and she smiled. She snuggled closer, her hand on his chest, listening to his breathing. In the complete darkness of the room, she could only hear him, feel him. She moved her leg across his thigh, pressing against him. Her head was on his shoulder and she hoped to wake him.

Last night had been so amazing she wanted a second dose of Jon Wiles in the early morning, before they had to pack. Besides, she wanted to have him again without being as drunk as she was last night. Jon insisted on drinking to kill the aches and pains he was having, knowing that she would be able to enjoy him more if she had a few drinks as well. He didn't want her hip to quench the night's activities. She sank into a deep sleep from the combination of alcohol and the exhausted state he left her in, but she was sure that Jon had to be infinitely more exciting sober.

When he didn't respond immediately to her touch, she closed her eyes, thinking. Jon was all that she expected him to be. He was rough but that only added to the conquest. He took exactly what he wanted, but then, so did she. She'd failed with Ty Synclair but Geoff Richards was next. Jordan didn't know how right he was about her. She smiled

in anticipation, brushing her hand across the thick mass of hair beneath her hand.

“Morning, babe,” came a voice in the darkness.

No. This wasn’t right. Confused, Crystal felt a panic rising in her.

“Morning, doll,” she heard from behind her. The arm around her moved and a second body pressed against her back. She felt calloused fingers moving up her side from her thigh to her ribs before the warm hand slipped between her and the body in front of her.

In a silent panic, she moved her hand again on his chest. Hair. Jon didn’t have hair on his chest. It finally made sense right before the bedside lamp clicked on.

“What are you doing here?” Crystal removed herself from Jordan, who had turned on the lamp. Crystal struggled to her feet, standing in the middle of the bed. She looked down at the bodies on either side of her.

“Well, we got to talking,” Jordan began, rolling on his side, propping his head on his hand. “We decided you’re working too hard.”

“We thought we’d save you some time and double up for you,” Jon concluded.

“Or on you, to be more to the point.” Jordan gave her a devilish grin.

“The hell you will.” Crystal tried to keep her balance on the mattress. She was distracted for a moment by the bruising down the side of Jordan’s face.

Jon laughed. “Not your choice anymore, doll.”

Jon and Jordan each grabbed one of her ankles and gave a tug, pulling her feet from under her. When she hit the bed, she felt herself being pulled toward the headboard. Four strong hands turned her around so her head was on the pillows again. She found herself in her original position

facing Jordan, with Jon holding her arms behind her. Jon pulled her hard against his body. She realized that struggling was useless.

Jordan kissed her hard, making it clear he could take what ever he wanted. He found the fear in her eyes and anger in her face soothing and mildly erotic.

“You know, babe, Jon and I have shared things for years. You should have been no exception. As you can see, we have control of the situation.” Jordan kissed her again, pressing his body against hers. She struggled at being sandwiched between the two. Jordan threw one leg over hers to keep her from thrashing around. He took the opportunity to run kisses and small nips down her neck, delighting in her growing anger, but once her eyes began to fill with tears, his ego didn’t seem to matter as much.

“Okay,” he said, rolling away from Crystal, looking at Jon over the top of her head. “I think she’s learned her lesson, don’t you?”

“I don’t know about that.” Jon grinned, doubt in his voice. “Why don’t you ask her?”

Jordan swept his eyes to Crystal’s face. “Did you learn your lesson yet?”

“You’re still a bastard.” Tears spilled from her eyes. “You, too, Wiles.” She gave Jordan a defiant look as her lips trembled.

“No, my mum was married to my dad.” He spoke in a matter of fact tone. “How about yours, Jon?”

“As far as I know, mine were, too. Still are.” Jon thrust against her backside. “I’d talk nice if I were in your position, doll. You used us. We use you. Everybody’s happy.”

Jordan continued. “We can continue this as long as you want, Crystal. We’ve got a couple of hours before we need to be anywhere. How far do you want it to go?”

“I’ll have you both arrested.”

“By who? You came with us willingly weeks ago. We took good care of you, fed you, housed you, and even paid your medical bills. You agreed to this,” Jordan reminded her.

“Do you think you’re going to ruin our reputation?” Jon laughed. “I think you’re too freakin’ late for that. Free publicity is always good according to Nigel.”

Jordan grinned. “Besides, until you came along, Jon and I shared everything. Why not you? I should have thought of this in the first place. It would have saved a lot of time and money. That bus cost us a fortune. And the costumes we need to replace.”

“Not to mention the guitar I broke,” Jon added. “Yours was busted in the roll over, too.”

“Yeah, there’s that,” Jordan agreed. “Congratulations, Crystal. You moved from only being a round heel to being a pretty high priced whore, I’d say. I never paid so much for a piece in my life.”

“We should get our money’s worth out of this one, J.C. Don’t you think?”

“You’re right. Ty flat didn’t want a piece of her, so Geoff and Brian can fight over what ever is left. So what part do you want first?” Jordan caressed the side of Crystal’s face, leaning forward to kiss her again.

Crystal struggled, turning her face into the pillow. Jordan laughed. “She wants to put up a fight. This is great.”

“I got her.” Jon rolled onto his back, pulling Crystal up on his chest, keeping her head low so she couldn’t hit him in the face as she struggled. With Jon pinning her arms, Crystal was totally helpless.

“OKAY, Okay.” Tears spilled from her eyes. “What do you want me to do?”

Jordan kissed her hard, rolled on his back, and pulled an envelope from the nightstand. He placed it on her stomach.

“Bus ticket. Go home.” He spoke in a commanding tone that left no room for discussion.

Jon released her arms. He slid her to the mattress, rolling on her, giving her a deep kiss before allowing Crystal to slide to the floor. She grabbed the envelope, giving them both a defiant look as she yanked a sheet from the foot of the bed. She wrapped it around her body, taking refuge in the bathroom, slamming the door.

“Good-bye, sweetheart,” Jon called out. “Miss you never.”

Jordan and Jon burst into laughter before rolling off opposite sides of the bed, pulling on their trousers.

“I think we should do that again sometime. What do you think?” Jon shook out his hair, pulling it back.

“Only if we find another beauty like her.” Jordan knew his ego was well on its way to being healed. “I hope it’s not any time real soon.”

Chapter 30

Diane turned on her side, pulling the pillow under her head. The blankets surrounding her body were warm and comforting. She fought against waking. Finding it impossible, she surrendered to the morning, blinking at the nightstand. Her watch lay beside Brian's. His read nine forty-five.

Brian slept on the sofa. He had to be uncomfortable with his head at an odd angle, chin to chest, legs extended over the arm. She felt bad but he had insisted, wanting her to feel comfortable. She was glad of his company as they spent hours talking through the night. Watching him now, Geoff's cold words washed over her.

"I have no choice," echoed through her mind. Her eyes misted as she focused on Geoff's ring. His promise. As if it were worth anything, from the conversation she and Brian witnessed.

She realized it was bitterness that whispered in her ear, giving her such thoughts. Geoff was sincere about taking care of her and the baby. He wasn't honest about being tied down. He made that painfully obvious. Diane knew if she forced him to marry her, it would only hurt them both in the long run. Them and the baby. Being widowed was tough enough. She didn't want to be "Geoff Richards' ex-

wife” as well. She knew that it would never last. She rolled on her back, laying her arm across her forehead, her eyes searching the ceiling.

“No, Geoff, you have a choice. You can choose Valerie or choose to be free.” She spoke the words quietly to the ceiling. “I can’t tie you down.” Then there was Brian to consider.

Brian was such a forgiving man, caring and kind. His proposal surprised her, in light of all that had happened. It would take care of everything if they both played their part. She appreciated the fact that Brian was so willing to play his part after confessing what she had done. She couldn’t be anything except grateful. It was the right solution for everyone involved. Almost everyone. Geoff, Valerie, and Brian would all be happy. She agreed to Brian’s terms, feeling she was trapping him, the thought of which made her uneasy. She rolled on her side to watch him sleep. An act she would be performing for some time to come, maybe for the rest of her life.

* * * *

Geoff knew that Diane made it a point to avoid him all day. As she made sure they were each ready, checking them over as they exited the dressing room, he wanted to pull her to the side, to explain.

After much sober thought, he finally figured it out. The truth was he loved Valerie with his head and his heart. She was strict—a challenge for him. She gave him rules to live by. Kept him on the straight and narrow, so to speak.

Diane? He loved her with his body. It was a physical thing. She was spontaneous, sparking instant fire in his blood. From the Plymouth incident, he knew she was warm and responsive, exactly what Valerie was not. Between the two, they made the perfect woman for him. But it didn’t

matter how he felt about Val. He would take care of Diane if she'd let him.

His stomach knotted as he watched her, trying to figure out the best way to explain it, first to her, then to Val. He hated to hit the stage feeling so tense but it looked like he'd have to. There would be no opportunity to work it out now. After he was deemed presentable, he moved down the hall toward side stage where he could watch her. He took several deep breaths going through his limbering pre-show stretch routine, hoping it would make him feel more at ease. ShadowsForge had to hit that stage as if it were the first night of the tour. It had to be fresh. It had to be alive.

Diane dismissed each one as ready, finally coming to Brian. If she was quick, Geoff might get time at least to apologize, to arrange time together later. He couldn't keep his gaze off her as she gave Brian the once over, hoping she would hurry. She tugged at his seams, as usual. She pushed his hair over his shoulders, straightened the collar on his shirt as he placed his hands on her hips.

Geoff's heart thudded as Diane ran her hands slowly down Brian's chest. It was far too obvious that she wasn't only smoothing the material. What did Brian think he was doing, putting his hands on her like that? She parted Brian's shirt, placing a kiss on his chest. Brian pulled her in, giving her a quick kiss before moving down the hall toward Geoff with a smile on his face. He brushed past Geoff, heading to where the others waited. Diane returned to her sewing kit with a smile, turning her back to Geoff.

"Oh, hell no."

Geoff took two strides toward Diane when he heard the chant. He stopped, knowing the house lights were going down. He scanned from Diane to Brian. Brian gave him a nod and two thumbs up, pushing through the curtain. Geoff

stood in indecision. He took another step toward Diane. Brian gave the four count and the axes screamed into Surrender. Geoff cursed as he dashed for the stage, his body primed with all the adrenaline that he would need to carry him through the next two and a half hours and probably the rest of the night.

* * * *

An hour later, Diane sat on a flight case listening to ShadowsForge. It had been weeks since she'd really listened. She tuned in on the drums, noticing the complicated patterns that Brian hammered out. She'd never paid that much attention before, realizing now how his chest and arms had been built to grizzly bear proportions.

Her attention was tugged back and forth between the hiss of the symbols that punctuated Fire and the rich tone of Geoff's voice.

*Insatiable flame shooting through my veins,
Searing my mind; driving me insane,
I'm out of control, over the edge,
Holding tight to a love that I hope never ends,*

*Leather and lace, Fire in ice,
The dream that you weave is a killing device,
Each fantasy moment is full of your charms,
You bleed my soul dry as I die in your arms,*

*You wear me down one touch at a time,
Tempting with love that I once thought was mine,
Leaving me sorrow, a lost empty shell,
Chained down in darkness, a personal Hell,*

I taste of your fire, praying for rain,

*To quench the desire, to soothe mortal pain,
Your flame ignites me, the words that you said,
Quench my fear of your torture, your world running red,*

*You blister my flesh. Tear me down. Break my will,
Leave me wretched, hungry, wanting you still,
Nothing left, only shards of cold shattered pride,
You promised me love. I knew that you lied,*

*It started so perfect, so right, so real,
Your scent, your touch, your promise, your feel,
You burned me blind, closed my eyes to your will,
I know that your love is a fire set to kill.*

Diane could hear the pain in Geoff's voice. It held a haunting tone she'd never heard before. He was putting more emotion into the words than Ty had when he penned them for the No Promises, No Pain album.

She thought that her open show of affection for Brian hadn't hurt Geoff too much. Listening to him now she wasn't sure. She'd struck a deal with Brian. It was the best way. Geoff would be satisfied, free to go his way, with or without Valerie. It was Brian's decision; she left it up to him. Diane wouldn't be abandoned with her child. She would be securely taken care of, not be alone. She'd have Brian, at least for now.

* * * *

Diane felt safe entering the dressing room. She'd hid backstage until the limos pulled away, not ready to face Geoff, not sure she wanted to see Brian. In the solitude, she gathered the costumes, checking for anything the band might have left lying about before locking down the wardrobe containers. When she was ready, she would have

a runner take her back to the hotel to get the costumes washed. All the routine things that made her feel normal.

The room reeked of after concert smells that Diane recognized, though she never grew accustomed to. Especially the heavy musk of sweat mixed with alcohol. She gathered up the stage towels, stacking them for the venue's laundry service to take care of. She tossed empty bottles into the wastebasket, cleaning up after her boys before tucking the costumes into her laundry bag.

There was a knock at the door; probably Pete with a roadie to collect the wardrobe containers. When no one entered, Diane dropped the half filled bag, opening the door.

"Did you get locked out?" She stepped back.

"No. I didn't want to frighten you." Brian smiled. His hair hung in soft waves around his muslin collar. The poet-style shirt crossed over his chest, draped to reveal a portion of his muscled torso. His narrow hips, wrapped in denim, looked inadequate to support the burden of his strong upper body. He smelled of soap and cologne, warm and clean in contradiction to the surrounding room.

"What are you doing here?" Diane was undecided how she felt about him staying behind. He looked so good.

"I wanted to see you. Do you mind?" He closed the door.

Diane returned to the bag, stuffing the pile of soiled costumes into it. "I suppose not."

Brian leaned against the door, folding his full sleeves over his chest. "He's upset."

"I noticed. I should have told him outright and this wouldn't be happening."

"I'll tell him. I think he'd take it better coming from me."

Diane shrugged, pulling the drawstring, closing the bag. "It's your show. You've known him longer than I have."

"Do I have your blessing, then?"

Diane dropped her shoulders, trying to ward off the tension creeping up her spine. "You're the one who wanted it this way. Do you want me there when you tell him?"

"Do you want to be there?"

Diane dropped the bag, turning to stare at him through narrowed eyes. "Do you have to answer every question with another question? Make a decision, would you?" She perched her fists on her hips. "It's what ever you want."

"What'd I do?" Brian reached for her. She turned away, walking to the dressing table that ran the length of the room, leaning her palms on the smooth countertop. She followed his reflection as he stepped behind her. She hoped, as he massaged her shoulders, that he wouldn't see the frustration she was feeling.

"You know what you did."

"No regrets." His reflection in the glass melted her.

"Time to pay for your sins. When will you tell him?"

It was Brian's turn to shrug. "When the time seems right, I guess. I'll let him down easy."

"Fine." Diane turned to face him, her frustration subsiding, the weight of responsibility lifted. "I don't want to talk about it any more tonight."

"Works for me." He pulled her to him, claiming her mouth.

Chapter 31

Valerie sat in the front row of the empty auditorium watching the crew tear down the stage, pack away the instruments, put ShadowsForge in a box wrapped and ready to move to the next venue. The limos left without her. That was fine. She wouldn't be the best of company tonight. She wouldn't be doing her job if she had gone with the band. She would be thinking, coming to a decision, about Geoff Richards.

Last night was hell, sleeping in Diane's room, thinking about them, wondering if they were together as she lay envious, confused and alone. They probably weren't, remembering the look on Diane's face when Geoff unwittingly confessed his feeling of entrapment. Diane was crushed; Valerie could tell by her face. What a horrible thing to hear from the father of your child. For a brief moment, Valerie hated Geoff Richards. For what he had done to Diane, for what he was putting both of them through.

She loved him, maybe. He saved her life. He carried her to his room, seeing that she was cared for. He was so attentive until they dropped her off in London and ShadowsForge went on to America. Was that enough to forget anything else he may have done? Was it love or more

likely gratitude? If he hadn't helped her, she may have died falling to that stage. But then, four other men caught her when she fell, when he dropped her. Did she love them all? It took five men to bring her to safety. Geoff was only one of them.

It bothered her that when he explained the Diane situation, it didn't hurt as much as it should have. Instead of betrayal, she felt relief. She felt worse for Diane than she did for herself. The tears that attacked her in the elevator were on Diane's behalf. To know that the man who took you, willing or not, used your body and left you with a child, now didn't want you, had to be the hardest truth to endure. If Geoff was so double-minded with Diane, how could Valerie trust him to be truthful with her? Fidelity was another issue, for both of them.

Another thing came to mind; she hadn't really missed him until she heard about the accident. She was happily working on her manuscript from the interview tapes. The time passed productively until she heard a report on the radio. She took the first commercial flight she could get but if she really loved him, she would have chartered a flight and gotten to him sooner. Why didn't she?

Why didn't she call to confirm that he was uninjured before spending so much money and flight time getting to him? Now that she was here, working on the biography was foremost in her mind, knowing that he was all right and she was "off the hook". That didn't bother her too much, either, now that she thought about it. Last night was an initial shock reaction. Her true feelings began to bleed through in the solitude of the darkened auditorium.

Valerie smiled. No, she didn't love him. Fond of him, perhaps, amused by him, but it wasn't love. Even if it was, it wasn't strong enough to put up with his womanizing. He

had the will power of a cabbage where women were concerned. Diane could have him if he was willing to stand by her. That was where he belonged. Valerie could live with that. As long as she could finish the biography, she would be satisfied. That was her purpose in the first place.

Valerie stood, heading to the side of the stage. She wanted to talk to Diane, let her know what she thought, how she felt. That she had no intention of standing in Geoff's way to be with her and their new family. As she walked down the dim hall to the dressing room, she heard voices. Loud. Angry.

Brian stepped out of the dressing room straightening his shirt, tucking it in as his long legs carried him briskly past her without a word. She watched him disappear into the dark before entering the room.

"What the hell do they think? That they can take turns?" Pete ranted at full volume as a roadie pushed two of the wardrobes toward the door. Diane was sitting on a chair, eyes down, as her brother paced the room shouting.

Valerie stopped the roadie. "What's going on?"

"You better stay low. Brian got caught with his hands on Diane. Pete will be a pain in the arse for the rest of the week." He shook his head, pushing the cases out the door.

"You know what?" Diane's voice rang out. She stood face to face with her brother. "Why don't you leave me alone? You're not my father." She turned to leave, nearly running into Valerie.

"Diane." Valerie felt embarrassed walking in on the situation. "Could I talk to you?"

In an agitated voice, Diane said, "Is it really necessary right now, Val?" She looked close to tears.

“No. I just wanted to tell you that I’m on your side.” Val held out her arms to Diane, receiving her in an encouraging hug. Diane returned the embrace.

As the friends parted, Diane gave a weak smile. “You don’t know how much this means to me. I’d like to talk to you. How about tomorrow on the crew bus? Would that be all right? I still have a lot to do tonight.”

Valerie felt a burden lift from her heart. “That would be great.” She smiled. “I’ll pick up some of those butter cookies you like so much and we can gorge.”

“Thank you. For everything.” Diane squeezed her hand.

“Coming through.” Pete growled, pushing by with the remaining three wardrobes. Diane scowled at him as she collected the canvas bag and left the room.

Chapter 32

Philadelphia, Pa.

ShadowsForge rolled down the interstate. The band bus led the crew and security buses, three stage rigs and the equipment truck. It wasn't often that the entourage rolled together. When they did, they made an impressive silver string, a shining snake stretching down the interstate highway.

Crossing the Pennsylvania state line, Geoff rolled out of the bunk, unable to sleep. He pulled his shoes on, ran his fingers through his thick waves and walked to the front of the bus buttoning his shirt. Ty and Alexis looked comfortable. Ty on the driver's side bench seat with his wife on a cushion on the floor, leaning against his legs, both reading. Jon and Jordan sat across from each other at the front, acoustics in hand, working out a new riff. Brian sat sideways on the bench along the passenger side, his legs drawn up, back against the partition. He watched out the window, elbow on the windowsill, chin resting on his fist, deep in thought.

Geoff could sit between Jon and Ty or between Jordan and Brian. Jon and Ty. Alexis smiled at him as he sat down.

Ty closed his magazine. "You're up early."

“Too much to think about.” His gaze wandered across to Brian.

Ty placed his hands absently on his wife’s shoulders, massaging gently. “What’s on your mind?”

“A guy has to wonder why a man who has a girl makes her ride in a different vehicle.” Geoff hoped that Brian would take the hint. When he didn’t respond, Geoff continued. “If you make the effort to hook up with a skirt, you should spend any down time with her. Especially if she was important enough for you to take her from one of your friends.”

Brian rolled his eyes and let out a deep breath. “I didn’t take her from you.”

“Did she tell you I proposed to her?” Geoff sat forward, elbows on his knees. He spoke in a steady voice. “Gave her the ring down on one knee, in classic style. Did she tell you that?”

“She told me.” Brian continued to watch the scenery go by.

“Did she tell you she’s pregnant?”

“You told me at the hospital. You told the whole bloody waiting room, remember?” Annoyance crept into his words.

“So how can a man simply take another man’s woman and his baby and still consider himself a man?”

Alexis stood. “I’m not getting in the middle of this.” She moved to the far side, sitting close to Jordan. Jordan and Jon stopped playing, watching the exchange. So far, the opponents were speaking in fairly civil tones.

Brian turned to face Geoff, putting his boots on the floor. “I thought Valerie was your woman. Where’s she?”

“She’s on the crew bus. That’s where she wants to be. I’m not talking about Valerie and you know it.”

“Ah. So just to make things clear, tell everyone who you’re talking about, if Valerie is your woman but you aren’t talking about her.”

Geoff looked around. All eyes were on him. “Would you care to step in the back and discuss this privately, Cummings?”

“No. I like it right here. You have no secrets, Geoff, but I’ve got one for you.” Brian smirked.

“What? That you’ve been sleeping with Diane? That’s no secret. Not when I’ve seen her coming out of your room the last two mornings. Yeah, I’ve been watching. How about that you sent her a couple of hundred pounds, excuse me, dollars worth of roses?”

Brian shrugged. “Three hundred and eighty two, to be exact. Arranged and delivered.”

“Big man. She gave them to the hospital when we left Semantica.”

Brian nodded. “She’s a giving person. Made a lot of patients happy.”

“She gives a lot, does she?” Geoff raised his eyebrows.

“Do you have something profound to say or can I go back to more important things like staring out the window?”

“I want to know how you feel about her baby.” Geoff stood.

“What makes it your business?”

“My child. My business.”

“It’s not your business. She told you it’s not yours.”

“I checked around. There’s no one else.”

“Is your head that thick, or is your ego that big?” Brian stood, followed by Ty.

Ty stepped between them. “Didn’t we learn something about this last week?”

Gary applied the brakes, causing the three men to stagger as he pulled off the road, the bus rocking to a halt. He slammed the bus into neutral, setting the brake and opening the door as he stood.

“Take it the hell outside, boys.” Gary pointed out the door, surprising everyone. “We got lucky last time. No one got killed. We’re not wrecking another one.” When no one moved, Gary grabbed Brian by the shirt and thrust him down the steps, out the door. Brian walked several yards away before turning around, hands on hips as he waited.

Ty followed Gary’s example, though he didn’t shove Geoff as forcefully out the door. Gary closed the door, dropping into the driver’s seat. “Let me know when they’re finished.”

Jordan, Jon, Ty and Alexis knelt on the seat, watching.

* * * *

The two men looked at their audience standing along the silver line of vehicles that outlined the highway. Several of the roadies, the Shadows, Pete and the two women stood beside their buses to see what was happening. Diane and Valerie exchanged glances, each concerned for one of the men facing off several yards away.

Brian brushed his hair out of his face, unbuttoning his shirt. “Perfect. The whole crew is watching. Now what do you want to do?”

“Kick your ass.” Geoff took angry strides toward Brian.

“You shouldn’t try it. I don’t want to humiliate you in front of the women. They’re both watching.”

Geoff stopped within striking distance of the shorter man. “Damn it. This is the first time in my life I’ve felt responsible for something, and I’m going to take care of that baby whether you have his mum or I do.” He raised his fists, ready to defend himself.

Brian shook his head in exasperation. He turned to his right, pulling his shirt open to take it off. Geoff waited, flexing his hands.

Brian looked down at the ground, slipped his right arm out of the shirt and spun around with a right hook that put Geoff flat on his back in a cloud of dust. Brian stomped close to Geoff's head, pinning his hair to the ground, landing on one knee on the downed singer's chest. He brought his left fist down, halting his strike an inch from Geoff's throat. His eyes blazed.

"Listen carefully. I'm going to say this one time and then I'm walking away. It's not your child. Leave Diane alone. I could have crushed your throat and there's nothing you could've done. You don't know where I come from and you don't want to fight me. You'll lose. You'll lose everything."

Brian stared into the shocked, pain filled eyes of his victim until he felt he was understood. He nodded, stood and backed away. His shirt hung from one shoulder, his chest heaved from the adrenaline. He raked his hair from his face before offering a trembling hand to the singer.

Geoff held his face, working his jaw several times.

"Didn't this adventure start out this way?" Geoff rubbed his chest, pulling in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. He held his aching jaw as he allowed Brian to help him up.

Brian pulled him to his feet, making sure Geoff was steady before releasing his hand. Head down, he turned to walk away, pulling on his shirt. He stopped, slapping the dust from his trouser leg.

Valerie covered her mouth. "Did you see that?"

Diane leaned against the bus, a nauseated look on her face. "I didn't know Brian could fight. He's such a gentle, quiet man."

Pete grinned, looking from Valerie to Diane. "What are they fighting about?" Both women shrugged before exchanging a glance.

"Great," Geoff shouted. "Just walk away. Now Diane can tell my kid his father's a loser."

Pete's grin melted into a frown as he turned on his sister. "His kid? You're pregnant?" Diane wilted under his angry glare. Pete headed toward Geoff. Diane chased after him with Valerie close behind.

Brian faced Geoff, taking a deep breath. He tossed his hands up. "You are so dense. I'll spell it out for you. Okay, here it comes. Listen hard. It is not your kid. Understand? It's mine." Brian glared at Geoff. "Did you get it? Do you understand?"

Pete stopped so suddenly, Diane ran into him. He looked from man to man in confusion. "Which one am I supposed to kill?"

Chapter 33

Diane moved in front of Pete, placing her hands on his chest as if she could hold him back. “No one. Stay out of it. I’m not a little girl anymore. I can make my own decisions and my own mistakes.”

Pete looked over his sister’s head at the two performers. “So, who is the father?” He dropped his gaze to Diane.

Diane walked past Brian to Geoff, taking his hand. She looked up into his face. “You don’t remember anything because there’s nothing to remember. I thought I might be pregnant. I told Brian, but he wasn’t exactly happy about it. We had an argument. I was angry and hurt and wanted to hurt him back. I was in the elevator when you stumbled in so drunk.

Diane dusted dirt from Geoff’s shoulder. “I thought if Brian found out I was with you, he’d come after me. I know it was childish but I wanted him to be jealous. Wouldn’t you know that nobody knew I was in your room? Not even you.” She slipped the engagement ring from her finger, putting it in Geoff’s palm, closing his hand around it.

Diane turned to Valerie. “He made it into the room, undressed and passed out. Once he was on that bed, he was finished. He barely got his trousers off. He didn’t do

anything, not even a goodnight kiss.” Valerie nodded. Diane looked around as she continued.

“I’ve already told Brian what happened that night. I slept beside Geoff because I didn’t want to go back to my room and run into Brian. It was morning before I knew it. When Brian found me, Pete and Jon were with him. This is what I should have done. Pete.”

She turned to her brother.

“If I want to sleep with Geoff Richards or Brian Cummings or anyone else, I’ll do it. It’s none of your business.” Diane smiled at Valerie. “I wasn’t much of a temptation for him. He’s been true to you. I think you should forgive him. He was a victim of circumstantial evidence and tried to be noble about it.”

Diane returned to Brian.

“I’m having my baby. If you want a part in its life, that’s up to you. If not, that’s your loss. Newcastle...” She bit her lip. “Or was it Sheffield? One of those nights, when we made love, we created a life. It was an accident but not a mistake. Before you all think I’m horrible for so soon moving on to another man, I was missing Rory so bad it hurt. Brian was everything that I needed.”

She placed her hand on Brian’s chest, stroking it lightly. “I don’t know if I love you, Brian, but I want to find out, if you’ll give me the chance. If not...” She shrugged in resignation.

Diane took a deep breath, wrapping her arms around her body as if she were cold. “I’m not feeling well, and we’ll be late if we don’t get moving.” She walked toward the crew bus.

Geoff watched her go, turning to Valerie. She stroked his swelling face.

“You don’t fight very well.” She kissed his cheek.

“Hey, it’s the thought that counts.” Geoff flinched at her touch. “B.J., where the hell did you learn to fight?” He put his arm around Valerie.

“Leicester. I told you I was a hitter.” Brian’s attention was on Diane as she reached the crew bus. They made eye contact before she disappeared up the steps, Pete close behind her.

“Truce?” Geoff held out his hand to Brian.

Brian shook his hand, giving him an uncertain smile. “Don’t make me go there again. It’s a scary place I left behind a long time ago.”

“No argument from me.” Geoff rubbed his jaw, realizing how little he knew about the man. He nodded toward the crew bus. “Go get her.”

“Yeah.” Brian stuffed his hands in his pockets, heading toward the crew bus as Geoff banged on the band bus door.

Gary opened the door, a smirk on his face. “You’re a wimp, lad.”

“Thanks. Could we come in now?” Geoff hugged Val to his side.

“Not until you knock the dirt off your back.” Gary grinned. “You’re not getting my new bus dirty.”

“Cute, Mum. Did you just mop the floors?” He brushed the back of his head, wincing once more. “That bastard stood on my hair.” He held his head. “That hurts.” He opened his hand, revealing the ring. With eyebrows raised, he held his hand out to Valerie. “You want this?”

Valerie smirked at him. “Are you serious? I know where it’s been.” She laughed.

“Women. You’re all high maintenance.” He turned, taking a step toward the field. With an exaggerated wind up, he pitched the ring as far as he could into the waiting

weeds. Putting his hand on Valerie's back, he guided her up the steps ahead of him.

Chapter 34

Washington, DC.

Geoff paced the hall. “This should be easy. It’s not like I haven’t done it before.”

He was running on the adrenaline from the show. It had gone very well, considering the light swelling of his jaw. It didn’t affect his voice but it ached. The meet and greet was short and thankfully so. He had plans. Important plans that he didn’t want to put off.

He leaned against the wall beside Valerie’s door, pulling a small box from his shirt pocket. He popped the lid open, studying the sparkling ring. The solitaire was surrounded by a sweep of smaller stones. It winked at him, the promise of adventures to come; the adventures of a married man. Married to one woman, now and forever; till death do us part. It sounded like such a good idea a few weeks ago, back in Chicago. That stone mocked him.

“Don’t look at me like that or you could end up in a field. Remember the last ring I bought?” He smirked, snapping the lid closed as the elevator opened at the end of the hall. Ty stepped out, his long strides carrying him briskly toward Geoff.

“Are you the hall monitor?” Ty smiled.

Geoff dropped the box into his pocket. “Sure. Where’s your pass?”

“How about a password? Matrimony?” Ty’s eyes sparkled to match the stone.

“Does it show?” Geoff raked his fingers through his hair.

Ty backhanded Geoff’s shirt, his wedding ring clicking against the box. “Sure does.”

Geoff pulled the box from his pocket, removing the ring from it. “Get rid of this, would you?” He handed the box to Ty.

“No problem.” Ty flipped the box in the air, snatching it as it fell. “Good luck, mate.” Ty continued to his room, giving Geoff a dimpled grin as he disappeared through the door.

Geoff dropped the ring into his pocket, squared his shoulders, stepped up to the door and knocked. An eternity passed before Valerie answered with a smile.

“I’ll be right with you.” Valerie went to the table, shutting down her laptop as Geoff waited in the doorway. She was wearing the same outfit she had worn at the interview, navy blue slacks that fit every curve, blue blouse and black heels. *We’ve come full circle.*

“I thought we’d eat in my room, if that’s all right with you.”

Valerie nodded. “Sounds good to me. I’m ready.” She stepped past Geoff, allowing him to pull her door closed. Geoff put his arm around her as they walked in silence down the hall to his room.

Valerie smiled when he opened the door for her. The lights were dim. The drapes were open, providing the backdrop of a starry night sky. A table had been set up,

dinner for two. Candles, white tablecloth, champagne, and a single white rose.

“This is beautiful. Not exactly your style but I love it.”

She moved to the window. While she enjoyed the view, Geoff took the ring from his pocket, hoping the perfect opportunity would present itself. He stepped up behind her, trying to think of the right words as he palmed the ring.

She glanced up at him. “I wish I could hold the stars in my hand.”

He couldn’t have asked for a better opening. “Would you like me to get them for you?”

Valerie looked over her shoulder at him. “You’d do that for me?”

He smiled his media smile. “Watch this.” He wrapped one arm around her, pulling her back against his chest. He swept the star field back and forth as he gathered every twinkling light. Holding them tight, he showed her his closed fist. Reaching around her with both arms, he worked to compact the stars, tucking in any escaping starlight between his fingers. He wrapped his arm around her again, opening his hand. The ring sparkled in his palm, reflecting the candlelight. “The stars—for you.”

Valerie drew a slow breath, leaning against him. “I don’t know what to say.”

Geoff turned her to face him, taking her hand. “Here’s the question. Are you ready for it?” He paused.

Valerie nodded, looking up at him.

“You want me on the floor for this?”

“You don’t need to.”

“Good. Okay. Here it is.”

He paused again, looking into her blue eyes. Why was this so much easier when he’d asked Diane? Maybe he

wasn't supposed to ask Valerie to marry him. Maybe he wasn't ready for matrimonial commitment. Maybe God was telling him not to do it. Maybe he would get struck by lightening and not have to go through with it. That was a crazy thought. He took a deep breath, forging ahead.

"Valerie Leonard, will you marry me?"

She searched his face, a calm seriousness in her eyes. Moments passed without words. Geoff felt a knot develop in his stomach.

She finally spoke. "I didn't expect this so soon."

"Should I wait a while?" Geoff wondered why she was stalling. Isn't this what she wanted? What she had been putting him off so long for? "You know, the thing with Diane wasn't my fault. I was only trying to do the right thing by her."

"I know and I'm proud of you for it. How's your jaw?"

Geoff tilted his head stroking the slight swelling on the side of his face. "It's fine, and you're changing the subject."

"I know." She bit her lip, eyes focusing on the ring. He held it poised, waiting to slide it on her finger.

"Are you stalling? You want me to suffer waiting for your answer?" He hoped not. "Because this is nerve wracking, y'know?"

"Can we talk about this, or do you want an answer right now?"

Geoff hesitated, looking at her hand and the ring. "We can talk." He pushed the ring onto her finger. Before she could protest, he folded her hand in his. "We can talk about it, sure. But—I can't put the stars back in the sky. You're stuck with them."

"Just like a man to not put something back where he got it." Valerie laughed. She admired the ring, hugging

Geoff around the neck. "It's very pretty. You're being so romantic tonight."

He shrugged. "I wanted to make you happy. Women like this kind of thing." Geoff gestured for them to sit at the table. He pulled out the chair for her, seating her before taking his place.

"You're doing a bang up job of it. It's just so unlike you."

"Would it be more like me if I tossed you on the bed and demand a tumble?" He quickly eyed the bed. Valerie laughed. He loved the way she looked in the candlelight. "Would you care to get sweaty and breathe funny? You're a bit overdressed for it, but then, so am I. Hey, why don't we get naked?"

He laughed with her, opening the top buttons of his shirt. If she only knew how serious he was, and how warm he was getting.

"That's the Geoff Richards I know." Valerie tapped her glass with a manicured fingernail. "Buy a girl a drink?"

Geoff wondered what was going on in her head. She didn't get insulted about the naked remark, and she wanted a drink. Now who was acting out of character? He poured champagne in his glass first, tasting it. Giving an approving nod, he filled her glass before topping his off.

"This was supposed to be for after you said yes." He held up his glass toward her.

Valerie lifted hers, tapping it against his; the chime hung in the air.

"Yes."

Geoff's heart thudded. "You'll marry me?"

"No." She smiled.

Geoff narrowed his eyes in confusion. "I don't get it. Yes, what?"

“Yes, to your second offer.” She sipped her champagne, stood to kick off her shoes, slowly opening the buttons on her blouse. “You might want to lock that door.”

* * * *

Diane lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling. She thought about the events of the last few days. It had been an emotional roller coaster. Seeing Geoff and Brian fight, although it was quick, made her heart pound. When Geoff hit the ground and Brian landed on him, his fist plunging toward Geoff’s throat, Diane thought she would faint. Geoff’s voice was everything to him and vital to ShadowsForge. Thank God Brian halted the strike.

She wasn’t able to hear what Brian said to Geoff as he held the singer pinned to the ground but she was relieved to see Brian offer his hand to pull Geoff up.

“Brian?”

“Hmm?”

“What did you say to Geoff after you hit him?” She turned on her side, hugging her pillow.

“I told him to leave you alone. It’s not his kid.”

“How did the fight start?” Her gaze wandered around the dark room as she listened.

“He accused me outright of stealing his woman—and his child.”

“Is that how you feel?” This was getting so complicated.

“I didn’t steal anything.” His voice was soft.

“I thought Pete was going to explode when you told Geoff the baby’s yours.”

“Geoff’s off your back and that’s what matters. That confession you made wasn’t the one we rehearsed. You did a good job, though, except for one part. Newcastle or Sheffield? Sounded like you don’t remember.” He paused. “I thought that was a secret.”

“I don’t want to have any more secrets.”

“I haven’t had to fight in a lot of years. I didn’t like it when the old Brian got stirred up and took over. I didn’t mean to hurt Geoff. It just happened.”

“You only hurt his pride.”

“I nearly took his voice. I might as well have taken his life.”

Diane heard a heavy sigh. “You didn’t do it, though. You stopped yourself.”

“Barely.”

Diane heard the sorrowful tone in Brian’s voice. He was more upset about the fight than she thought he should be. It was over. Everything worked out the way they wanted it to. She confessed more than he expected to hear. Their night together was out in the open and he could decide what he wanted to do.

Brian was so compassionate and giving. He was a beautiful person. Could she love him? Easily. He was not far from being the man that Rory was. That was the initial attraction for her but over time he became so much more.

“Brian?”

“Hmm.”

“Would you hold me?”

“Are you sure?” He sounded doubtful. “You know what happened last time.”

“Please?” She listened for any indication that he was moving. “How long are you going to sleep on the sofa?”

“How long have you known you’re pregnant?”

“Unofficially? Before we left England.”

There was movement in the dark. Brian tossed his pillow on the bed before slipping under the covers beside her. She turned to him, laying her head on his shoulder as he took her in his arms. His body felt comforting. She

closed her eyes as she laid her hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat.

“Sheffield,” Brian whispered. “It was Sheffield.”

Chapter 35

Valerie opened her eyes. She felt like she'd been run over by a large truck. What a night. She was looking at the legs of the table and an over turned chair. The remains of their dinner sat on a bed sheet, shoved against the wall below the window. She grinned. The prime rib had been perfect and she'd had no idea that mashed potatoes were so versatile.

The drapes were open allowing the morning sun to blaze into the room. Several pieces of clothing peeked from under the bed. She groaned, pushing her hair from her face as she rolled on her back. She stifled a laugh when she noticed her bra hung from the ceiling fan. It had taken Geoff several throws to put it up there from the floor, where they now lay. How cliché.

Geoff was beside her, one arm beneath her head, the other curled beneath his own. They were covered with the tablecloth. He was staring at the ceiling, humming *Surrender*.

"What's on your mind?" Valerie rolled toward him, adjusted the tablecloth, modestly covering herself, draping her leg across his thigh. She laid her arm across his body.

"One—more—time." He grinned.

She laughed. "I'm going to feel this in the morning, and this is the morning. I thought you said slow and easy?"

She looked around at the devastation. The mattress was half off of the bed on its way to the door. The sheets had been dragged from the mattress. One was beneath the collection of dishes; the comforter and other sheet acted as padding between them and the floor. Lamps were knocked over; furniture was shoved out of the way.

"It started out that way. Are you complaining?" His eyes met hers.

"No. Just wondering."

"About what?"

"Is this normal?"

"I was wondering about that myself." He shifted, reaching beneath his lower back. He pulled out a fork, tossing it toward the dishes. It clattered onto a plate. "That's better." He grinned as he settled comfortably. "I don't think I've ever quite so successfully thrashed a room like this. Wish I had pictures."

"Housekeeping is going to hate you." Valerie ran a finger through the hair on his chest, drawing small circles with her nail.

"Me? What about you?" He hugged her.

"I'm just some no name round heel as far as they're concerned. You're the star."

"This is what happens when the dragon gets famished. You need to feed him more often."

"I wish I could." Valerie spoke in an apologetic tone.

"There's no reason you can't. Is there?" Geoff's questioning gaze drilled into her, causing her to lower her eyes.

"It's difficult to explain."

Geoff rolled on his side, cradling her in the crook of his arm. She turned her eyes toward the window.

"I think you'd better give it a go, Val. What's the problem?"

"I can't marry you."

Geoff looked puzzled and disappointed. "This is a joke, right? I wasn't good enough, huh?" He gave her an uncertain smile.

She smiled. "I've never had better. I promise you that. But..." She hesitated.

"But what?"

"I'm already married."

Geoff stared in stunned silence. "Would you like to say that again? It sounded like you're already married." He pulled away from her, standing.

Valerie sat up, facing him. "It was about three years ago. I haven't seen him in over two years."

"So you're getting a divorce, right?" He looked hopeful, offering his hand, pulling her up.

"No. I don't know where he is or what happened to him."

"He just walked out on you and you aren't divorcing him?"

"I don't think he walked out. I think he was abducted."

"By who?"

Valerie wrapped the tablecloth around her while she searched the room for her clothes. "If I knew that, I could probably find out what happened to him."

Geoff found his trousers beneath the bed along with her blouse. He pulled on his trousers, handing her blouse to her as she pulled on her slacks. Stretching, he retrieved her bra from the fan.

“So what was last night all about?” Confusion marred his features.

“I thought it was about us.” Valerie dressed quickly.

Geoff shoved the mattress in place, sitting on the edge. He gathered up the bedclothes from the floor, casting them in a ball over his head against the headboard.

“Apparently, there is no us.” It was a flat statement. “Why didn’t you tell me a month ago? Do you like playing games?”

“I didn’t think you’d meet the challenge. Until yesterday, we both thought you failed. I don’t tell anyone I’m married because it’s so complicated to explain. He’s in surveillance; that’s all I can say about him. Until he is declared legally...”

She stopped, swallowing hard. “Until he comes back or they declare him dead, there’s nothing I can do. I don’t play games, Geoff. That’s why I stayed with you last night. I owed you that, at least. Above all, I wanted you.” She pulled the ring from her finger, holding it out to him, a sadness lurking in her misty eyes.

“Put that back on. I told you last night, you’re stuck with them.” He smiled, taking the ring and returning it to her finger. He pulled her to sit on his lap, wrapping his arms around her waist, kissing her shoulder. “Thank you for last night. I’ll never forget it. Just remember, I gave you the stars.” He took her hand, admiring the ring.

“I can’t keep the star that I really want.” Valerie hugged Geoff’s neck.

“Maybe not, but you can always take a tour of the Milky Way now and then. Let me know when you want another rocket ride.”

Chapter 36

Roanoke, Va.

Diane tucked her scissors into her back pocket. She poked a threaded needle through her collar and dropped a spool of thread into her shirt pocket. She took her place at the dressing room door as ShadowsForge emerged. Jon wore a killer smile as he stepped in front of her.

“You look too happy, Jon. What are you up to?” Diane checked him over.

“I love the way you put your hands all over me, girl.” He winked at her as she knelt before him, running her hands down his legs. She squeezed his muscular thighs. “Ooh, baby.”

“Don’t let Brian hear you.” Diane stood. “You’re ready.” She stepped out of his way, slapping him on his leather-clad backside as he walked by. Jordan took Jon’s place. Diane straightened his collar, smoothing the shoulders lightly. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Doing a lot better. My guitar isn’t as uncomfortable as it was a week ago.” Jordan smiled. “How’s my face look?”

Diane eyed the fading bruise that followed his hairline. She pinched both of his cheeks. “Gorgeous.” She wrinkled her nose at him.

“Okay. What’s the story? You’re the one that’s too happy.” J.C. grasped her wrists, pulling her fingers from his face.

“I like to see all of my men looking good. It’s a reflection on their wardrobe lady when they do.” She shrugged, turning him around. “You’re ready.”

Jordan laughed. “As Nigel would say, you look like you got some last night.”

Diane gasped, covering her mouth, achieving a look of wide-eyed innocence. “Me? Never.”

“I could argue that point.” Brian’s voice echoed from the dressing room.

Diane grinned as Jordan moved down the hall. Ty stepped through the door with Alexis behind him.

“All right, Synclair,” Diane commented, putting her hands on her hips. “You’ve been seeing that other woman again, haven’t you? You look perfect—as usual.”

Ty gave her a grin. “I can’t help it. She’s there every time I turn over in bed. She won’t keep her hands off of me. She gives me a workout every night. To keep me healthy, so she says.” Ty jumped as Alexis pinched him.

Alexis leaned against the doorframe looking up at her husband. “He always complains. You think I should throw him back?”

“No. There’s too many that would be willing to catch him. Besides, you’d only have to train another one.” Diane dusted at his shoulders, carefully moving his curls aside. “Sorry, Alexis. I have to get my hands on each of them at least once per show. Fringe benefits.”

“I heard that.” Brian called out again.

Diane smirked. Alexis looked into the dressing room. “Don’t worry. I’m keeping my eye on her—and him.”

Diane moved out of the way for the Synclairs to pass. She smiled, watching Ty kiss his wife before he followed the other guitarists to side stage. Diane's mood faded as Geoff stepped in front of her.

"Geoff." She moved through her usual ritual, unsure what she should say to him. It was difficult to tease with him after what she had done.

"No kind words for me tonight, girl?" Geoff held out his arms for her to check his cuffs and sleeves.

"Why are you so dressy tonight? Two shirts? You can't usually get one on and buttoned." Geoff was wearing a form-fitting black tear-away shirt under a cobalt blue, long sleeved, dress shirt that was buttoned up half way. Both were tucked in at his waist that was encircled by a silver studded black leather belt. His silver ShadowsForge logo nested in the thick hair above the low neckline of the tear away shirt. She knelt before him, smoothing his black suede trouser legs, straightening them over black suede boots.

"I have a special spotlight moment tonight. You'll have to watch. Let me know what you think." He held out his hand to help her stand. She took it, looking into his topaz eyes as she rose. "It's a little something I worked out with your lad, there." He glanced behind him, into the dressing room.

"I'll be watching. You look good, by the way. When did you get this shirt?" Diane straightened his collar, although it didn't need it. She ran her hands across his shoulders and down his chest.

"I had Gary pick these up for tonight. It's a one night only appearance. Could you do me a favor, though?" Geoff's eyes sparked.

“What do you need?” Although he wasn’t the man for her, Geoff could still incite a twinge deep within Diane. Especially the way he looked tonight.

“Your scissors. Could you take a snip right here?” He held out the collar of the tear-away, marking the center of the neckline. “Just a small nick that won’t show.”

Diane looked at him, one eyebrow raised. “Should I ask why?” She retrieved her scissors from her back pocket, complying with his request.

“You’ll see. And another one here—and here.” He indicated for her to take a snip at the top of each sleeve where they connected to the shoulders of the shirt. “Where’s Val?”

“She’ll be meeting me in a few minutes, once you hit the stage.”

“Good. I want her to see this, too. Cummings, you ready or what?” Geoff kissed his fingertip, touching it to Diane’s nose. He strutted down the hall as Brian stepped out of the room.

Diane finished buttoning Brian’s shirt. He in turn, unbuttoned it. “What are you two up to?”

“Nothing you won’t like, I guarantee you.”

“He’s going to roast in that shirt. It’s too hot under those lights for it.” Diane checked Brian over before kissing him.

“He won’t be hot for too long. Only until my solo.” Brian kissed her again, following after the others as the chant began.

* * * *

After an hour of sweltering heat, Geoff was ready to be rid of the stifling shirts. He was grateful when they reached Brian’s solo. The axe men of the group dashed off stage for a well-deserved break. Geoff climbed atop the drum riser in

the center of the stage holding out a hand of presentation to Brian.

“This is Brian Cummings, one hell of a drummer and one hell of a hitter.” Brian stood smiling, nodded toward each side before raising his sticks in a fisted hand above his head. Geoff waited for the response to die down. Brian settled behind his drum kit before Geoff continued.

“Let’s turn up the heat.”

Brian started out with a thundering drum roll that grew to a complicated pattern with burlesque overtones. Geoff prowled back and forth, moving in time to Brian’s four-count beat. Shoving his microphone into his waistband at the small of his back, he unbuttoned one cuff. Working his finger into the nick Diane had clipped in the material, he ripped the sleeve from his shirt. He tossed the material into the throng, inciting a competition for the memento reminiscent of the piranha that devoured Jordan’s shirt in Semantica. Once he moved to the opposite stage front, he repeated the performance with the other sleeve.

Geoff pulled the microphone from his waistband.

“Hey, you like that?” He smiled, his eyes glittering as he surveyed the women. The response fed his ego. Being refused by two women in two days had taken its toll.

“You want some more?” Geoff returned the microphone to his waistband. He slunk across the stage, making it clear he was shopping from the feminine smorgasbord. Brian kept the thundering beat coming, spinning a few sticks high into the audience while providing Geoff with the incentive to thrill the fans with all he had to give.

Geoff grinned at the shocked response from both Diane and Valerie in the wing. Nigel was undecided about the whole thing. He covered his eyes, turning his back to the

stage. *All the better...* Geoff leapt to the drum riser, hooking his microphone in a stand.

With feet wide, throwing his head back dramatically, he ripped his shirt open, sending buttons scattering. Peeling it from his body ever so slowly, he swung the shirt about in classic burlesque style while moving to the edge of the platform, finally flinging it to the outstretched hands of the fans. Several women succeeded in claiming a part of the material.

Amid the thunderous response, Geoff made a circuit of the stage, pointing out certain women, licking his fingertips in silent promise. When the crowd reached a fever pitch, he grasped the front of his remaining shirt, ripping it slowly down the front, hips gyrating in time to the beat. He stretched the material outward with both hands, revealing his sweat-glistening, sun-bronzed torso.

With the remains hanging like an ill-fitting vest, Geoff jerked his microphone from the stand.

"You want it?" He paused looking all around. "I got it." Another pause while the noise rose and fell. "Can I give it to you?" The arena roared.

Geoff Richards smiled his media smile as he tossed the shredded material, grasping the buckle on his belt.

* * * *

ROANOKE TIMES.

ROANOKE, VA. —

SHADOWSFORGE'S GEOFF RICHARDS SHOWS OFF MORE THAN HIS GOLDEN VOICE

ShadowsForge brought down the thunder, the lightning and security during Monday's performance.

The highlight was the medley of the group's best sellers, followed by the impromptu disrobing of the twenty-five year old bronzed Adonis.

Playing to a sellout crowd of ten thousand in the Roanoke Civic Center, ShadowsForge's performance turned to liquefied lust. The British bad boys thundered across the stage playing in-the-round after the fashion of their legendary forefathers. They packed six years of golden hits (of which there have been many) into a two-hour show.

Geoff Richards, Ty Synclair, Jordan Cantrell, Jon Wiles and Brian Cummings demonstrated their dedication and stamina, performing phenomenally only one week after they were involved in a tour bus roll over just out side of Semantica, New York. In their undaunted style, they have continued to meet all commitments since the accident, blazing their way across the eastern states.

Beginning with the crackling of Cummings riveting percussion, overlaid with a tempest of Cantrell and Wiles' riff-wars, and underscored by the rolling thunder of Synclair's bass, ShadowsForge builds a show comparable to an F-Five tornado of lights and sound.

Richards' distinctive vocals were crystal clear despite the gale-force performance surrounding him. The band maintained fast paced circulation between the four front rows of the arena setting.

"Let's turn up the heat." Richards challenged at one point, ripping the sleeve from his shirt at the beginning of another legendary drum solo performed by Brian Cummings. Richards eventually tossed both sleeves and the remainder of his shirt into the throng, inciting a competition for the souvenirs of riotous proportions.

Before it was over, Richards' shirt, torn in several pieces—his remaining shirt removed in WWF style—and his belt had been surrendered to the crowd. When he unfastened his trousers, several Civic Center Security personnel swarmed the stage, surrounding him. Security

dragged Richards from the stage, bringing a negative response of outrage from the crowd. After assuring the management that he had had no intension of going any further, Richards was allowed to continue the show.

Several female fans were overcome in the excitement, requiring medical attention. They were carried from the crowded floor to the medical station at the side of the arena.

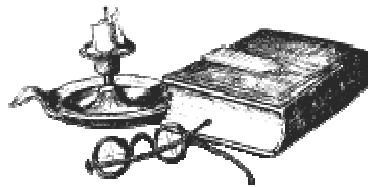
The night was crowned by an extended encore, when ShadowsForge was persuaded to perform its Spirits Rising album in its entirety. The resurrection of their first album made the night of exceptional performances most memorable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jena' Galifany lives in Los Angeles county and has lived in California all of her life. She began writing in eighth grade but did not pursue publication until 2004, after developing a following at her workplace for the ShadowsForge series. She is the mother of three, and "G-Ma" of one. She writes in the Romance/Adventure genres and hopes to branch out into Inspirational.

Jena' is married to the love of her life, a man that she first wrote about in 1982, met in 1989 and married in 1990. That wonderful man is the basis of Ty Synclair—the bass player for ShadowsForge—and facets of Steve appear in each of Jena's leading men. She also appreciates your comments: shadowsforge_band@yahoo.com

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