

BLUE SILVER

**making
noise**



penny dawn

BLUE SILVER: MAKING NOISE

...He couldn't help imagining Ms. Seamless sprawled on his hotel mattress, legs spread eagle, hands occupied, probing a buzzing stick into her pussy. There was nothing more thrilling than a girl who knew how to love herself, and he'd enjoyed more than a few self-pleasuring shows in his prime. The interesting thing about watching a woman touch herself, or watching two women fondle each other, was the tenderness with which they did so. No woman crammed a dildo between her legs, seeking a quick release. Every movement was smooth, liquid, emotional.

Stationed a few feet away from the bed, he would watch this woman grind and moan her way to climax, savoring every stroke of bliss derived from her toy. Every second leading to orgasm would be a small pleasure in itself. Her back arching against the pillows, her sweet, feminine voice would moan his name, as she came, at last, in slow, shivering moments. Only when he was certain she was finished, perhaps when she tossed the implement aside and settled a smoldering gaze upon him, biting her lip in deliberation—had she pleased him?—would he approach her.

One female orgasm brought forth another, if a man were patient enough, and he'd tease her into the second with a trick he'd discovered years ago, while in bed with two darling brunettes...

ALSO BY PENNY DAWN

Ancient History
Measuring Up
Rolling In Clover
Salute
Sound-Off
Wake-Up Call

BLUE SILVER:
MAKING NOISE

BY

PENNY DAWN

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BLUE SILVER: MAKING NOISE
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*For Fid, who shared with me minute
details about drumming in the spotlight—and even more about
life backstage. I’m blushing!*

*Much appreciation to my husband, Don,
for understanding the hours I poured into this one. Kisses to my
Samantha and Madelaine, who in the spirit of this musician’s tale, made
instruments of my pots and pans and paper towel tubes.
(I have such a headache...)*

*A word of warning to my mother: Stop reading right now.
This one’s really racy.*

*Chelsey, your days as a Duran Duran groupie
really paid off for me with this one. Thanks for reminiscing. Li’l Kristin,
through you, I channel the woes of a single gal. Without your dramas, I have no
stories. Thanks to Jacki King, creator of the Vibralex 3000
(see *She Who Laughs Last* and *Margarita Chica*, available at amberheat.com)
for bringing much pleasure to my characters. Angela and Mary: Hope this one
left you “a little warm in the britches.”
Thanks for the knee-jerk reactions.*

*Natalie J. Damschroder, Megan Hart, Jacki King, and Ellie Marvel,
working together was nothing short of a pleasure.
There’s no one else with whom I’d rather flash backstage passes.
Let’s do it all again—and soon!*

*Thanks to the children and counselors of the CRC in Waukegan, Illinois.
What I learned with you gave this story purpose.*

*And thanks to Susie Soukup, for sending me to the CRC, the Naval Base,
and any number of other places I was terrified to enter alone.*

“MAKING NOISE”

Lyrics by Troy Douglas
Music by Julian Manchester

She paved a play to make some noise
And made it down on me
Toast the town, she prayed her choice
And dropped me to my knees

I prayed to all the heavens
She'd never disappear
A nightmare in the limelight
If I can't draw her near
A taste of all that's holy
Gave me reason to believe
Her heart beats deep inside me
A religion I conceive

She found a truth in making noise
And poured it over me
Kneeling there, I found my voice
Graced in tranquility

I prayed to all the heavens
She'd never disappear
A nightmare in the limelight
If I can't draw her near
A taste of all that's holy
Gave me reason to believe
Her heart beats deep inside me
A religion I conceive

At dawn's first light we made some noise
And now she's set me free
Chapel bells and altar boys
In strange society

I prayed to all the heavens
She'd never disappear
A nightmare in the limelight
If I can't draw her near

—Blue Silver's 3rd #1 hit

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“Treat me nice.” Shontae Pepper had a whisper like rainy-day sex—creamy, provocative. And since there’d been a drought in northern Illinois that summer—and not only weather-wise—

Faith Hennessy sighed when the lulling tenor reached her ears, and her cheeks flushed a thousand shades of ruby.

“I need a favor.”

He appeared in the doorway and leaned against butter-yellow plaster. Six-foot-three of pure male, he crossed his mocha-toned arms over his chest. Drummer’s arms. He played in a jazz band evenings. Faith loved musicians, men who could find rhythm and keep a beat beyond distraction. They almost always disappointed her outside the bedroom, but *c’est la vie*. Some lessons were hard-learned and well worth the repeat tutorial.

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Despite the teenaged residents and the stagnant August air in her “classroom” at Daisy’s Halfway House for Homeless Minors, a shiver raced up Faith’s spine. Everyone needed favors these days, and she was pretty sure she’d oblige Shontae, no matter what he asked of her.

And why not? She’d been working for Daisy for seventy-five percent pay for months, and she’d work for less if more red tape delayed the state grant. She’d been conducting art classes *pro bono* at Fort Sheridan as a favor to her father, a retired Army major, who’d suddenly acquired concern for transient military children. Even Georgiana “Georgie” Davis—to whom Faith hadn’t spoken since they’d sported fedoras over aerosol hairspray-tortured hair in tribute to the all-the-rage band Blue Silver—had recently requested her presence in central Pennsylvania for some benefit concert. Faith couldn’t say no to charity. She might as well give Shontae whatever he wanted—and perhaps indulge in a little reciprocal pleasure.

Smack-dab in the middle of a sex-ed discussion with six female runaways, she turned away from her easel and white board, and faced the male monument to promised pleasure in the doorway. Her students, seated on thread-bare furniture and bean bag chairs—Daisy preferred her classrooms to be comfortable, in lieu of clinical—craned their necks to view the visitor.

“Ms. Faith gonna get some,” Alicia said from a worn arm chair, her fingers patting her three-months-pregnant abdomen. “Mr. Shontae goin’ for some white milk.”

“You white milk, too,” another girl muttered.

Faith shot a silencing look at the wards-of-the-court and approached Shontae, who worked in the boys’ wing of Daisy’s building, a hundred-year-old mansion on Sheridan Road in Waukegan, just north of Chicago. The counselor’s tank top bulged with ebony muscles, and a “V” of sweat drenched him from pecs to abs. He looked like wet chocolate. Suddenly, she was craving something sweet.

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“That dress is kickin’.” Although his smile looked sincere, his compliment was facetious. She never wore anything more alluring than “librarian” to work, and today’s yellow jumper would have bordered on “Kindergartener,” had she neglected to tear the teddy bear patch off the breast pocket.

“I’m in the middle of a class,” she whispered.

“So am I.” He hitched his chin toward six teenaged boys, just as sweaty as he, seated single-file on the floor in the hallway. “One hundred plus degrees on the courts today, and a/c’s down in our wing. I can’t keep them outside. What do you say? Grant me a little refuge?”

“It’s not much cooler in here. We’re on the fritz, too. Besides, I’m in the middle of a sex lesson.”

He grinned. “Half your girls are pregnant, and the rest have given birth at least once. My guess is they know how it’s done.”

He was right, but damned if she was going to give her girls what they wanted—a mixer with horny teenaged boys. Her straight, brown hair—practical length, practical style, practical color—bounced against her shoulders when she shook her head. “Sorry.”

“I’ll make it worth your while.” He chewed his succulent lower lip, and his left bicep flexed, perhaps involuntarily.

“I’m listening.” She locked her gaze on that perfect arm, bronze with a hint of pink at his shoulder from the sun.

“Dinner. You free tonight?”

At last, she looked into his eyes. Dreamy and dark. “You’ll cancel.”

“Not if I can help it. What do you say?”

Before she verbalized a yes, he was dropping a whistle on a red-and-white string around her neck.

“If they give you any trouble,” he said, his voice as smooth as the jazz he played, “you just give me a blow.”

“I can’t—”

He touched his thumb to her chin, turned to his charges, and

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switched on his bad-ass voice. “Ms. Faith’s going to keep you for the rest of the afternoon.”

“Keep them? Shontae, I can’t baby sit your boys while you—”

He ignored her and continued with his instruction. “No one moves from their seat. No one speaks to the girls. You get out of line, and may your Maker help you. Ms. Faith may look like five-six of softie, but she knows tae kwon do and can kick any one of your butts. Understood?”

The boys grumbled, standing.

“I said, understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the boys said in unison.

While they filed into her classroom, breathing sighs of relief—hard to believe the steamy room provided any reprieve from the heat—the girls whooped with crude, sexually suggestive commentary.

“I’m prime for the prickin’.”

“Gimme some yum-cum.”

“If you’s hungry, dive into the buffet.” Alicia propped a pale, bruised leg on the arm of her chair, stretching her skirt up and exposing her panties.

“Posture.” Faith’s pointed finger and single word snapped the girl back to submission, with only a roll of her eyes. “And the rest of you. Silent.”

“Thanks.” Shontae ducked back into the hallway. “You have no idea how much I—”

She pinched his elbow. “I can’t do this.”

“Sure you can. Positive attitudes change everything. Isn’t that what you’re always telling your girls? My boys are good kids, and you’re good at what you do. You can do this, if you tell yourself you can.”

Damn her PACE principle...it was such a crock that positive attitudes change everything. “If they were ‘good’ boys, they wouldn’t be here. I have six overcharged and, by their standards, undersexed girls. And you’ve just—”

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“It’s twenty minutes, Faith.” He licked his lips and turned away. “I appreciate it.”

“I’m ordering steak and lobster tonight,” she called after him.

“Hey, I rake in same as you. A man has limits.”

So did a woman. She headed back into her classroom, ready to make sex as technical as it had been the last time she’d had it, which was too long ago...and obviously not good enough to remember.

And she didn’t know the first thing about tae kwon do.

* * *

Six hundred miles to the east, in central Pennsylvania, Troy Douglas squinted into bright studio lights. Ten years ago, as a favor to his now ex-wife, he’d spent six weeks in India, finding his inner hemisphere, and now he was destined to lose it again. This photo session, the interviews, and posters and bumper stickers weren’t what he’d had in mind when he’d agreed to reunite with his old band mates. The boys of Blue Silver were readying themselves to kick off a comeback tour, and prepping for it was pure hell.

He’d never returned to England when the band fell apart a decade ago; he’d traversed a holy land—searching for faith, for something to believe in—and then holed up in a lighthouse on Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Far from civilization, he’d held onto his sanity there, even when his spouse cut out on him. Now he could scarcely believe he was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the musicians who’d watched him crack, hands in khaki pockets, wearing a false smile for local media.

He hadn’t appreciated the attention at the band’s prime, and now, nearing forty, he was too weathered to endure Seth and Julian’s constant discussions about stage backdrops, and he knew he was far too old to find endearment in knickers tossed on stage. But he was, perhaps, wise enough to value the magic of the music, which was the only thing Troy was interested in making. Not money. Not love. Just

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music.

Music should have been the focus of the Blue Silver reunion, not this comeback tour. Life on the road had worn Troy to the bones when he was a young man, had needled him into a nervous breakdown, but a man was nothing if he wasn't fulfilling a purpose. He had never felt more at peace—even in India—than he did while drumming out a beat.

"Let's see the dimple, Troy," a photographer called out.

He pulled free a hand and shaded his eyes. What interest did the man have in his dimple? In seeing his smile? He shoved his hand back into his pocket. "Doing my best."

Bloody Harrisburg. There was only one reason the tour was beginning in central Pennsylvania, and she was Seth's ex-wife, Cassie. The operative syllable being ex did little to mask the pain he felt on the rare occasions he thought of her. Once, despite the wedding ring on his finger, he'd harbored a secret crush on the woman. She'd respected his vows and then proclaimed her own—with Seth. When the happy couple had learned marriage on the road consisted of nothing but uppers and downers and the occasional drink-'til-you-hate-her moments, they'd split. And she'd taken the lead singer for a pretty penny. With Cassie gone, Seth sank deeper into the bottle, leaving his band mates to drag him on and off stage, in and out of limos. The son-of-a-bitch had been toasted all the time. Blue Silver eventually sang a farewell, but not until Troy's last nerve—and marriage—had withered to a live wire.

And being here, in Cassie's home town, was simply a bad omen—not to mention a reminder of romantic failure, on Seth's part and Troy's.

On paper, beginning the tour in a tiny town looked humble, and donating part of the proceeds, noble. But reading between the lines, Harrisburg was sure to be disastrous. There were reasons bands broke up and those circumstances, without fail, far surpassed any need to reconcile and reunite. Odds were this tour would end in mayhem before

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the band reached Chicago next month, and Blue Silver's Yoko would likely have a hand in its demise.

Which was just fine with Troy. The tour had two possible outcomes—abysmal failure or raging success. Obviously, no one wanted to fall short of the mark, but he was equally as weary of triumph. He'd had enough random pussy and intense hangovers to burn in hell four times over. The last thing he needed was a rush of adoring strangers assuming they knew him, acting as if he owed them something.

And Seth, Julian, and the other guys were on the top of the list. While he still respected them, even loved them, in some cases, Troy didn't owe his former—and, as it turned out, current—band mates any more than the four hit albums and the four years they'd spent making them. If he'd learned anything during his spiritual journey, he would high-tail it back to the U.P., resume life in his unique home, and renovate his thirty-five foot vessel, the *Tranquility*.

But aside from deep breathing, India had yet to prove her sanctum. Not a chance in hell Pennsylvania could do what India couldn't.

* * *

“Hey.”

Faith looked up from stowing her teaching supplies into a Rubbermaid™ container. She clamped on the lid and quickly looked away from Shontae. “I’m not talking to you.”

“Truce?” He rubbed his palms together and sauntered toward her.

He smelled of fresh soap and wore khaki shorts and a white, collared shirt. On his feet were brown leather sandals. She rarely saw him in anything but Nikes™, and the sight of his bare toes sent tingles to regions she shouldn't acknowledge in her classroom. The thought of those bare toes touching hers in the morning took her to a place she'd nearly forgotten. A place where pleasure exceeded gorging on pints of Ben and Jerry's in front of a sit com and involved intimacy between

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bodies. Skin on bare skin...on a bearskin maybe. In a mountain lodge, where heat had nothing to do with the weather.

She'd conjured all that from toes? Toes were doing it for her. No doubt, she had to do something about her over-active imagination. Perhaps if she lived out a fantasy from time to time—

"What do you say?" His smile brought a glimmer to his eyes and a yearning to her clit.

She shook off the mental foreplay. "Don't even tell me you dumped your boys in here so you could shower."

His smile broadened. "Did you smell me? I needed it."

Showered or sweating, the scent of him invigorated her. "I'm not amused. There was more sex in my classroom today than I've had all summer. Alicia and Juan. Right there." She pointed to the arm chair Shontae was just about to lean on.

He stepped back, raising his palms and eyeing the chair. "No stains. That's a good sign."

She narrowed her gaze and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Nothing is a good sign when it comes to attempted public sex."

"Juan says there was no penetration. So technically, it wasn't sex."

"It was panties off, genitals exposed, hand under skirt, with eleven for an audience. It was sex enough." The boys' chants of "Go, Juan. Get some," echoed in her head. "Consider it your last favor." She hoisted the heavy container to a high shelf.

"Let me." He stepped in to finish the job.

"Thank you."

"Least I could do." He bit his lower lip, and it sprang forth from his ivory incisors seemingly in slow motion. "Is your hair different?"

It had taken him long enough to notice the pencil-thin highlights. They were over a week old and—apparently—not stunning enough, considering what she'd paid. Damn it, she should have gone platinum blonde. "Yes."

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“Now about dinner. I’m sorry, but—”

“You’re canceling.”

“Something’s come up. A gig at the Hotel Moraine.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” She began to pack folders into her shoulder bag.

“Listen, it’s a wedding reception, and the guy lined up has a conflict.”

“So do you.”

“Maybe so. But I could use the cash, you know?”

“Since the day you began working for Daisie, you’ve been canceling on me. You’ve danced around the possibility of us for three months now. Admit it. We’ll never happen.”

“We could.”

“You don’t like white girls. No hard feelings.”

“I like you, but you have to take a rain check.” He stepped in front of her, impeding her path to the doorway.

She stared at his biceps for a moment before meeting his gaze. “Not necessary.” She stepped around him.

“There’s something else. It’s Alicia.”

Her heart beat double time, and she stopped walking. “Tell me it’s nothing. Tell me she’s learned the pass code, and you caught her watching MTV again.”

“I wish I could. I wish that were all it was.”

“But ...?”

“She’s gone, Faith. Took off again.”

“That’s the last thing I needed to hear.” A deep breath warded off tears. “And Juan?”

“He’s accounted for. I’ve got him on toilet duty until further notice.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you going to look for her again? It’s an hour before I have to

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be in Highwood. I'll take a ride with you."

"Like I said. Not necessary." Few things could have made the day worse, but Alicia's running away plummeted it to rock bottom. If a ward left grounds, she risked being shucked back into the foster care system, from which most had run due to any sort of inappropriate conduct with foster families—sexual, included. Alicia had been delivered to Daisie after making it with another foster "child" at her last known home—on the kitchen table, mid-meal, or so Alicia had bragged. This was the girl's second disappearance, and it was Faith's fault. She'd succumbed to Shontae's charms. As a result, her charge had tasted what she thought she needed and now was out chasing it.

After ten years in social work, Faith still ached when she considered a fifteen-year-old's addiction to sex. The closest Faith had come to intercourse at that age was lusting after the musicians of Blue Silver. She'd daydreamed about famous, talented men making love to her forever, whereas her students craved the only attention they knew how to attract, even though it disappeared in quick, sticky moments after meaningless bangs in alleyways or backseats. It was a counselor's job to teach her girls the difference between expressions of love and what Alicia and Juan had nearly accomplished that afternoon.

Alicia bolting was Faith's personal failure. She would spend the weekend looking for her, if she thought it would do any good, but she wouldn't find a girl who didn't want to be found. She'd learned that the last time the kid had run.

Cursing Shontae's biceps and his smooth voice all the way home, Faith decided what she really needed was time for herself. No pregnant runaways to worry her in the middle of the night, no chocolate men whetting her appetite. No art classes for soldiers' children, and—sorry, Georgie—no benefit galas, even if a trip east would bring her back to carefree, Blue Silver days.

She unlocked the door to her comfortable studio apartment

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overlooking Winthrop Harbor. The view cost an extra fifty a month, but in her line of work, sanctuary wasn't a luxury, it was a necessity. Without the serenity of Lake Michigan in the distance, Faith might be running herself as ragged and off-the-wall as her charges.

If the job didn't yet own her, it was beginning to take its toll. She yanked off the girlish jumper and fell onto her sofa in her underwear. She felt like a nun in the ensembles she wore to the halfway house, but she was there to convince her girls they needn't use their bodies to attract men. And judging by Shontae's chronic cancellations, her wardrobe served its purpose. Would he have made good on his promised dinner had she donned a form-fitting, cleavage-enhancing dress? Probably, and not just because her cleavage didn't need enhancement, but because men enjoyed femininity.

He'd probably be surprised to know she'd been so wild in her teen years she'd tattooed the American flag on her right hip, in tribute to—and in rebellion against—her father. On one occasion, she'd dyed her hair pink, too. *How's that for femininity?* Not that she'd go to such extremes now, but she'd sacrificed much of her style for the sake of her runaways. Doing so was an important choice—worth making. Until her girls possessed unwavering self-esteem, they didn't have to know sex appeal was an essential element of success in a patriarchal society, and in that regard, her teachings were farcical. Sad, but true.

The blinking message light on her cordless phone taunted her. Perhaps her fellow counselor had had a change of heart. Maybe he'd called to say he'd be there in five minutes to make good on his promise. If she used the PACE principle, could she make it so? What would he do if he happened upon her in the barest of all essentials? Would he flush in embarrassment, or take the hint and press against her? He was probably an up-against-the-wall kind of guy. Men with strong arms usually were. And that voice...just as she liked it. Deep and nearly musical. If she needed something to believe in, Shontae Pepper's voice

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might have been God. She might even enjoy a Sunday service in the new religion of Shontae's Voice.

Positive attitudes change everything. Think it, and it will happen.

So there he'd have her, pinned against the wall in her modest apartment, not giving a thought to the breakfast dishes in the sink or the several pairs of flip-flops abandoned just inside the door. He wouldn't waste time registering untidy details like those; he'd be too focused, too ready, squeezing her lace-clad backside with adept fingers. While he massaged wet kisses onto her neck, her breasts would squash against his chest, and he'd groan at the hollow of her throat, say something lustful, but endearing, in a silky, bedroom voice. Something like, "Ever make love in the rain?"

There were few things more intriguing than a man who just couldn't wait, and Shontae struck her as a lover who worked around clothing, rather than removing it all at once. He'd pull aside her panties and bury his fingers—strong, she'd been watching him palm and manipulate basketballs for months—into her slick channel. She'd be ready, too, considering the number of times she'd daydreamed of sex with him, hardly in need of foreplay. She'd appreciate the endeavor, regardless, and she wouldn't be shy about expressing her gratitude.

His index finger would stroke her into a heavenward spiral, enticing and teasing her to the hilt. He'd read her involuntary shivers, the catching of her breath and, at just the right time, he'd plunge his thick cock—an assumption, of course, but judging by the bulge always present in his shorts, he was well-hung—into her moist depths. Only then would she reach the passionate height she sought. Her orgasm would be fierce enough to draw the cum right out of him.

Oh, hell, now she'd done it. Turned on, turned up, and no one—make that nothing—to do tonight, thanks to the object of her fantasy's cancellation. She'd stashed a Vibratex 3000 in the second drawer in her bathroom vanity, but the thought of another battery-induced climax

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evoked a groan—and not in a good way.

The tiny red light on her telephone again caught her eye. Shontae might have had the decency to call, since he'd successfully—although unknowingly—primed her for a thorough, long-overdue sexing.

She dialed her voicemail and entered her password. "You have four new messages."

Four? Wow, that was a new record this summer. The hot months of a dry spell just might end before the summer did. One of the messages had to be from Shontae, with a profuse apology—something he hadn't yet given, she realized—for sticking her with a no-win, inevitable situation. After leaving her to pry apart two sexually-engaged teens, he could at least reconsider and ask her to meet for a drink before his first set at the Hotel Moraine. He'd done so last time he'd canceled. Dinner would have been a better incentive, but she was a reasonable woman.

Her tongue traveled over her bottom lip as she remembered the energy watching him perform behind a set of drums. What was it with musicians that set off a chain reaction of mental orgasms?

Message number one: "Faith, dear, it's your mother. I'd have called your cell phone, but I don't want to bother you at work. Do you have an hour or two this weekend to help with—"

Sorry, Mom. Not this weekend. I'm busy wallowing over a chance I never had. Delete.

Message number two: "Mr. Hennessy, this is your area satellite installer for the Satellite Network. We're currently installing in your neighborhood, and for the cost of—"

If you don't know my gender, and I can't decipher yours, we have no future. Delete.

Three: "Hey, Faith. It's me, your under-privileged, under-age-for-three-more-months brother. I'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a twelve of Sams today. Buy it for me? Call me back."

Nice try, Kyle.

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Four: “Faith? I’m not sure I have the right number.”

Not Shontae. She recognized the soft, female voice, but couldn’t place it.

“It’s been a while. Hope you’re doing well. You must be busy because you haven’t returned my emails, and if you’re that bogged down, you could probably use a vacation. It’s time for a reunion, don’t you think? Sing, Blue Silver. Marci’s game, so is Cassie. I haven’t heard from Arliss, but I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. Call me. My number is area code—”

Blue Silver? Marci, Cassie, and Arliss? Goodness, that’s Georgie Davis. Faith scrambled for a pen, found one in the end table drawer, and giving up on finding a scrap of paper, jotted ten digits on her bare thigh.

Her heart panged with the thought of her last nights in central Pennsylvania—and in particular, the night which should have been the best night of her teenaged life. She and her four closest friends had spent it in the back of a limousine, listening to the radio broadcast of the Blue Silver concert they were supposed to have attended. Front row, center seats. Backstage passes. All forfeited due to engine trouble for which Faith had secretly held Arliss Pacifica Edgeworth accountable. It was, after all, Arliss’s dad’s limo. She winced with the memory of her childish blame. It was no one’s fault.

Not like Alicia’s disappearance, for which Faith took total responsibility.

And damn it, Shontae hadn’t called to apologize. *So much for positive thinking.* She’d have to spend the night with NetFlix and microwave popcorn, with only a three-wick candle for romantic company. She needed to get out more, which wasn’t to say she was ready to hop a flight to Harrisburg and leer at posters of Blue Silver. She’d grown up considerably since ogling had been her favorite pastime. Or had she? She was still lusting after untouchable musicians,

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wasn't she?

Through waiting for positive thinking to burst into reality, she jumped up from the sofa and headed toward the shower. Her drought would end. Tonight. Untouchable? Not so much, if she was looking the way she could.

She transferred Georgie's phone number to her cell phone, hopped into a cool shower, and washed away the horrendous day with vanilla-scented soap. She shaved her legs twice, lest she missed a spot. How embarrassing to face a man day after day, if he'd stumbled across some stubble in the bedroom.

On a normal day, she didn't bother with much in the way of cosmetics. SPF 15 sunscreen was about it. But tonight, she went through the entire ritual from foundation to eyelash curler to lip liner. Red halter dress, a contraption of a bra, and sexy panties she hadn't donned in months—red, lacy tangas. And she'd forgotten how much volume a few curls gave her usually flat hair.

The Hotel Moraine was situated on the west side of Sheridan Road, directly across from the fort, where her father had been transferred ten years ago. Of all the army bases they'd known, he'd chosen to remain near this one on his retirement, perhaps because Faith's younger brothers had found real friends here. Perhaps her father, too, had found tranquility in Lake Michigan. But whatever the reason, the Hennessys had at last planted their family tree in a permanent location.

While winters could be brutal in the Midwest, Faith had grown accustomed to the vicious wind off the lake and its high-pitched whistling at night. And she had fallen in love with the glorious change of seasons here. Autumn was right around the corner, her favorite time of year. And if tonight worked the way she hoped, she and Shontae would spend the upcoming season rolling in piles of freshly fallen leaves together.

She parked her Ford Escort in the packed lot and walked into the

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hotel, a spring in her step. *Shontae Pepper, prepare to drool.*

Yet the moment she entered, she felt as if something were wrong. She didn't know what, exactly, as everything looked just fine. The lobby swarmed with wedding guests in after-five wear, and she milled along with them, waiting for something to strike her as odd. When a white-gloved server passed with a silver tray, she helped herself to a seafood canapé and tapped her foot to the beat of a familiar song. Maybe nothing was wrong. She was paranoid, that's all, wanting badly for the evening to turn out successfully. But after one bite of the flavorful appetizer, her heart sank when she realized everything was wrong. The song was more than familiar; it was top forty.

She rushed to the ballroom, still empty, save lavishly set tables and...

A disc jockey.

No jazz band, no drummer.

Shontae had lied about a gig at the Hotel Moraine.

That's it. She definitely needed some personal time. The first call she made was to Daisie, requesting a few days off, which were granted after only a deep sigh. The second was to Georgie Davis. "Georgie? It's Faith. I'm coming out."

"Tremblendous!" Georgie-speak for so tremendous I'm trembling.

* * *

"This trip was a bad idea," Faith muttered. She stood with arms crossed, trying to ward off the chill inside Chicago O'Hare International Airport. Few things topped standing in bare feet on a filthy floor, awaiting a feeling-up. She had the unfortunate honor of being a randomly selected passenger for a security check. At least the Transportation Security Administration wouldn't pull her Vibratex out of her carry-on and put it on display. She'd stashed her personal toy in her checked luggage. Thank God for small favors.

Was it wrong to thank Him for hidden vibrators?

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She shrugged and looked to the circle of TSA agents, who laughed together as if it were their own free time they wasted in banter, and not her precious ten minutes before boarding time. One of the agents reminded her of Shontae, but only because he had biceps she wanted to bite into. Heaven help the man if he was assigned to inspect her; she was in the mood for a little retribution.

A few moments later, a stocky woman, with biceps just as large, yet not nearly as enticing, meandered over. “Legs shoulder-width apart. Arms out.”

Faith obeyed, feeling uneasy in her black rayon and spandex jumpsuit. Every passerby—and the Shontae look-alike—stared at her, as if they knew she no longer felt comfortable in the ensemble in which she’d chosen to travel. Not that she didn’t look good in it—spending grocery money on a harbor view every month made overeating impossible—but she didn’t feel good in it. Sure, it was cozy, pliable, and physically comfortable. Exactly the qualities she wanted when she’d be crammed against the window in a puddle-jumper for an hour and twenty minutes. But she felt as much a spectacle in wearing it as Alicia and Juan had been in her classroom.

Alicia was flying under the scope, still missing more than twelve hours after her departure.

The security agent ran a thick wand up and down Faith’s legs, across her tummy, and over her breasts, stimulating her nipples, which were budding to sharp points in the air conditioning. Twenty days over ninety degrees the past month made the airport feel like a walk-in freezer. She could hardly wait to slip her hoodie back on. The detector wand lit up at her waist. “Remove your belt, ma’am.”

“I can’t. It’s attached.” Faith yanked at the sash sewn to the jumpsuit. “It’s just for show.”

“Can you open the clasp?”

“I walked through the tunnel just fine.”

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“The wand is more sensitive than the doorway detectors. Open the clasp.”

Jeez. Did it look like she could hide anything in a garment as body-hugging as a jumpsuit? She did as she was told and tried to stand still, while the agent again frisked her with the metal detector. Sadly, the wand was the most action she’d received in months.

Why had she agreed to take this trip? Oh yes, she was helping her high school friends achieve the dream of a lifetime, although she was no longer certain she shared the vision. Georgie Davis had been secretary and founding member of the Silverettes Fan Club back in high school. Faith, Marci, Arliss, and Cassie had been the only other members. When the band fell off the face of the earth ten years ago, Georgie must have kept them on radar because now the boys from Britain were staging a comeback tour.

Faith hadn’t heard the first thing about the small venues they’d soon play across the United States, or the small benefit concert in her old stomping grounds, but shy, introverted, and still-local Georgie knew Blue Silver’s entire schedule. Faith almost asked if the librarian were privy to the boys’ shower schedule as well.

Hmmm. Wet, naked musicians. Another thing about which Faith shouldn’t fantasize. True, musicians turned her on in ways she couldn’t possibly ignore, but Shontae was the last in a long line of music men she would allow to snare her. Any more would be detrimental, unhealthy. If she were one of her charges, her lectures against chasing musicians would never end. Yet there she was, running from one semi-professional drummer towards a horde of once-famous rock-n-rollers. If only songbirds didn’t make love the way they made music...

Faith pinched her eyes shut. *Don’t go there.*

If she had any brains, she’d kiss this trip goodbye and head home to wait by the phone for Daisy to call with good news about Alicia. Faith had given all her girls her cell phone number, but not one had used it—

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ever. Those on the run usually meandered back to the halfway house out of desperation. Before long, Alicia might find her way back, too, and Faith should be there to counsel her. She shuddered when she considered sixty-nine-year-old Daisy Jones' handling the situation personally. A natural philanthropist, Faith's boss ran the tightest ship in the state. Grants always came her way, benefactors appeared out of the clear blue sky every holiday season, and the return rate for her runaway residents was astronomically better than average. However, as Daisy had aged, she'd lost skills in one crucial area—relating to the teens. If the headmistress was Alicia's welcome back wagon, Alicia's stay would redefine brevity.

Faith considered scampering out of the airport now, however, if she did, the TSA would assume she had something to hide. Better to wait until they completed their search for nothing.

Faith's cell phone rang. She glanced at the beige, plastic bin into which she'd tossed her car keys and cell phone upon reaching the black conveyor at the security post. She'd followed the rules, zipped through the metal detector without so much as a blip, but there she stood, spread-eagle, watching her phone chime its way to voice mail. What good was being good, if the world was going to treat you like a felon, regardless? Maybe it was time to make some noise of her own, if only for the weekend.

Rule number one: Clothes don't make a reputation, actions do. You own your body, and you'll wrap it in whatever you wish.

Once put back together again, and scrambling her way to Gate H13—the furthest walk in the terminal—Faith checked the call log on her cell phone. The call she'd missed had been Shontae. He hadn't left a message. Tapping the phone against her palm in deliberation, she sighed. Should she call him back? He could have news about Alicia. Then again, he could have formulated yet another lame excuse for lying to her about the Hotel Moraine.

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Well, she wasn't going to give him the chance to unload it. She was pampering herself this weekend, reconnecting with the only people she'd ever called friends—the Silverettes. The next few days had nothing to do with Shontae Pepper. And neither did the rest of her life.

* * *

Eleven a.m. in Pennsylvania. *Too early for a drink.*

Troy hadn't imbibed much since his inner-cleansing in the East, but he bloody well needed it today. And to hell with the numbers on the clock...he wanted it now. He was thinking whiskey, but he'd settle for a screwdriver. Orange juice made the concoction an acceptable breakfast drink, even if mixing liquor with fruit juice was rather girly.

The Blue Silver reunion tour wasn't yet off the ground, the group hadn't set foot on stage here in the States, and Seth and Julian had discussed the backdrop three times today. This one cast shadows over the keyboard podium, that one necessitated an extra spotlight, and other such nonsense. Too many big fish trying to jump over the pond, so to speak.

Troy looked at the clock again. Eleven-oh-four. *Still too early for a drink.*

Fanfare was low and tolerable, even with their picture and an article published in the Arts section of the *Harrisburg Gazette*. The other guys, Julian in particular, were probably scared shitless women would fail to flock to their limousines this time around, but Troy found much relief in the prospect. The last thing he needed was some beautiful, young groupie wrapping her legs around him, granting him an hour of pleasure, which would undoubtedly evolve into months of litigation, paternity tests, and the like. He'd had enough random couplings in his twenties, and he'd learned from his own marriage—and the Seth-and-Cassie debacle—what happened when random relationships became serious.

Of course, the world was different now than when Blue Silver hit

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their high-water mark. With the AIDS epidemic, he couldn't imagine any musician caught without cases of prophylactics to back him. Nor could he envision any woman willing to take a chance going raw with a man as sexually hectic as musicians on tour could be. Especially considering the tour's expected audience, the original Blue Silver fans and groupies, had to be in their thirties—and much wiser—by now.

Yet the time might pass more pleasantly if he were to become acquainted with a gal who might find him interesting. Not Blue-Silver-drummer interesting, but Troy Douglas interesting. Not necessarily bedroom-interesting, either. Cock- and ego-stroking were no longer synonymous in his world. Not that he didn't enjoy a good slam against the wall with the best of them every now and again, but companionship meant different things to him these days.

Perhaps if he kept a low profile, wore jeans, a flannel shirt, and a cap, he'd find the perfect woman with whom to pass the time. Maybe no one would recognize him, if he wanted to grab a drink at the lounge in pursuit of her. Chances were good. He didn't wear the makeup of glam rock anymore—still hated to admit he'd once been an ace with a mascara wand—and most people couldn't pick him out of a lineup now.

* * *

Faith had lived in Harrisburg for a short while a long time ago, but she remembered distinct things about the city. The scent of hot pavement and clear summer skies. Coming back was something like a return to dreamland, hazy but welcome.

"Rebecca Faith Hennessy. I was expecting fire engine red hair still."

Few people knew her full name, and even fewer dared to address her by it. Faith recognized the sultry voice, even with the hint of Southern—that is, Texas—belle. She looked up from the baggage carousel and into the green eyes of Marci Anderson, her favorite

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Silverette, with whom she'd kept in regular touch. "Marci!"

"I can't believe we're all going to be here." Marci propped a hand on her hip and sported a sassy grin. "Together again."

"Arliss, too?"

"Of course." Marci checked her watch. "She should be here any minute."

"Hmm." Faith crossed her fingers in silent prayer. On one hand, apologizing to Arliss would provide closure and release the guilt she'd been feeling about the way she'd blamed the poor girl for their lost night with Blue Silver. *On the other hand, wouldn't it be easier if the priss didn't show?* "That should be interesting."

"It'll be great. And why haven't you hugged me yet?" After a split-second embrace, the red-haired beauty jumped back. "You're vibrating there."

"Oh." Faith tucked a hand into the neckline of her jumpsuit and pulled her cell phone from her bra. "Shortage of pockets in this thing, so few storage options." She looked at the caller ID screen. "One of my girls ran away last week. I'm on alert. But this is just my brother, Kyle, begging me to buy beer for him."

"Girl, what'd you do with the tits?" Marci tapped Faith's left breast. "Buoyant, yet firm. Implants?"

Faith fought the initial impulse to yank her hoodie over her cleavage. If someone was going to touch her breasts, it might as well be Marci. *Let Kyle leave a message.* If he had anything more important than beer consumption to discuss, she'd call him back. She stuck her phone back into her C cup. "No, they're mine. Late bloomer, I guess."

"Better late than never, I always say. Nice." Marci cocked her head, studied Faith's bust line for a moment, and again bounced her hand against a breast. "Very nice."

Faith giggled. "I use tissues for other things these days. Are you just getting in, too?"

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“No. I’ve been here for a while, waiting for your delayed ass. And Arliss’. Is Austin the only city on time these days?”

“Travel day from hell,” Faith said. “I could really use a rum runner.”

“Now you’re talking.”

Faith and Marci turned toward Arliss Pacifica Edgeworth, who hadn’t changed one iota. Faith might have suspected plastic surgery—Arliss didn’t have a single wrinkle—but had the girl gone under the knife, she’d probably have had her nose done while she was at it. Arliss stood with designer bags in tow, clad in a linen suit—with the same nose she’d always hated. “I could really use a martini. A chocolatini.”

“Arliss, check this out.” Marci yanked open Faith’s sweatshirt. “Knockers. On Faith. They’re real, too. I touched them.”

Faith felt heat crawling into her cheeks. “What were we saying about drinks?”

“Say no more,” Marci said. “Now that we out-of-towners are all here, let the party begin. Where’s your baggage?”

Faith turned to see a lone suitcase traveling the circle...and it didn’t belong to her. “Hell.”

Marci laughed. “I think you may need more than alcohol, honey.”

Damn right.

A few miles down the road, between Sixth and Broadway, the girls bellied up to the bar at New Moon Lounge in the Come Inn Hotel at which they’d be staying. Faith stared out the blue-tinted window at Theater Seven across the street, where Blue Silver would begin their tour. Quite a change from the enormous venues they’d played in their prime. A pang of sadness hit her in the gut. Was this a comeback or would it be a fall from grace?

She blinked away from the window and focused on the bar surface—cold, azure granite with silver flecks.

Arliss patted her hand. “I’m sure they’ll find your luggage. And you

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can borrow our things until they do.”

“Got a Vibralux on you?”

Marci let out a booming laugh. “Honey, a battery buzz is the last thing you’ll need this weekend. Did Georgie tell you? Cassie used her connections to arrange a private party after the set.”

“I’m through chasing musicians, and that includes the once-remarkable boys of Blue Silver,” Faith said. “I want a smoke more than I want a man at the moment anyway.”

“You’re quitting musicians, but resuming smoking?” Marci knit her brow and doled out cocktail napkins the color of vanilla pudding. “Reprioritize. Please. Besides, I thought you quit years ago.”

“I did. Comes with the job. If those girls smell smoke on me, it’s like I’m giving them a green light to inhale God knows what.” Faith drummed her fingernails on the granite. “But being here makes me want to start again. With musicians and smokes. Bad influence.”

“How can I be a bad influence?” Arliss tossed a blonde curl over her shoulder. “I don’t smoke. And I’m stopping at one drink, so I’ll pay for my own.”

Of course the immaculate girl wouldn’t dream of tarnishing her pearly whites with tar and nicotine. Faith almost rolled her eyes, but the sight of a vaguely familiar man seated a few stools away distracted her.

His chrome stool was positioned on an angle toward her, and he’d propped one loafer-clad foot on its rung and the other on the scuffed, chrome foot rail. He stared just over her head at the soap opera on the television, looking bored out of his mind. It was too dark in the bar to discern the color of his eyes, but thick, dark lashes almost fluttered when he blinked, and his skin was as flawless as freshly fallen snow, save tiny laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. She knew him...somehow. An old boyfriend, perhaps? But no one so good-looking would have looked at her twice during her flat-chested-and-awkward stint in central Pennsylvania.

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Dark hair—then again, what wasn't dark in this joint? Hadn't the proprietor ever heard of electricity?—with just a touch of gray peeked out from beneath a backwards, navy baseball cap with a tiny logo stitched on the sizing band. A Detroit Tigers cap. *Interesting*. Most locals rooted for the Phillies or the Pirates. Some even for the Orioles, but not the Tigers.

He looked away from the elevated television and met her gaze. A smile crept onto his face, pronouncing the creases at his eyes and melting a dimple into his left cheek. Was it wrong that she wanted to bury her tongue into the fold of that dimple—and her hand into his jeans? He extended a pack of cigarettes and raised a brow in invitation.

Rule number two: You're a grown woman capable of making your own decisions, even if such choices will eventually give you lung cancer.

With a small smile, she nodded and reached for the pack. "Thanks," she whispered, sliding a cigarette from the gold-and-white package.

He flicked his thumb over a pewter Zippo™ lighter and offered her the flame. Without taking her eyes from his, she puffed the sizzling tobacco, winked, and turned back to her friends.

* * *

Troy had noticed her the moment she entered the New Moon Lounge. Not the fiery red-head in the snug U2 t-shirt and tight jeans. Not the stick-up-her-bum blonde who looked like an accountant. The natural woman wearing the extraordinarily seamless catsuit. How the hell had she wiggled all those curves into something without a zipper or a button?

The gold streaks in her brown hair managed to catch the dim illumination from the wall sconces across the room. Stray wisps had escaped the claw clip and draped around her face in a way that made him yearn to drag a finger along the underside of her chin. Soft skin, he'd bet.

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She carried herself as if she didn't know how stunning she looked in that get-up—not a strut, not a timid gait. She'd strolled across the navy wood planks, dotted with silver specks like a night sky, as if she weren't intending to attract attention, but her toes, sporting a French pedicure, tempted him from black and bamboo flip-flops. He'd like to suck on those toes, while buried nine inches deep.

But even more alluring was listening to her. She spoke of civil service as if performing it were a privilege. He might have pegged her for an officer of some inner-city church, if not for the vibrator commentary. Too bad she'd sworn off musicians—including once-famous ones. However, the carrot-top mentioned Cassie and the after-party Troy had already decided to blow off, perhaps prematurely. These women would undoubtedly attend Cassie's gala, and while he never dreamed he'd be attracted to a friend of Seth's ex, he could be persuaded to change this lovely girl's mind about music men.

He couldn't help imagining Ms. Seamless sprawled on his hotel mattress, legs spread eagle, hands occupied, probing a buzzing stick into her pussy. There was nothing more thrilling than a girl who knew how to love herself, and he'd enjoyed more than a few self-pleasuring shows in his prime. The interesting thing about watching a woman touch herself, or watching two women fondle each other, was the tenderness with which they did so. No woman crammed a dildo between her legs, seeking a quick release. Every movement was smooth, liquid, emotional.

Stationed a few feet away from the bed, he would watch this woman grind and moan her way to climax, savoring every stroke of bliss derived from her toy. Every second leading to orgasm would be a small pleasure in itself. Her back arching against the pillows, her sweet, feminine voice would moan his name, as she came, at last, in slow, shivering moments. Only when he was certain she was finished, perhaps when she tossed the implement aside and settled a smoldering

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gaze upon him, biting her lip in deliberation—had she pleased him?—would he approach her.

One female orgasm brought forth another, if a man were patient enough, and he'd tease her into the second with a trick he'd discovered years ago, while in bed with two darling brunettes.

That night, he'd learned to touch women the way they touched each other. With a gentle finger, he'd enter and stroke her, while massaging her clit with a compassionate tongue. When she gave him a sign—a wiggle, a caught breath—it would be time to add to the mix, while continuing with what worked for her. Repetition was another secret weapon. He'd keep the tongue going, the finger stroking at the exact pace—not unlike drumming an intro. While he pressed a second digit into her vagina and the tip of his little finger into her rectum, he'd gingerly cup a mound and brush a thumb over a distended nipple.

Bloody dangerous.

In an obscure moment, he refocused on the New Moon Lounge, sipped his screwdriver and wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. His cock had stiffened against his zipper. If a man needed incentive to perform, this precarious woman might be the reason he picked up his sticks tonight.

Judging by a conversation he couldn't help overhearing, she wasn't committed. On the contrary, the damn fool she'd had her eye on had been nothing but a wanker, which made her very available.

He stared at the program on the television screen, hoping to fall flaccid before she noticed the tent in his pants. It would be just his luck she'd finally glance his way, and an erection would be the first thing she'd see. He tapped his fingers against a pack of cigarettes, which he'd purchased on a whim a few days ago. So far, he'd smoked two—the only two since India. Inner cleansing be damned, he'd loved every last drag of them.

Ms. Seamless drummed her fingers against the bar, keeping time

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with his. It was a sign. They'd keep precise rhythm together in bed. As gentle as it would begin, it would turn into fucking eventually. That's what would make it so good.

She turned her beautiful head toward him; he felt her eyes lingering. Did she recognize him? If so, she wasn't asking for an autograph. The suspense was too much to handle, and he finally redirected his attention to her.

The moment he caught her glance, he had to smile. She was so intriguing. The sight of her rushed a heat wave through his system, and just like that, Harrisburg took a positive turn. Without a word, he offered her a cigarette and then a light. She accepted both, winked, and turned away, oblivious to the fact she'd watch him play tonight...and if he had his way, he'd be watching her perform, too.

* * *

Still no word from the airline regarding her lost luggage, and no word from Daisy about Alicia's whereabouts.

Faith dropped the hotel-monogrammed robe, spritzed her jumpsuit with Arliss' perfume, and stepped into the garment, sans panties. If she weren't deathly afraid of sagging, she'd have gone braless, too. She ought to learn to listen to her mother, who always traveled with spare underwear in her purse...just in case. However, living on seventy-five percent pay had taught Faith to excel at improvisation. With a complimentary razor from the hotel, she'd shaved her pubic hair to ward off any embarrassing poke-throughs, and because no one would undress her that evening, no one would know she was flying commando—or with slick labia.

But how incredible would it be to see a musician's smile when he peeled off her clothes and found her without panties, to feel adept fingers trailing over her hairless sex? An internal nagging pined for the magical touch. Watching a man exude energy on stage and then feeling the glory of his sweat against her body in a private room backstage

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provided a rush no drug ever could. She wondered if her girls at the halfway house had felt such a flash pursuing the sexual advances of men who didn't care about them.

Were she and Alicia really that different? Hadn't she, like the runaway, found abbreviated pleasure in the arms of men possessing a certain quality? While Alicia craved attentiveness, however false, Faith didn't need something half as important in her men. All she required was a staff—a music staff, that is. If Shontae didn't spend his evenings drumming, but gardening, chances were she wouldn't want anything to do with him. Would she have jumped on the attractive man at the New Moon Lounge had he stashed a guitar pick in his pack of smokes? She might have jumped on him, regardless, but he'd disappeared too fast.

She reached for her cell phone and dialed, using the PACE principle once again. *Alicia's back. She's safe. Think it and it will be so.*

"Daisie's Halfway House. Shontae Pepper speaking."

What were the odds this would be his Saturday in the rotation? And what was he doing pulling office duty?

"Hello?" he said again.

Faith took a deep breath and mustered courage enough to speak. "Hi, Shontae."

"Ms. Faith, I knew you'd come around."

"I'm not coming around anything." She dropped to the bed and counted the pink orchids printed on the gray draperies. *Twenty-one per panel.* "What's the word on Alicia?"

"There is no word on Alicia. Waukegan's finest are looking for her. That's all I have for you."

"Do they know she's pregnant?"

"Daisie gave them the rundown."

"You have to tell them. She's three months along, but she's still in denial. She won't admit she's pregnant, which means she's not acting pregnant. She'll ingest whatever she scores out there, and—"

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“Ms. Faith, I assure you, we’ve given the department a full report. We’re doing our best.”

“Thank you.”

“Listen about the Hotel Moraine—”

“I don’t want to talk about it. You don’t owe me anything, and I don’t expect anything.”

“But I—”

“Why are you answering the phone anyway?”

“Daisie’s got me on probation, so to speak. She’s none too pleased with my sticking you with twelve adolescents of mixed gender, so, until your girl comes back, I’m shunned to filing.”

“Good.”

“Gonna give me a chance to make it up to you? What do you say I come by with take out tonight?”

“Shontae, I’m in Pennsylvania.”

“What are you doing there?”

“Call it a retreat.”

“Call me when you’re back in town?”

She bit her lip and pictured his bronze biceps in a torn t-shirt, his sweating body making its way from one end of the basketball court to the other. “I’ll do my best.”

“I’ll take your best.”

“I have to run.”

“Faith? You be a good girl out there.”

Before this trip, she might have melted, told him she understood his hesitation in crossing the ethnic line, and assured him she’d wait until he was ready. But things were different now. Because being with her girlfriends reminded her she used to be feisty and strong-willed? Maybe. Or maybe she’d simply had enough.

Rule number three: Sassy does not equal bitchy. Go ahead and stand your ground.

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"I'm good at everything I do. You'd know that twelve times over, if you'd ever followed through with our plans." She rose from the bed and slipped her feet into high-heeled, open-toed sandals she'd borrowed from Marci. "See you." After punching a button to end the call, she stashed the phone in her bra.

"I'm telling you." Marci appeared in the doorway to her adjoined room. "Stop saving yourself for the guy. He's probably married or something. Divorce yourself from this drama, and live a little."

Faith shook her head. "He isn't married. He's having a hard time with the color barrier."

"Speaking of color, you could use some. Where's the vibrant bitch, who used to wear four colors of mascara at once?"

"She's a role model for wards-of-the-court these days, and too often colors signify gangs."

Marci peered over her left shoulder, over her right, and bent at the waist to look behind her, between her legs. "No wards of the court here." When she flipped back up, her hair arced through the air and settled—fluffy and full—against her shoulders. "I'll give you points for your slinky party-wear, and I'll give you a break because your luggage is traveling the globe at the moment, but here." She lofted a lipstick.

Faith caught the tossed cosmetic and studied the woman reflected in the framed mirror tiles above the bed. *Plain Jane, not unpleasant.* She opened the tube, studied the color, and read the label. "Revved Up and Ready Red."

"Appropriate, don't you think?" Marci's grin defined the Cheshire cat.

What the hell. Faith applied the lipstick.

* * *

Beyond the red velour curtains, the crowd chanted. It was pitch black on stage, where Troy sat behind his drums, twirling a personalized stick between his fingers. A rush of energy overpowered

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the touch of nervous nausea in his gut, but he knew the anxiety was there. Performing was the easy part of music—it came naturally to those passionate about it. The hard part came later, when he faced the public, lost his privacy. Was the prior worth the latter?

He closed his eyes and envisioned an apricot sun setting behind the hills of India. Deep breaths. *Search for sanctity. It's in there somewhere.*

“Ready.” Seth nodded.

“Ready.” Julian glanced around.

“Ready.” Robert tapped a foot.

“Ready.” Brad smiled.

Ready. Troy inhaled one last cleansing breath and adjusted his Detroit Tigers cap. The opening number began with a slow, steady snare. Ready or not, it was time. He tapped a stick against the snare and heard the curtains part with a swoosh. In an instantaneous flash, lights from above blazed and heated his already warm skin.

The roar of the audience vibrated in his ears, his pulse peaked with a fervent rush, and as he felt a cool sweat break on the back of his neck. A good crowd. Adoring, appreciative. And according to Cassie’s latest memo, Ms. Seamless was somewhere in the front row.

Fantastic.

* * *

Theater Seven swarmed with sweating bodies, nudging as the stage lights illuminated the men of Blue Silver. A better turn-out than Faith had anticipated, the crowd consisted of few men. Mostly, the attendees were women in their early thirties, along with some younger, who probably thought retro was hot. The latter group included a handful of he/shes sporting the long-expired look of Boy George. If they hadn’t been too young to know who Boy George was, Faith might have guessed the group was dressing in tribute to the 1980s. What a crazy decade, fashion-wise. Grommet belts, layered socks, wind-tunnel-wild

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hair. Who but the young would relive such bad taste?

And who but those who had experienced Blue Silver mania in its prime would shriek with the start of the first set? Georgie could have been the most excited gal in the joint—focused solely on the keyboard, as if willing Julian Manchester to appear and blow her a kiss. Cassie stood to Faith's right, bit her lip in pensive-yet-passionate fashion, and although Arliss seemed to be anxious, something about her gaze was distant, blank. That's it, Faith decided. I have to apologize.

"Can you fucking believe this?" Marci hooked an arm around Faith's waist and pressed a tawdry kiss on her lips. "We're here! Together!"

Faith was too old to climb on chairs, although she probably would have been the first to do so when Blue Silver was all the rage and she, the epitome of fanatical. Luckily, Cassie had arranged front row seats for the Silverettes. The "seats" were of the molded plastic, folding variety, and they'd disappeared the moment Troy Douglas hit the snare, but she could watch the show with her feet firmly planted on the floor, her bosoms squashed against the stage platform and the patrons behind her pushing forward.

This did not equate to enjoyment, this was abuse, and her breasts paid the price. At least the view wasn't half bad. The men on stage had aged well, and appeared more attractive than they'd been in their prime. Who wouldn't be more handsome without flashy cosmetics and voluminous hair?

The boom of the music clanged around inside her, an intimate sensation. The band's harmonious creation beat against her bones as if it were the product of her own heart, and desire shimmied throughout her body. Music men were like cigarettes. She'd quit them, but just one taste, and she was instantly addicted again.

The boys strutted on the platform as if oblivious more than a decade had passed since they'd had a top ten hit. They still possessed the "it"

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quality that had swept them to stardom, and they knew it. Well, four of the five did, anyway.

Troy had always been hard to read, never a media darling, hunkering in the shadows of the limelight. Who knew if he enjoyed the life of a musician or not? Rumor had it his mental breakdown had added fuel to the fire and quickened the band's splitting up. He'd been the first to walk away.

Her gaze trailed to the elevated station on which the drummer performed, curious. Upon catching sight of the Detroit Tigers cap, her jaw fell open. There, banging away, was a man who loved making music, a man who'd seemed introverted at the New Moon Lounge, but was anything but reserved on his pedestal.

She yanked on Marci's elbow. "I thought he looked familiar."

But Marci, engaged in a flirting match, waggled her eyebrows at bassist Brad Nix, and did not respond. Probably couldn't hear her over the steady beat anyway.

Troy's arms glistened with perspiration, and his biceps bulged beneath his thin, white t-shirt. Faith couldn't look away from the definition and flex, and focused on his muscles, until the world around her faded into a fantasia of music notes and colors. She was wet. Everywhere.

* * *

"I thought you'd quit." Cassie fished a cigarette out of her pack and handed it to Faith.

"Thanks, and I could say the same to you. What's going on with Seth?"

"It's that obvious?"

"Just a rumor, and there was no mistaking that last song was meant for you."

"I don't know what's going on." Cassie shrugged. "I couldn't explain it, if I wanted to."

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“I know what you mean. Something about being in this city again...I feel like I’m seventeen again, sneaking smokes behind the Dairy Queen with Dale Mariano. Any minute now, one of my father’s sergeants is going to pull up from the Carlisle Barracks and shake his finger at me.”

Cassie laughed and pulled a lighter from her purse. Just before she handed it over, Faith heard, “Allow me.”

She turned toward the smooth voice, laced with sex and a proper, British accent. Troy Douglas, still covered with the sweat he’d earned on stage, extended his Zippo™ and, for the second time that day, smiled at her. This time, she registered his cool blue eyes and noticed the way his dimpled smile warmed them.

If she were wearing panties, the sensation in her clit would have drenched them on the spot. To avoid falling onto his lips, she leaned to his flame and lit the cigarette.

“Troy, this is a friend of mine,” Cassie said. “Faith Hennessy, Troy Douglas. He hates me.”

“Ludicrous,” he said.

Faith exhaled and fixed her gaze on him. “Nice hat.”

* * *

Faith Hennessy had the smile of an angel-turned-vixen—as if she were as good as she were bad—and when she spoke, Troy’s insides tied into double knots. Such a difference from what he’d expected to experience during the after-party—or, as he thought of it, Seth and Cassie’s excuse to bonk after the show.

“You never wore a hat back in the day,” she said. “Not even the trademark fedora, let alone a logo for a bad baseball team.”

“I don’t regularly follow baseball. Just liked the hat, that’s all.”

“A slave to fashion.”

“No, something to hide my gray.”

“A little older, a little wiser, I always say,” Cassie said from behind

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him.

Not until he turned to acknowledge the comment did he realize he'd turned his back to Seth's ex-wife. "Or just older."

"You'd never know it watching you on stage. Quite a show you put on up there." Faith's mesmerizing lips were scarlet red and indecent, considering what they were doing in his mind. A hot breeze fingered through her hair, curlier than it had been earlier at the New Moon Lounge and bouncing free against her shoulders. What would her hair feel like draped on his chest in the aftermath of sex? "Do you enjoy it?"

He snapped back to reality. "Beg your pardon?"

"The never-dying question you always seem to sidestep, even when Barbara Walters asked it. Music. Do you enjoy it?"

"The part in front of my drums, making it, yes." And this part, making it with women backstage, wasn't so bad either. The wafting air heightened his awareness of his moist skin, and he took a closer look at her. Despite her disheveled appearance—mussed hair, a glimmer of perspiration at her temple—a faint scent of romantic perfume hung around her. Nothing like the scent of a woman to get him going. Perhaps he ought to invite her into his shower, only so they could resume sweating together once they'd towed off. "Do you have plans for after?"

Challenge appeared in her eyes. "We're conducting them as we speak. The after-party."

"I meant after the after-party."

She chewed on her lip for an uncertain moment and took a drag off her cigarette. *Ah, deliberation. Fine—and a little on the intriguing side, too.* He hadn't expected her to come quietly, had he?

He shrugged a shoulder. "Nothing heavy, of course. A drink, maybe a snack. I gather from your speech at the New Moon you're through with musicians. I can respect that."

"You were listening?" She raised a brow and her quick smile

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conveyed her amusement.

“Couldn’t turn away. You were...” He silently weighed adjectives. *Alluring? Sexy? “...interesting.”*

Her lashes fluttered over her big, brown eyes, somewhere between flattered and embarrassed. “Then you know I’ve been involved with my share of men like you, and the last one...” She shook her head. “He was beyond frustrating.”

“You didn’t recognize me at the New Moon.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“We could’ve had a drink together, for a millisecond, when you didn’t know who I was. Anonymity is fascinating and priceless for a man in my position.”

“In that case I don’t deserve the credit. I knew I knew you from somewhere.”

Knew you. No, she didn’t know him, but knowing her might be more than a pleasure. “No matter, I’m not looking for what you assume I want.”

“Been there, done that?” Her red lips parted into a sly grin.

“Let’s just say I learned a thing or two in India and leave it at that.”

“Oh, yes, your excursion to the East. How’d that pan out for you?”

“A lot of energy exuded for a few moments of serenity.”

“If you play your cards right, moments may become hours.” She cocked her head, and a golden brown ringlet bounced to the middle of her forehead. “Positive attitudes change everything.” She blew the curl off her forehead, and her gaze trailed to his arm. “Can I touch that bicep?”

“You’ll keep a man guessing, won’t you?” He licked his lips and turned to Cassie for confirmation, but Yoko wasn’t there. Not that he missed her, but where had she gone? And was he so smitten with this sex kitten in the catsuit he’d neglected to notice Cassie’s exit?

“She went inside,” Faith said.

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“Who?”

“Who you’re looking for. Cassie.”

“I’m not looking for—”

“Of course you are. An age-old crush, right?”

“Don’t believe everything you read in the tabloids.”

“And I should probably join her, so if you’ll excuse me...”

Don’t let her go. He stretched the collar of his t-shirt, fanning his hot, sweaty skin.

She flicked cigarette ashes onto the stones at her feet. “Nice meeting you.” She sauntered toward the backstage door. “Good night.”

He stared at her swaying ass, praying for the courage to speak his mind, even while knowing such free speech would land him in the eye of the public again. If he left with this woman, whatever the night brought wouldn’t be intimate moments shared between two consenting adults. Rather, he and Ms. Hennessy, the seamless wonder, would be a “story.” *Deep breaths. Sanctity.* He couldn’t hide in his Upper Peninsula lighthouse forever, could he? Fame brought a lonely existence, but he didn’t want to be alone tonight.

Her hand reached the doorknob.

Now or never.

“You don’t wear panties,” he said.

“I’m sorry?”

“Panties. You don’t wear them. Not tonight anyway.”

“That’s what I thought you said.” When she turned around, her cheeks were flushed, or perhaps they’d been rosy all along, due to the heat. She sucked a long drag off her cigarette and, with her stare fixed on him, exhaled slowly. “Aren’t you a little too shy for that commentary?”

“I don’t like the media, but that doesn’t make me shy.”

Her brow knit, and she smashed the cigarette into an ashtray of sand near the door. “In my experience, undergarments just delay things or

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get in the way. I didn't think men cared one way or another."

He wouldn't mind delaying her—with or without panties. "First off, men do notice what a woman is wearing underneath. In fact—at least to me—it's very important. The reason lingerie usually ends up on the floor so quickly relates more to the prize beneath it than lack of male interest. Personally, I'm not big on thongs and such. I prefer something that highlights the hips and lower back a little more.

"But whatever you're wearing, in addition to what you aren't, is a big part of foreplay. Men need visual stimulation. Foreplay provides that and a whole bunch more, if you're lucky. Which I think you are."

She looked up at him, jaw hanging open a fraction of an inch. "Funny, I thought foreplay was strictly for women."

"It can be."

"Is that an invitation?"

He began to nod, but thought better of it. "You're clearly the most beautiful woman in any room—here and at the New Moon—and I find myself looking for you. Nothing heavy, but I'm enjoying it."

"Here's a double-edged sword for you. If I go with you, you assume it's because of something witty you've said, something hokey about the color of my eyes, some line you can't possibly believe I'd fall for. It'll pump more than your body; it'll pump your ego. Good for you, as you're allowed the privilege to boast my insecure naïveties with your buddies on your way to the next stop down the road. But somehow, that doesn't hold much appeal for me."

"I value my privacy. I don't boast—"

"On the other hand, if I admit my attraction to you, inform you sex with you is nothing more than a primal desire, something I truly down-and-dirty need—and I need it, make no mistake. This has been the longest summer of my life—you aren't interested. There's no fight. No win. Half the thrill for men like you is in the chase, and if I'm not running, you aren't thrilled. So while you make a pass, I'm going to

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save both of us a boatload of trouble and deny you. But thanks anyway.” She placed a hand on the doorknob again.

Dumbfounded, he mustered neither the courage nor the wit to speak. Well, that was certainly one for the books.

She turned back. “Can I have the hat?”

“You want my testament to bad baseball?”

“I like it, too.”

“It’s sweaty and grungy.”

Her pursed lips spread into a small smile. “I like sweaty and grungy.”

“Be my guest.” He pulled the hat from his head and offered it up.

She grasped the bill.

He held onto it a moment longer than necessary. “Let me get you a quick drink.”

“Thanks.” She gave the hat a shake. “And thanks.”

He followed her into a dimly lit, backstage room filled with crew members still clearing the stage. A quick survey confirmed his suspicion. Cassie and Seth had disappeared.

“What’ll it be?” Troy asked.

“Rum runner.” Faith accompanied him to the walk-up bar.

In the glory days, a bartender or staff member would have catered to the girl if he’d snapped his fingers. He much preferred the privacy and intimacy of this set-up, but he didn’t have the first clue what was in her drink of choice. He scratched his temple and inspected the multitudes of bottles on the gold-clothed table.

She zapped him with that killer smile of hers. “A shot-and-a-half each of light rum, dark rum, orange juice, and pineapple juice.”

As she rattled off ingredients like a role-call, he tallied the inventory.

“Half-shot of grenadine, blackberry brandy, and for the more exotic girl, banana liqueur, but I can do without it.”

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It was his turn to grin, as he pulled a bottle from its ranks. “No need to do without anything.”

“In that case,” she said, fingering the stubborn curl resting in the middle of her forehead. “Serve it on ice.”

* * *

Whew. Close one.

Once in the confines of her hotel room, Faith sank against the door, clutching Troy’s cap to her chest. Good God, she’d wanted him. But she’d stood her ground and denied the invitation to rub more than elbows with one-fifth of the band who’d once upon a time had her creaming her jeans.

And she had Arliss to thank for that. The girl had requested a private meeting with the Silverettes backstage, and they all gathered to listen to a rant. Everyone except Georgie, whom no one had seen since she disappeared on a mission—and on Julian Manchester’s arm. Arliss had had a few drinks and let loose on the Silverettes, confessing she’d never liked the band. She said she’d pretended to go ga-ga for Blue Silver in high school in order to impress her only friends, and some friends they’d turned out to be, blaming her for their lost opportunity with the band the first time around.

Faith expected an accusation of that caliber between her charges at Daisy’s, but not from confident Arliss. First thing tomorrow, Faith was going to apologize for blaming her old friend for the missed concert years ago. She might have tracked her down now to ease Arliss’ long and undeserved suffering, if Robert Fox hadn’t staked a claim as screaming as his guitar solos. Maybe Arliss needed a good, old-fashioned lay to blow off some steam tonight, and judging by the way Robert had stepped in to end her rant, the priss might be on her back imminently.

Everything would be fine in the morning. Daisy would have good news about the pregnant runaway, Arliss would be herself again, and

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Faith would apologize, whether or not it was necessary, not only for displacing blame back in high school, but for abandoning Arliss to a musician's charms, when it was obvious Arliss needed a friend tonight.

But, damn, Troy Douglas had nearly charmed her pants off the moment he surrendered his hat.

Faith tugged at her catsuit. Her clothing clung to her body, damp with perspiration. Perhaps a cool shower would chase away passionate urges brought on by dimples in left cheeks, firm biceps, and velvety voices. A sting of summer heat sizzled on her skin the way she imagined Troy's hands might, and the drought of the past three months had left her thirsty. Regardless of whether she knew the man well or not, she knew what she'd nearly achieved—an all-out satisfaction-fest. Irresponsible, morally speaking, but liberating all the same.

With her hair secured atop her head with a clip, she peeled off the jumpsuit and stepped under a steady stream. If she'd played things a little differently tonight, she—like the rest of the Silverettes—might be engaged in a nude embrace right about now. The water needled her taut nipples, danced over her stomach and thighs. PACE principle: When I'm done showering, my luggage will have arrived. And with it, my battery-operated friend.

It seemed such a waste to grind out an orgasm with her Vibralex, when the delectable drummer occupied suite 1142. Perhaps she ought to accept his invitation...if even an hour late. He'd slipped her a key, hadn't he? Wasn't that the physical equivalent of Anytime?

She cupped her full breasts in her hands and flicked her nipples with her thumbs. So ready for release, the need for penetration ached deep within her vagina. Now that she overflowed a C-cup naturally, could she tongue her own breasts? She lifted one to her mouth, closed her lips over a bud, and enjoyed the surge of pleasure darting from one erogenous zone to the next. She sucked harder, brushed her tongue faster, and her involuntary hum of satisfaction against her flesh only

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turned her on more. She slipped a hand south and rubbed her wet clit.

God, she needed another hand. A masculine hand, entering her one finger at a time. A quick inspection of the shower revealed a bottle of hotel-issued shampoo-plus-conditioner. A small bottle, but a perfect cylinder. It would do, in a pinch, although reaching for it would mean sacrificing the breast in her mouth, or the clit under her finger. The latter lost out.

She worked her mouth over her own breast—she was good orally...she'd been told so before—and grabbed for the shampoo. After a moment of coercion, it slid in and out of her with slick precision, and soon, she exhaled staccato breaths against her nipple. The bottle twisted and stroked against her insides, and her hips instinctively bucked with each entry. In a frenzy, she traced circles round her nipple with her tongue and pinched her eyes shut.

In her mind, it was Troy Douglas entertaining her breasts with his mouth, and her pussy with his cock. Judging by the pulsation below, he had a knack for creating friction against her clit as he slid in and nudged for extra depth. And he was beyond talented. Better than any music man she'd known. They'd only been at it a few minutes, and already, her legs twitched, her vaginal walls tensed, and, and..."Oooh."

She breathed the sound against her hard peak of a nipple and quivered around the shampoo bottle. As she drew the implement out of her body, she kneaded her breast in her hand.

For a moment, she reeled in satisfaction, but she soon was awash with an intense need for reciprocity. It wasn't enough to give herself an orgasm, if no one would enjoy it with her. If she couldn't curl up, spent, in the magnificent arms of a partner, reaching climax had sated only half her need. It was going to take some crazy willpower to stay away from the eleventh floor tonight.

She lathered and rinsed her stimulated flesh, stepped out of the tub, and released her damp hair from the clip. The hotel robe, cozy,

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comfortable, and warm against her skin, would have to suffice unless her suitcase happened to materialize. With a yawn, she ventured out of the bathroom, studying her chipping nail polish. Too bad the hotel didn't boast amenities such as a full-service, twenty-four-hour salon. She was in severe need of some pampering—one way or another.

"Hello, gorgeous," she heard from the next room.

Faith didn't look up from her hands. "Hey, Marci. Couldn't make a night of it with Mr. Dream-an-erotic-dream-of-me Bassist?"

The faint scent of showered male lured her attention, and when she regarded it, she met the gaze of Brad Nix, who leaned against the open door to the adjoining room. Moments later, she caught sight of Troy Douglas lounging in the dim light of the room on her king-sized bed. Shoes off, shirt open, as if he hadn't bothered to fully dress himself after his shower.

Heat rushed to her cheeks, as she pictured the adorable drummer getting comfortable in her room, listening to her pleasuring herself in the shower. Had she come quietly? She couldn't remember, and suddenly, she couldn't recall why she'd denied him earlier either.

He smiled as if he had not only heard her most private moments, but watched them, as well. An intriguing, although somewhat embarrassing, thought. How would Troy Douglas react to a display of self-love? Would he stroke himself as he listened? Join in to double-fuck her? The last musician she'd dated had been obsessed with the thought of penetrating her rectum, while an accessory vibrated away in her other hole. He'd been on the road again before they'd gotten around to it, but thinking of doing it now, with Troy—

"Night's not over, is it?" Marci giggled and appeared in a pair of willow green satin pajama pants and a snug, cotton tank. She cuddled in the crook of Brad's arm. "Truth or dare."

Faith blinked away from Troy's hypnotizing dimple and acknowledged her girlfriend. "Truth."

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“Do you, or do you not, travel with a vibrator?” Marci led Brad by the hand to the bed, where they sank onto the duvet.

Could the blood in Faith’s cheeks reach a higher temperature? But used to having inappropriate conversations with Marci, and cloudy with the effects of a few rum runners, she tried to regain her composure. Besides, in her experience, the kinkier the woman, the more turned on the musician. “As a matter of fact, I do.” Faith tucked a damp tendril behind her ear. “I travel with the patented Vibr lux 3000, designed to stimulate and reach every nerve ending in a woman’s vaginal cavity. A buzz by any other name is not the same.”

Troy’s exhalation bordered on a steamy sigh, and she could have sworn his eyes deepened to midnight blue in an instant.

She hid a satisfied, empowered smile and refused to take her eyes from Troy’s. “Right back atcha, Marci. Truth or dare.”

“Dare.”

“I dare you to demonstrate what you do for a living. Not what your parents think you do. What you actually do.”

Marci’s voice lowered half an octave to husky. “Tell me what you want me to do next, tiger. I’m wearing what you wanted: a plaid skirt, white oxford, knee socks, and penny loafers. I’m bending over the table, with my bare ass in the air. Are you going to fuck me? Or spank me for using obscene language? Whatever your pleasure, you’re in charge here.”

She shrugged and when she spoke again, the Texas belle had returned. “Phone sex. Someone’s gotta do it, right?”

“Great mother of God,” Brad murmured into a strawberry blonde cloud of hair, as if they’d been coupling for years. But that was the way it went with musicians. They could afford to make a girl feel special for just one night because the one-night-stand was implicit in any backstage relating. They knew it. Their girls knew it, too, just as Marci knew it now.

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Marci rubbed a leg against the bassist's. "I dare you." Her phone sex voice emerged again. "Repeat that move you made on me. Only this time, make it on Faith."

"Christ," Troy said. "Have you applied for a patent on that move yet?"

"If he hasn't, he should." Marci snickered.

"Are you in for a treat," Troy whispered.

A hot, fluttering sensation shot from Faith's heart to her nether regions. She bit her lip in anticipation, as Brad reached for her. She looked to Marci, who mouthed, You won't be sorry.

Rule number four: You are a consenting adult, and you may knowingly and willing partake in this game. She swallowed hard and looked to Troy, whose dimple winked at her when he flashed his smile.

"Come here." Brad rubbed her hand in encouragement and positioned her back to his chest. He rested his chin on her shoulder and whispered, "A musician knows nothing better than he knows his own instrument. Yet at the same time, playing with a woman's body is"—His hand slipped into the folds of her robe, and she tensed, seeking Troy's reaction.—"in-fucking-comparable."

Passion glowed in the drummer's eyes. His tongue appeared for a leisurely taste of his bottom lip, and he gave her a quick nod. "Show me," he whispered. He wanted to watch.

Her tension melted away.

Brad rolled her clit between his fingers, manipulating her as he would his bass guitar. "Fuck, I love 'em shaven."

Troy closed his eyes for a moment longer than a blink, but quickly fixed his gaze on Faith's. Brad plucked and rubbed. But with her heated stare tangling with Troy's, it felt as if he were the one making music of her pleased sighs, applying pressure to evoke a higher pitch, relenting for a breathier note. Troy's hand crept to the apex of Marci's legs, caressing her through the satin.

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The moment Marci groaned in pleasure, Faith threw her head back against Brad's shoulder and closed her eyes, overcome with the absolute bliss she'd fallen short of during her solo effort in the shower. For stability, she gripped the first thing within reach, which happened to be Troy's bicep. Feeling the hard, defined muscle, tensing as his hand worked her best friend, only added fuel to the fire. Jeez, she was going to climax, right here, right now, with three witnesses.

"Oh, God. Oh, God." She concentrated on nothing but what she felt. Strong arms, talented fingers, and with closed eyes, it didn't matter that the two body parts belonged to two different men, or that the guy she wanted to fuck harder than hard had a hand on Marci's clit. Her audience faded into the far recesses of her mind. She released her apprehension and gave in to pleasure. When her last groan of gratification escaped her, she tumbled to the bed—across the lap of a very happy man.

* * *

Troy was rock hard. He'd been halfway there the moment Faith appeared, just out of the shower, with skin glowing as if she'd recently finished a satisfying workout, face natural, no cosmetics. The scent of her clean skin, the sound of her voice, and her partially open robe—which rewarded him a glorious glimpse at the inner curve of a breast—invigorated him plenty. And if that weren't enough to arouse him, his best mate had brought her to orgasm in mere seconds, perking a rumbling desire deep within his soul. And the look in her eyes...Brad's fingers had entertained her, but it was Troy she wanted. He knew for certain.

"Oh, God." She blew a strand of hair out of her eyes and lounged with her ass between his thighs, propped on her elbows, next to the red-head he'd reached for in the heat of the moment. "Quite a move."

"Pretty impressive, huh?" Marci grinned and turned to the Brad. "I told you. Faith and I share everything. Everything."

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Troy had never been a jealous man when it came to matters of the flesh. He, too, liked to share things. He'd shared women with Brad—and other men—in the past. Some women were too good not to share. He had only one rule about the level of quirkiness in the bedroom—a woman really had to derive pleasure from it. Anal? If she wanted it, he'd oblige. Oral? Any woman down on him had better enjoy the living daylights out of a blowjob, or refrain from giving one. Multiple partners? She'd better beg for them, or best mate or not, he'd tell their company to get lost.

"Truth or dare," he whispered in Faith's ear.

She shifted in his lap, and his erection grazed against her hip. "Truth," came her breathless reply.

"Do you enjoy kissing women?"

She brought a hand to her thigh, straightened her robe, and stroked him, however subtly, through his jeans with her knuckles, as she withdrew. "I imagine I might." Her voice sweetened, and as she looked at him, embers of a passionate afterglow burned in her gaze, the type of fire telling him she'd only just begun.

"Do me a favor." He tucked a hand into her lapel and brushed four fingers against a firm, full breast. "Give it a shot."

She shivered with his caress and very slowly leaned toward the feisty redhead.

"I dare you to do it, Faith, baby." Marci braced one hand against Brad's crotch and leaned in the rest of the way.

The women met with a dry pucker, but an instant into the affair, he could see both part their lips. Tongues rimmed lips, flirting, pleasing, as if each knew what the other wanted. Faith brought a hand to Marci's cheek and, amid the tender exchange, Troy grew another inch. His cock threatened to part the teeth of his zipper. He eased his jeans open.

Seeing the two women go at it, he suspected they'd done so before. Marci's hand abandoned Brad's fly and dipped into Faith's robe. She

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pushed aside the white terrycloth and revealed a pale mound with a tawny nipple, just ripe enough to lick. But the women didn't break the kiss to caress with their mouths elsewhere. With her thumb, Marci drew a circle around Faith's already hard bud, and their French kiss deepened—tongues delved further, lips kneaded with more precision.

When Faith arched into her girlfriend and dragged her tongue along the underside of Marci's, Troy couldn't stop himself from joining the party. He reached for Faith's naked breast, and his fingers entwined with Marci's as he massaged it.

A naturally large tit. He hadn't felt one of those in a while.

"Ohhh." Faith had a voice sweet as nectar, and now that she'd given him a verbal cue, no way was Troy going to allow her to slip out of her building satisfaction.

He raked anxious fingers through her hair. "Beautiful," he whispered.

Brad worked the sash on Marci's pants. Once loosened, he shoved the garment out of the way and exposed a pair of pink bikinis, a treat in themselves, with satin laces criss-crossing up her rear. Brad wiggled a hand into the panties, and judging by the tensing of the redhead's fingers against Faith's breast, he'd plunged in a finger from behind.

Troy's hand grazed from breast to fit stomach; Faith's robe opened a bit more.

When his fingers reached her slick, shaven pussy, wet from her earlier coming, the woman-on-woman kiss grew hungrier, as both women reeled in dual pleasure. He yanked the robe halfway off and traded glances between his fingers working bare folds of skin and the girls' tangled tongues. An American flag—a tattoo—waved from the curve of Faith's right hip.

"God bless America," Troy whispered.

Soft groans, purely feminine, emanated from their united mouths.

Brad worked Marci's tank top up and over her breasts, and soon,

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Faith's tawny buds met Marci's pink ones. Full breasts squashed against full breasts. Something quite better than two real breasts was four. Faith's hand feathered from Marci's cheek to bosom. She fondled herself and her friend simultaneously, tweaking nipples with patient fingers.

That was the only encouragement Troy needed to move things along—feeling her mouth on him was no longer a maybe but a must be. He climbed out from beneath Faith's body and, careful not to disturb her and Marci's union, repositioned himself. Watching as Brad stroked fingers into the redhead's kitty, he darted his tongue into Faith's, eating her from behind. Her smooth, hairless cunt tasted of vanilla soap and caressed his mouth like a gourmet dessert. He'd lick her for hours, if she could last that long.

He spread her labia with his thumbs and dragged his tongue from her front hole to the other. She did nothing to stop him from probing her tight, taboo rectum with the pads of his fingers. Rather she tightened and arched against him. That only encouraged him to work his mouth faster and harder against her. God, he loved a woman unafraid of feeling good. The fewer the inhibitions, the better, and she was well on her way to coming in his mouth.

The sound of an opening zipper rang in his ears. He roved a hand up from her privates toward her breasts. The women had parted, save a joining of their hands, and Brad, too, was onto the next step in the whirlwind of sexual exploration. Troy climbed between Faith's legs and tasted her clitoris, nipping at the nub, licking her folds until her thighs squeezed at his cheeks. She locked a leg around his neck, and a gushing release flooded over his tongue.

Now that's what he called an orgasm.

* * *

After her second coming, or third, counting her solo affair, Faith caught her breath and watched Troy emerge from the death grip she'd

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put on his head. Marci laid a foot-and-a-half away, completely nude and entwined with a bare-assed Brad. Faith released her girlfriend's hand.

Wow, this was really happening. Four bodies. One bed. And why did it feel so...normal? Was it because it was with Marci? Or was it the magic of star-struck awe?

"Relax," Troy whispered, lifting and rolling her quivering body over so she lay atop him. He shoved her robe, which lay in a discarded pile on the bed, to the floor. "That one took a lot out of you." He brushed his talented hands up her spine, ruffled her hair, and took her mouth with his.

With one hand pressed to her backside, he nudged his pelvis against hers. His jeans were unzipped and his healthy erection skated against her wet vagina, tantalizing her stimulated tissue. She groaned and rubbed against the length of him.

And length he definitely had. His balls—they felt hairless—were nestled at her rear, and his tip reached her mid-abdomen. But size didn't matter...or so she'd always assumed, mainly because she'd never experienced a man of such endowment. She slithered down his torso to investigate, yanking off his pants along the way.

"I love a woman who can't stop," he said.

What she discovered between his legs was a pleasure stick at least nine inches long, maybe ten, with a circumference far surpassing the girth of any Vibratex. After a quick glance at his gorgeous face, complete with flashing dimple, she took him into her mouth, sucking and massaging the tip and gradually working lower. There was no way it all would fit—in her mouth or elsewhere—but she worked him in sections, cupping his balls in her mouth, one at a time, licking him from base to tip and back again. His dick was like an amusement park—more to see around the next bend—and she did her best to experience it all in one visit.

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It wasn't until he pressed up to meet her mouth she realized she was pleasing him, as well as herself. Well, if her mouth were half as good as it'd felt in the shower against her own breast...

A hand went rigid in her hair. "I want you," he whispered. "Now." She wanted him, too. Years ago, and yes, now.

He pressed a foil package into her hand. A condom. Extra large.

She bit open the package and placed the prophylactic atop the head of his penis like a party hat. She unrolled it as far as she could with her mouth, and when she could accommodate him no more, she massaged it down his shaft with her hands.

He pulled her up, aligned her, and plunged in. One, two, three strokes, and he was buried to his balls. She'd never been filled to such capacity and wasn't likely to forget the thoroughness. Like her vibrator, he reached every inch of depth she had to offer, but he provided her with so much more than her faithful, battery-operated companion ever would—and something she craved—reciprocity. He held her close with ultra-strong arms. A shiver darted through her from clit and nipples to a million sensitive places she didn't know existed. As he pumped, her breasts crushed against his chest and the beating of his heart reverberated against hers.

Murmured sounds of satisfaction rose from the foot of the bed, and she locked gazes with Marci. So turned on in her own corner of the bed, she'd nearly forgotten the group effort that had preceded this finale. Her best friend, mid-orgasm, was nothing like Marci's phone-sex character, who was outspoken and sounded like a porn star. The other sexually engaged woman in Faith's bed shivered quietly, allowed her body to do the talking.

Faith had never watched another couple get it on before, let alone her best friend and a famous musician. And she never dreamed Marci would be watching her screw Troy Douglas into oblivion either. So wrong, on so many levels. So amazing on so many others.

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As if they shared a connection on some cosmic level, Marci's pleasure became hers. Witnessing the woman's climax stirred something from deep within and prompted one of her own. And the boys of Blue Silver kept time and took cues in bed as expertly as they did on stage. It seemed as if either she or Marci had been coming—by design—at all times. Brad and Troy had done this sort of thing before. Thank God for men who'd perfected a craft—especially this one.

Was it wrong to thank Him for hedonistic sex?

* * *

Troy bid adieu to his best mate and the redhead, who closed the door behind them, and he fingered through Faith's golden brown mane as she slept. Ms. Seamless was also Ms. Agile, and illuminated with the dim beam of light from the bathroom, her beauty rivaled those wearing pageant tiaras. He caressed the hollow of her cheek, down her neck, over generous breasts and a tight stomach, only to drag his fingers over the tattooed flag on her hip. *Miss America*.

So many names for a girl he barely knew, but knowing a girl—really knowing her—was a near-impossible feat when one lived on the road.

That was the trouble, had always been the trouble, for Troy. In retrospect, he hadn't known his ex-wife all that well, and Cassie...well, Cassie was no more than an acquaintance, if not a stranger, to whom he'd been attracted. He knew that now.

But after life in a fish bowl, then seclusion on the shores of Lake Superior, could he ever hope to fall into a routine with a deserving woman? Would he ever come to rely on a woman the way he'd relied on music all those years?

Faith had been playing the anchor for homeless teens for years. She might never drift far enough to learn to lean on a man, but in the safe confines of her hotel room, he dared to daydream. What would it feel like to catch her when she fell? How would it feel to fall for her?

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He imagined vacationing with her—not her, per se, but with the woman he assumed she'd be underneath it all—and the pictures in his mind represented the serenity he'd lost long ago. Sunlight resting on her shoulders, wind racing through her hair, she'd laugh and lean into him, arms around his waist, as they traversed the waters of the Great Lakes.

Perhaps it was time to pull the ole dinghy out of storage. With or without the woman he'd just had his way with, he might find peace on the *Tranquility*, reconnect with nature. Forget the life he'd re-established—the glam, the limelight—but never the music. He couldn't forget the music.

* * *

Hours later, Faith awoke next to only one body. Despite the comfort she found nestled in Troy's arms, the persistent shrill of the telephone lured her to the other side of the bed, where Marci and Brad had collapsed in post-intercourse moments before Faith surrendered to sleep. They were gone now, probably behind the door that adjoined the rooms. As fun—strike that, as unbelievable—as the foursome had been, privacy was nice, too.

Troy's strong hand grazed across her bare stomach. "Where do you think you're going?" he grumbled, pulling her back into his embrace.

"The phone." She tripped the receiver off its cradle with reaching fingertips and yanked it by the coiled cord. "Hello. Yeah. I'll be right there."

He tightened his grip when she attempted to hang up the phone. "I'm not through with you yet."

"My luggage has finally found its way to town." She twisted in his arms and pressed her torso to his.

He groaned and gave her a squeeze. "Give me the phone."

"It'll take just a minute. I'll be right back."

"Give me the phone, love."

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She bit her lip. Troy Douglas had just used a term of endearment. Not that it meant anything to a man like him, and not that she'd believe otherwise, but hearing it flattered her to the Nth degree. She handed him the phone.

"Dial the bell desk."

She did as he asked, snuggled in, and listened.

"Code: Fid."

"Code what?"

He covered the mouthpiece with a hand. "Short for fiddlehead, a young fern before it rolls out. And that's we're doing. Rolling out." He spoke into the phone again. "Please deliver Ms. Hennessy's things to suite eleven-forty-two. She'll be joining me there for the rest of her stay. Thank you." He handed back the phone. "Done."

"Joining you in your—"

"It's much nicer than this pad, I assure you." He found her robe, tossed it at her, and began to step into his discarded clothing. "You can swim in the tub, lounge with a drink on the sofa."

"For the rest of my stay?" Why was she putting on the robe? It wasn't as if she were going anywhere. "I'm leaving in twelve hours."

"Not anymore, you're not. Do you have anything here to pack? Carry-on luggage? A purse or anything?"

"You mean other than my best friend?"

"As we speak, your best friend is fast asleep—or fast at work, as the case may be—in suite eleven-fifty-eight." He pulled on his shirt and fumbled with the buttons in the dim light. The first button entered the wrong hole.

"You don't have to do this."

"I don't have to do what? Bring you upstairs, work you over—and good—in my bed?" He popped the few buttons he'd fastened incorrectly out of buttonholes and began again. "I beg to differ. I definitely have to do something as intriguing as that."

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“No, I mean—”

“Let’s lay it on the line, shall we? Like you, I don’t do anything I don’t want to do. This isn’t about getting laid. Christ, what’s with these buttons?” He tore open the shirt, left his chest exposed, and slid a long, muscular leg into denim. “We’ve already laid plenty, haven’t we? I’d say we made enough noise to last me all month. If sex was all I wanted, I could have high-tailed it out of this room the moment your eyes closed.

“Hell, I could have sweet-talked a woman into my bed in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, if that were my motive, and saved myself the trip. And you could’ve done so back in Chicago, had you told that wanker where to go back in June—and you should, by the way, as soon as you return. Marci’s right about that.”

“How do you know about—”

“I listened to every word having the good fortune to pass over your lips at the New Moon. I believe I already mentioned that.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but what could she say? If there was one thing she’d never expected from a musician, it was honesty.

“I enjoy your company, plain and simple, and I’d like to enjoy a bit more of it. So what do you say?”

Was he for real? She’d expected the incredible sex. She’d expected the gold-star treatment—while he was interested. But she didn’t expect to set up camp in his suite, especially for an extended stay. “I have to get home. One of my girls is on-the-run, and I—”

“That’s right, your runaway. Tell me about her...in eleven forty-two.” He stood, hiked up his jeans, and straightened his boxer shorts. “Don’t forget my hat.”

Rule number five: you may overindulge upon occasion.

* * *

To reach the suites from the wing of standard rooms in the Come Inn Hotel, one had to ride down to the ground level, cross the lobby,

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and take a separate stack of glass elevators up the west side of the building. During Blue Silver's hey-day, Troy would have had an anxiety attack at the thought of lurking photographers. However, considering the late hour and the quiet, respectful privacy in which he'd reveled since the concert, Troy's apprehensions were few. He'd survived the first two legs of the journey without incident, and without interest perking in his pants, despite the glimpses of Faith's skin he caught along the way. But now that they were on their way up, so was his reproductive muscle.

His companion, wearing a hotel-monogrammed robe, flip-flops, and his Tigers cap—backwards—leaned against a chrome railing and stared out at the slowly waning lobby below. She was unlike any woman he'd encountered recently—lacking any sort of inhibition in bed and unaffected by his once-superstar ranking. For a moment, he hadn't known whether she was going to accept his invitation to his suite. He'd never been rejected after a concert, and Faith had nearly done so twice.

The scuffed, mirror-mosaic floor in the elevator reflected a distorted glimpse of the legs he'd recently unwound, and the mirrored ceiling provided a portrait of the generous décolletage in which he'd buried his mouth not too long ago. A beautiful specimen, with purpose to her life. He shifted her carryon luggage on his shoulder. "Pull the stop."

A smile touched her lips when she looked over her shoulder at him. "I thought you valued your privacy."

"We're running out of time." As he uttered the words, he realized the truth in them. She'd soon be on her way home to counsel America's troubled youth, and he'd soon be on his way to...hell if he knew—Columbus, Ohio? Richmond, Virginia?—prepping for yet another venue. Perhaps he ought to invite her to the show in Chicago. He'd be there in a few weeks, in her neck of the woods, but he was getting ahead of himself. She'd been a welcome distraction, a fascinating lover, but neither expected more than a single night together. She'd said so

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herself, mumbling in the afterglow of the sexual extravagance they'd shared.

Her smile widened into a mischievous grin as she reached for the red stop button on the control panel. The elevator lurched to a halt. "What now, drummer boy?"

His glance trailed to the mirrored ceiling. "Lose the damn robe."

With a sauntering gait, she approached him, loosened her sash, and, shoving his shirt aside, pressed her nude torso to his bare chest.

He dropped her bag.

She yanked on the button at his fly, and a hand delved in to investigate his condition. "You have the most amazing cock." Her voice, graveled with passion and lust, was music to his ears, and her long fingers stroked him straight up in a single touch. Like magic. "But I'm sure you've heard that before."

"A few times." He licked his lips, slid his hands against her silky skin, and squeezed two handfuls of spectacular ass. "I hear all kinds of things I'm not sure I should believe, but when I enjoy a woman's body the way I do yours, I use everything God gave me. I leave no stone unturned and have you every which way I can."

"We should—"

The strobe of a flash bulb silenced her. That and his body immediately plunging between her and the glass. He kicked the stop button, and the elevator jerked into a slow climb.

Out of the corner of his eye, he'd seen the figure stationed on the balcony across the way; he ought to have been more careful. If he wanted to give the photographer another shot of his face, he could look over his shoulder to ensure the paparazzi aimed for him. There was a chance, after all, that the flashes were simply the product of partying hotel guests, documenting their night after the Blue Silver reunion. Or maybe Seth had fallen off the wagon, was piss drunk again and calling attention to himself, inviting the publicity. The latter was unlikely,

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seeing as the singer had had his addictions under control for years, but if Cassie had denied him again, anything was possible. The fool was bloody lovesick for the gal.

Don't look over your shoulder. He willed himself to stare at the chrome doors, waiting for them to open on the eleventh floor. Investigating where the flash had come from might provide another, maybe clearer, picture for some gossip rag, documenting his engagement in flagrant sexual activity with—good Lord—a youth counselor. The thought deflated him—literally. “I’m sorry.”

“What was that?”

“I apologize.”

“No, I heard you.” She brushed her hands against his cheeks in calming, reassuring strokes. “I asked what—”

“Freedom of the press, love.”

“Oh.” Her hands left his face in a quick, darting motion, and she took a step back, pulling at her robe. “Do you think they...they—”

“Did they get a picture? If they were aiming for us, it’s highly likely.”

“My father will kill me if he sees it,” she muttered. And then, speaking more clearly, “I’m going to lose my credibility. And my job.”

“I apologize,” he said again because he didn’t know what else to say. “The reflection off the glass might...” He shook his head. “We’ll know in the morning.”

“Will they be waiting up there?”

“The elevator won’t stop on eleven without a key, and we’re the only guests on the floor. We and the other guys, that is.”

“Thank God for small favors.” She chewed her lip and attempted to close her robe tighter, but she’d already wound herself in like a mummy. Why had he agreed to this tour, to returning to a lifestyle that had nearly beaten him a decade ago? And worse, he’d now exposed Faith to the turmoil of fame. He’d recovered from the worst, and he’d

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bounce back from this—even if it meant another trek to India—but her livelihood was on the line.

The elevator doors opened, and he led her down a corridor to the right. His was the farthest suite from what he'd expected to be party central—Seth's room—but the entire floor seemed a-slumber. He unlocked the door and his guest entered with a quiet smile. Although the hotel couldn't follow through with tight security, the bell staff had hopped to delivering her bags, which awaited them inside the door.

She opened the largest suitcase, while he dialed the front desk. "Yes, I just called regarding code Fid. It seems there may be a breach of your security around floor number..." She walked past, nude, with her robe dangling in her hand. She hung it on a hook on the bathroom door. "Floor number..." The fluorescent light settled on her skin, making him want to sink his teeth into her creamy flesh. His memory blanked, spewing only images of full breasts and a shaven cleft nestled between two strong thighs. "Christ, what floor was it? Floor number..."

"Seven," Faith said on her way back toward the plush, red sofa.

"Floor number seven. I'd appreciate your looking into the matter." He approached the wet bar and began pulling out bottles. "Oh, and I specifically requested a bottle of banana liqueur, and I'm not finding it. I'd venture down to the lounge, but under the circumstances—the photographer, that is—could I trouble you to send up a shot or two? What can I say? The lady may be thirsty."

Her cheeks blushed to the color of a Michigan apple, and she thanked him. Smiling, she pulled a handful of black lace from her baggage. He tried not to take inventory of her belongings, but after she'd laid out a black satin slip, lace-top thigh-highs, and her Vibrax, his interest peaked.

"You'll let me know about the security issue?"

"I have a man on six as we speak," the night manager said. "There was a youth group wandering around up there. Just a few kids, pushing

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their luck. One of them had a camera. A disposable type, not capable of capturing you on film from that distance. They're back in their rooms now, so you can rest easy. Should I call if anything else comes up?"

Just kids. He'd been back on the road for one show, and already the paranoia had set in. "No, don't phone, and as a matter of fact, I'd appreciate your putting a do not disturb on the line. Slip a note under the door by morning, so I know what, if anything, I'm dealing with. Along with a *Chicago Tribune*. Thank you." He hung up the phone and shook a cigarette from the pack on the bar. "Turns out it was probably just kids with a camera. Most likely nothing to worry about."

"Good. I don't know if you warrant national coverage anymore, but—" She looked up as he flicked the switch on his lighter.

"Not in quite some time. But sex never goes out of style, does it, love?"

Her mouth formed a small "o," pulling memories of her expert fellatio to the forefront of his mind—and to his cock.

He looked to the implement she'd laid out on the back of the sofa. "You'd sworn off musicians."

"And cigarettes. Want to light one of those for me, while you're at it?"

He pulled another smoke from the pack. "Why do you travel like this, with things in your suitcase that inspire me to violate you one hundred ways, if you didn't anticipate—"

"My father is an officer with the United States Army, thank you very much. I'm always prepared. For any situation."

"Truth—had you ever made love with Marci before?"

"I think I need a drink before I answer questions like that." Her lashes fluttered for a moment, as if the question had embarrassed her. He might have assumed he'd humiliated her by asking, but when she met his gaze, it was with sparkling eyes and a flirty, challenging smile. "What do you think? Was I good enough to convince you I'm an old

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pro? Or was I reserved enough, nervous enough, to convince you my virtue is far more attractive than my experience?”

“What do I think? He handed over a cigarette. “I think you’re a natural, when it comes to all things sexual.”

* * *

The tang of nicotine filtered through her body, tingling in the tips of her toes and fingers. Jeez, why had she ever quit something that felt so good? All right, it would kill her someday, but the buzz was better than alcohol, in that she kept her senses as she partook, but her skin felt ultra-sensitized, as if it were humming with feeling. Or was that the effect of Troy Douglas, likening her to a primal, desirous being?

Such a change of pace from the plan-and-run pattern to which she’d grown accustomed. Shontae and his mantra about white girls had never given her a chance, but Troy...he couldn’t get enough of her.

Neither could she get enough of him. There had been a time in her youth when she’d fantasized about these moments, night after night. She’d dreamed of the men of Blue Silver making love to her—sometimes Seth had appeared in her subconscious, other times, Robert. Although she’d rarely pictured herself with Julian—she couldn’t couple up with a man prettier than she was—her preferred band member had changed as often as the direction of the wind. But there was no question who would remain her favorite now. Her already engorged clitoris—she’d probably be swollen for months—ached with longing for more of Troy Douglas, despite the tension brought on by the seventh-floor photographer.

“I think you and I are two of a kind,” he said. “You do what feels good—even if it’s deeply animalistic—and you see it for what it is. What we did earlier, four bodies going at it at once, most people in contemporary society would have bee-lined for the nearest confessional, but not me. And not you. That type of activity only spurs more yearning within us. Greed, gluttony. We have to do it all, or we’re

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not satisfied. So I'd say if you hadn't had a woman before tonight, it's been on your fantasy list of things to do for years."

"I hit a dry spell this summer." She exhaled a stream of smoke. "Tonight was definitely about over-indulgence, but it was a first. If it seemed natural, it's only because it was with Marci. I love her, and she loves me. Would I do that sort of thing with other women I love? Not Arliss, not Georgie. And I'm sorry to say, not Cassie, although I think taking on Cassie and me at the same time might do incomparable things for you."

"Watching you make love with anyone will do incomparable things for me. And it's not that I want to pass my women around, as if I own them—I've been accused of that before. I don't want a woman to do anything she doesn't want to do, but when she wants it, I'm there. There's something erotic about watching you please someone—man or woman—something taboo about multiple naked bodies, not knowing if my hands are doing it for you, or if it's her mouth, or his...whatever. In the end, I want you for myself, but the journey can be sweeter with an extra hand along the way. Or haven't I proven that yet?"

"Oh, you've proven plenty. That was no first for Brad and you I'll bet."

His dimple brightened his smile. "The first in many years." He took an ashtray from the bar, flicked his cigarette, and extended the small glass object to catch her ashes as well. "You should take that as a compliment."

A knock sounded on the door and, while she tended to her suitcase, he answered, only to accept a bottle of banana liqueur. "Thank you."

Click. The door closed. Chock. Troy turned the deadbolt. Slick. He employed the chain lock.

He plucked the hat from her head. Arms wrapped around her from behind, hands cupped her breasts and brushed against her clit. A satisfied sound escaped with her next exhalation—a sound so foreign

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she was surprised she'd made it.

"I'm going to make you a drink," he said. "Then I'm going to run you a bath, get you good and wet, and put you to bed. Tell me." He sucked a lobe into his mouth, flicked it with his tongue, and released it. "Have you ever been filled, both ends at once?"

* * *

She shivered in his embrace. His kind of girl—turned on with words, glances, and all things physical. Comfortable enough with her own body that she walked around in her birthday suit. Not afraid to talk about what had happened, what was about to happen, or what she'd like to happen in the bedroom. And she stroked his shaft as if she owned it. He adored a woman who repeatedly reached for him and pleased him with a subtle touch.

Why had he made the journey all the way to India? Chicago might have sufficed.

"A man could get used to a woman like you." He'd said the words to random women in the past, maybe he'd even meant them, from time to time. But this particular uttering gave him pause. Could he become accustomed to a woman like Faith Hennessy?

A sweet purr rolled from her lips, sending an urgent message. She was ready. Again.

"Hold that thought." He took the cigarette from her fingers and placed it in the ashtray next to his. Streams of smoke coiled upward, entwining. "I promised you a drink, didn't I? A little something to take the edge off. Meet me in the bedroom." He turned toward the walk-up bar and mixed the ungodly number of liquors required to concoct her favorite drink. Pleasantly, however, her drink of choice seemed to be the only complicated thing about the girl.

He popped a straw into her glass and meandered into the bedroom, draped in cranberry velour and spritzed with the scent of orchids. A naked woman leaned against the black glossy dresser, and a vibrator

occupied a space atop it, evoking a smile from each of them. “Your promised cocktail, my lady.”

“You also promised me a bath before thoroughly filling me.” She raised an eyebrow, but climbed onto the bed. She lingered for a moment on hands and knees before melting against the mattress. “That’s a lot to accomplish in twelve hours.”

The vision of her up on all fours haunted him. He’d taken her from behind hours ago—deep and mammalian. Wet and hot. But once would never be enough. “So make it thirty-six, and we’ll both get a little sleep tonight.” He abandoned the drink—she obviously didn’t need the alcoholic incentive—tossed the Vibratex to the bed, and approached her.

His hand met the littlest toe on her left foot. She giggled, flinched her foot away, and rolled onto her back. *A ticklish babe. Good.* When he reached for her foot again, he grasped it tightly, pressing his thumb into her arch, and brought her pretty toes to his mouth. “I’d planned to suck on these toes, while I’m nine inches deep.”

She groaned when he sucked her toes, one-by-one, and stifled a cry of pleasure when he kneaded her clit with his thumb. He wanted to lick her there, too, and fuck her pussy at the same time, and have her suck him dry. Ergonomically impossible, but good God, she deserved multiple satisfactions. And they were too good together not to want it all.

His tongue trailed from her toes, up her leg, and against her sex, wiggling into her folds, dragging against her rectum, as he slowly pressed a his pinky finger into her tight ass. “Show me,” he whispered against her. “Show me an orgasm.”

Within moments, the buzz of a vibrator rang in his ears, and he felt its pulsation against his finger, through the thin layer of skin dividing her cunt from her anus. He blinked to be sure he hadn’t dreamt it, but reality probed inches away. The pink rendition of a thick cock inched

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and rotated between her labia by the power of her own hands. “Bury it.”

She did, arching against the mattress as the implement disappeared into her body. *Heavenly*. What else could he shove between her legs? She was too good, too uninhibited...he had to push for more.

“Keep going, love.” He freed his ramrod cock from his pants, and it sprang out against her thigh with a slap.

While she worked the vibrator with one hand, she gave him a gentle squeeze with the other, climbing from his balls to his tip. She licked her lips. “Let me taste you.”

He scrambled out of his jeans, repositioned himself, and pulled her atop him in a sixty-nine. She remained on her knees, straddling his face, the toy buzzing happily in her depths. He plunged it in a few more times. She licked him up and down, covering every inch of his dick, as if he were a dripping Popsicle™ in ninety-degree heat. Damn, had she majored in blowjobs?

He twisted the vibrator in a full circle. She answered with a wet kiss against his balls and before long, took them into her mouth, one at a time, humming her satisfaction against him. Her tongue flicking against his testicles was enough to turn him into a geyser, especially with the event taking place between her legs. But he wasn't done with her yet. Not by a long shot.

She trembled atop him, sucked harder on his balls, stroked his shaft more precisely. “Mmmmmmm...”

She was nearing climax.

He pulled her pelvis closer, so her breasts squashed against him, and he fought the urge to replace the vibrator with his mouth. He didn't want her to lose it. Not this one. It was too sweet. Keeping the same rhythm, he penetrated her again and again with Mr. Vibralux, watching it disappear into her flesh.

“Mmmmmmm...”

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Unable to control himself any longer, he discarded the implement after one last thrust and pressed his mouth to her dripping honey-pot, just in time to lap up her gushing. He occupied two of her three holes—one with his cock, and one with his tongue. An accomplishment, but an incomplete one. All in good time. He found her so fascinating, he'd penetrate her ear, if he could.

Her fingers tensed around his cock. "Mmmmmm."

A single bead of pre-ejaculation dripped down the length of him.

She eased his balls from her mouth. "Fuck me."

Oh, he planned to. He puckered his lips over her hard clit and swept her sweet juices with his tongue.

"Fuck me!"

No need to ask three times. He lifted her by the hips, shifted her body downward, and, like a ringer in horseshoes, hit pay dirt.

Her hot channel melted against his naked cock. How long had it been since he'd been raw inside a woman? Too long, and too risky to continue. He traced her spine with an index finger and pressed up into her again. One last time before he cracked out another condom. He thrust hard and long into her, nudging for one last inch of accommodation. Oh, the thrill in making it fit.

* * *

A beam of morning sunlight gleamed off Troy's bare chest as he walked toward the table, where Faith sat, sipping a cup of coffee. He tousled her hair and cupped a breast, presently clad in black satin. "A little piece of home for you, love." He dropped the newspaper atop the table and reached over her for his cell phone.

"Ooh, the *Trib*. Thanks."

"And thankfully, we're not on the cover." He flipped open his phone and scrolled for a number. "Do you enjoy boating, Faith?"

"If memory serves. It's been a while, but I live off Winthrop Harbor."

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“Is that right? If you’ll excuse me a moment, I’m going to locate my boat.” He paced the floor, phone at his ear. “Good morning. This is Troy Douglas, calling in regards to the *Tranquility*. How possible is it to bring her out of storage for the rest of the season?” He winked when he caught her staring at him.

She flashed a grin and thumbed through the headline news. But she couldn’t help returning her gaze to the handsome man who’d stroked her into a whirlwind of pleasure the night before—and all right, this morning too. And he owned a boat? She probably knew that, didn’t she? She’d have to ask Marci and the girls if they remembered reading anything about Troy’s *Tranquility*. Just her luck, she finally met a man unrivaled with lovemaking—nasty, yet respectful, somehow—talented, beautiful, and he loved the water enough to own a boat. Yet for all intents and purposes, he was unavailable, due to his career. If he were any normal guy, she’d probably be halfway to Love Street by now. But as it turned out—she checked the clock—she’d be leaving him within a few hours.

“I happen to be in central Pennsylvania at the moment,” he continued, on the phone. “And I’ve got a tight schedule for the next couple of months. I won’t take her out but once or twice, but I’d like to introduce her to someone.”

Faith looked up to see him smiling down at her. Jeez, she’d come for that dimple alone.

“Go ahead and dock her, will you? Slip number one-twenty-seven, correct?”

Oh, wow. She turned back to the paper, searching for an excuse to stay with him. Just another twenty-four hours should do the trick. She’d really enjoy him this time around, not that she hadn’t been enjoying him since he’d first lit her cigarette at the New Moon. *Okay, Alicia. Tell me you’ve turned up somewhere.*

She found the police beat, where arrests and assaults were

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chronicled, and scanned it for mention of an underage, pregnant Caucasian female. Surely, a runaway from Waukegan wouldn't make the cut in a national newspaper. It was a long shot, but if she knew of Alicia's whereabouts—even if the girl happened to be in jail—staying an extra day would be easier. She was wasting her time looking—no update from Daisy meant there was no news to relay—but she needed something to go on.

One of her girls had been gone a-day-and-a-half. Last time Alicia had gone on-the-run, she hadn't returned for three days and then only under police escort—and knocked up. If you're running under the radar, be safe.

What a paradox that was, considering Faith had had a few pumps of unprotected sex, herself, a few hours ago. Sex was the same for her, with or without latex, but condom-free, Troy had been more vocal, more primal, if that were possible. And thus, she'd enjoyed it all the more. Perhaps that was part of the reason her charges had resisted using condoms. The girls craved attention. Unfortunately, they knew no other kind than that which required open legs, and if men seemed to enjoy them more without packaging their sticks, it was no wonder the girls didn't deny them the pleasure.

She began to gather her things. As enticing as another day with Troy and his biceps would be, the girls of Daisy's Halfway House needed her.

Troy pressed his bare chest to her back and slipped his arms around her. "You own me, wearing this. I love lingerie."

"I have to grab brunch with the girls, then..." She looked over her shoulder and brushed a kiss onto his lips. "The airport awaits."

He nuzzled her neck. "Hadn't we decided you're staying?"

"I appreciate this." She rubbed the back of his hand with her fingertips and spun to face him. "Really, I do, but—"

"But you don't want to kill the dream."

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“You have to leave, too. Listen, I know you’ll find another prime candidate the next city down the road. You don’t think I understand the distinct temporary status of a woman like me for a man like you, do you? This is why I swore I’d never be involved with a musician again. This was great, but I’m not naïve enough to believe it means anything. And if it were just me, having a fling, fine. I’d stay. But I have a girl on-the-run. I have to get home.”

* * *

She was right, of course. But he couldn’t help feeling offended by her inference she’d grown out of affairs with musicians, while he still craved meaningless romps with fans. Her misjudgment was an occupational hazard, he supposed, and it was no real surprise, was it? He’d lived this life before, always denying what someone else thought was truth, fighting to counter something conveyed by the image of a rock-n-roller. The process had unraveled him. He might have died trying to prove he wasn’t who the public thought he was.

And maybe Faith had him pegged. After all, had he truly intended to extend their relationship, for lack of a better word, beyond tomorrow? Taking her out on *Tranquility* might have been a noble thought, and something she’d damn-well earned, considering the way she’d completely opened her body to him. But there was little chance he’d follow through on the invitation. He’d yet to ask for her phone number, for Christ’s sake.

His cell phone buzzed. Probably just the marina, reporting a complication. It had been years since he’d seen the damn boat—he wouldn’t be surprised if they couldn’t find it in their warehouse. He slipped into the bedroom to take the call. “Hello.”

“Calling to see if you’re all right.” It was Brad.

“Fine. Couldn’t be better.” Well, maybe, if Faith had decided to stay, allowing him to throw another one into her...

“Then you haven’t seen the Metro section of the *Harrisburg*

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Gazette, have you? Of all of us to be caught on camera, mate, I'd hoped it wouldn't be you."

Oh, God. It was happening again. No privacy, no space, no time to himself. He ran a hand over his unshaven chin. "What's the picture like?"

"Suggestive, but it still leaves plenty to the imagination. There's a duffel blocking what I'd assume to be an obscene view, and—"

"Just local, though. No one national gives a shit, right?"

"No idea, mate. They may have reported something on *Hollywood Scene*, but I didn't catch it. I had a few handfuls of Marci at the time. Robert might have the bug on that."

"Thanks for letting me know." Troy terminated the call and emerged from the privacy of the bedroom to see his lovely companion stowing her Vibratex 3000 into her suitcase.

His heavy sigh commanded her attention. "I have some unfortunate news." He touched her on the chin. "Our early morning tryst in the elevator appeared in the local paper."

She nodded. "Local?"

"There's a chance it's leaked beyond that, but yes."

"I guess we'll have to wait it out, won't we?"

The woman conducted herself with great composure, considering her job may have been at stake. Again, his kind of girl. "How do you feel about leaving your phone number?"

She smiled. "I think I can arrange that."

* * *

Wearing cotton, low-rise capri pants and a snug, white t-shirt with the word "Babydoll" scrawled across her chest in sparkly pink—two items she never wore to work—Faith crossed through the Come Inn's lobby, looking over her shoulder the entire time. Ridiculous, really. No one followed her. Who'd want to follow a girl simply because she'd had sex with a famous man? Who'd recognize her from one profile shot

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through a glass-walled elevator?

Maybe no one, Troy had said. But always, always, answer “no comment” to any question, no matter how mundane. She exited through the revolving door, darted into the diner next to the hotel, and slid onto the chair next to Marci’s. An ache darted her between the legs, a pleasant reminder of Troy’s prowess—and the kinky side of her brain she didn’t know existed until the drummer tapped it. “Morning, everyone.”

Georgie, Marci, and even Arliss smiled their hellos and continued to exchange reminiscences of their evening. Marci gave her a sly grin, but kept their shared secret quiet. A few moments later, Cassie joined them and promptly ordered a large breakfast. There was only one activity capable of spurring an appetite like that, and every Silverette stared at her, awaiting details of her and Seth’s obvious reconciliation.

“What?” Cassie said. “I’m hungry.”

When it became apparent Cassie wouldn’t offer details, Marci nudged Faith. “Nice work,” she whispered. “Blue Silver’s Troy Douglas romances local fan. Back in the saddle again.”

Faith sighed in exasperation. “Is that what it said? At least they got part of it wrong, if they think I’m local. Did anyone catch network news?”

“I was awake.” Cassie looked up from a steaming cup of something, a distracted expression in her eyes. “But otherwise engaged.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Doll,” Marci said. “So you bonked the hell out of hunk, and someone caught you on film. I wish I’d been the one. God, anything to document that night.”

“Everything I dreamed it would be.” Georgie’s voice was soft and rhythmic. “We read poetry together.”

“We fucked like animals.” Marci grabbed Faith’s knee beneath the table and gave it a tickle. “Didn’t we?”

Her cheeks grew hot, not with embarrassment, but with passionate

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flames. “Like lions, tigers, and bears.” She fanned her neck with a menu. “Oh, my.” She and Marci giggled like schoolgirls.

“The night went better than I expected,” Arliss said, although a little soft-spoken.

Everyone at the table had had her share of orgasms last night. The glowing cheeks and plastered smiles left few questions on the matter.

“Maybe we weren’t meant to meet them back then,” Georgie mused. “That night—no matter what might have happened—could never have come close to last night. And if everything had worked out back then, I might not have pushed Cassie to arrange this, I wouldn’t have pestered the rest of you to join us, and who would have dropped everything to accept the invitation? This was serendipilicious.” Georgie-speak for serendipitously delicious.

Faith looked to Arliss, who tossed a blonde curl over her shoulder and reached for the sugar. Was Georgie correct? Did Faith owe the most sexually explicit, the most fantastically orgasmic night of her life to the priss whose limousine had conked out on them? Maybe. But there was no “maybe” about the time to make amends. The time was now. “Georgie’s right,” she said. “I think an apology is long overdue.”

“I’m sorry,” Arliss said immediately.

“Not from you.” Faith shook her head. “From us.”

“I doubt anyone owes me an apology after the fit I pitched,” Arliss said.

“I think I do.” Faith shifted in her seat, and smiled when the tenderness of her swollen labia zinged her. What a night.

In the middle of blueberry pancakes, her telephone vibrated in her bra. She didn’t recognize the number—or even the area code—but with a missing runaway, she answered it. “Faith Hennessy.”

“Hey, love.”

A pack of butterflies rushed through her system. Assuming he was only being polite in asking for it, she’d never expected him to use the

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number he'd requested. "Hi."

"I've arranged for your transportation to the airport."

"You didn't have to do that."

"But there's been a change in plans. I'm leaving the hotel."

"Why are you—"

"I can leave your things with hotel security, if you wish, but considering the *Harrisburg Gazette*, we both know how efficient that might be. I can leave your luggage in the room, but I'll warn you. I have little doubt the press knows your name, your flight number and your zip code. They'll be watching, waiting, asking questions. I know because I just dodged a dozen of them. If you get out from under them now, there's a good chance life will resume as scheduled in Chicago. But cooperation with one reporter is a sure-fire ticket to another interview request. Your life might never be the same, should they take another shot at you."

"I don't know. I don't know what to do."

"Open door number three: you can walk out to the curb, hop into the silver Lincoln Town Car, and circle the block. I'll be joining you at the rear exit of the hotel, in the alleyway. Together, we'll drive to Columbus, and you can hop a flight from there."

She looked out the window and viewed the car in question. "You really believe it's necessary?"

"Every member of this band will declare me paranoid, but those are our faces in that paper. Your job and my inner-sanctum are at risk. I always err on the safe side, and when the prize is a few more hours in stunning company, I don't see how we can lose."

"I don't know." She chewed her lip in deliberation.

"If you're in the car within three minutes, you'll be joining me. If you aren't, I'll be seeing you. Either way, thank you for a fascinating night. I enjoyed our time together."

Before she could thank him in return, he hung up the phone.

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“Who was that?” Marci asked.

“Troy.” Did she sound as stunned as she felt? “He wants me to drive with him to Columbus.”

“Are you insane?” Marci whispered. “Go.”

“He’s paranoid about the press.”

“Halleluiah and thank God for the press then.”

Faith stood, dropped her share of the bill on the table, and stretched her sore muscles. Who knew crazy sex could leave a girl feeling as if she’d just run two marathons? “Ladies, I have to see a man about a drumstick.”

Marci grasped her hand. “Call me.”

“Of course.”

“Love you, doll.”

“I love you, too.” She made a quick pass around the table, hugging everyone, and then darted out to the curb. The oppressive, August heat accosted her, and a mist of perspiration broke on the back of her neck.

“Rebecca?”

Aside from her paternal grandmother, only Marci had ever dared to call her by her first name, but she looked toward the voice, out of curiosity. A good-looking man in khaki shorts and a golf shirt quickened his pace in her direction. In his left hand, he held a notepad, and in his right, a pencil. “Rebecca, how long have you been seeing Troy Douglas?”

Nausea churned in her stomach, when she saw the photographer behind the reporter, and she took a few hurried steps toward the car. *Troy was right!* She’d registered under her full name—Rebecca Faith Hennessy—and they’d learned her name from the hotel registry.

“Come on, Becky, just a few questions.”

PACE principle: You can outrun him. No one will recognize the back of your head. You’re in the clear if you don’t look back.

She heard the repeated click of a camera at work behind her. “She

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looks good with her clothes on, too.” The photographer snickered.

Ouch. She opened the door, jumped into the chill of air conditioning, and barely looked at the driver. “Go.” As the driver gunned into traffic, she hung her head, feeling as much as spectacle as she had standing spread-eagle in the O’Hare security line, the difference being she’d indulged in a music man and, thus, deserved the negative attention this time around.

She looks good with her clothes on, too. If the resurrected Blue Silver hype didn’t die down, she was going to appear on one of those pages in *Playboy* that pointed out so-and-so’s nipple peeking out of a dress at the Emmys. She just knew it. God, her father was going to see her in an open robe, with her hand in a man’s pants. And so would her students. So would Daisie. And Shontae. Of all the ways she’d anticipated exposing herself to him, this wasn’t one of them.

She felt...violated. Robbed of her private moments with Troy, stripped of her dignity. If this wasn’t a reason to reinstate her no musicians rule, a reason didn’t exist.

She needed a drink. She needed a cigarette. She needed...“Troy.”

In the dead calm of a dirty alley, he stowed their three bags in the trunk. He slid onto the bench seat next to her, nodded at the driver, and put his arm around her. His warm body comforted her amid the blasting ice-cold air from the Lincoln’s vents. She relaxed against his chest with a sigh.

The buttons on his shirt weren’t in the correct holes, and he’d only fastened a few of them. The faint scent of his masculine soap lingered in the air around him, indicating he’d had time for a shower, but his hair was damp and disheveled, as if he hadn’t run a comb through it, and his chin was unshaven. Suddenly, the sun reflecting on his face showed signs of his age. His usually peachy complexion looked ashen, and his eyes, tired.

* * *

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For the first few miles, neither said a word. She looked worn and exhausted, as well she should. They'd filled last night with every imaginable evening activity—except sleep.

"Relax," he said, guiding her head to his lap. "Take a nap." He combed through her hair with his fingers in an attempt to soothe her, and, although she pulled her legs up onto the seat and curled up, she didn't close her eyes.

"Is this what it's like for you?" she asked. "One night with a girl wearing your baseball hat, and—"

"It's what it was back in my prime. No more. This time, I'm nipping it in the bud. Our manager will contact the photographer and attempt to purchase his film. We should be in the clear, depending on the price."

She nodded.

"We have a few things going for us. First, they're referring to you as Rebecca, whomever that might be, and second—"

"Rebecca's me. That's my first name."

If not for her relaxed position—she lay with neither tremble nor fidget—he might have guessed she was frightened. Damn it, if only he had bought her a drink, hit it off, and blown off the concert. Without a reunion debut there'd have been little cause for hoopla afterwards. He could have been halfway to *Tranquility* by now, and Faith could have been back home. Or with him, the average joe who'd bought her a rum runner at the New Moon. Safe, either way.

"And second," he continued, "he's a local reporter, hoping to spur something big. If not for our lack of clothing in the elevator, no one would have looked twice. I'm not headline news anymore, and I don't care to be. In order to kill this thing, we need to keep a safe distance from one another."

"I never expected otherwise."

Great. She thought he was using this fiasco as an excuse never to

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see her again. Maybe he was. He knew what made her purr, but he hadn't even known her full name.

He felt a buzzing against his thigh, yet after a split-second flinch, she pulled her cell phone from her bra and pushed a button to silence it.

"You can get that, if you'd like."

"It's just my brother. Probably wants me to buy him beer tonight."

"A brother?"

"I have two. Both younger. One's twenty-four, the other's three months shy of twenty-one."

"I have a brother, too."

"I know. Roger, right?"

Of course she knew. Half the world knew private things about him, about his life. It was hard to get to know people when they held such an advantage. "Why do you go by Faith?"

"My father was on tour in Korea when I was born. My mother's always called me by my middle name because faith was all she had, she said. Faith he'd survive, faith he'd return, faith he'd someday know his daughter."

He stared out the window. *Faith. Could one survive on faith alone?* He'd gone to India, searching for something to believe in. He'd returned to his lighthouse on Lake Superior, and until recently, he'd been content, if not lonely. Did the two go hand-in-hand? Did serenity equal a solitary existence? Could he hold onto his faith in music, without subjecting himself to the media's three-ring circus? Or should he have bailed before this whirlwind began?

After a snack stop mid-way to Columbus, she fell asleep in his lap. He continued to massage her scalp, enjoying the feeling of her soft hair between his fingers, the sounds of her breathing. Simple pleasures. Things he'd forgotten when his ex left. Had he not been a member of Blue Silver, his wife never would have married him, and she'd gone because he abandoned the glamorous life of rock and roll.

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But Faith was of a different breed of woman. The first time she'd looked at him, she had not done so with awe, but with desire. Something told him she wouldn't have cared if he were a janitor. Maybe he should look into a career change. Janitors had mind-blowing sex, didn't they?

When he woke her upon arrival at his hotel in Columbus, she smiled a sweet, sleepy smile he instantly committed to memory.

"Did anyone follow us?" she asked, with a charming yawn.

"We're in the clear, love. Two anonymous ships passing in the night. And this is a safe hotel. I'm checked in under an assumed name, and no one knows we're here."

Relief washed over her.

"But it all begins again tomorrow, when we set up stage here," he said softly, watching a frown appear in her tantalizing brown eyes. "When we allow the city to peruse our photographs and learn our new, glam-free faces. Naturally, I suggest you go, and miss the next installment of insanity, or else it'll hound you for months."

The lip she was biting rolled out from between her teeth, and she nodded.

"The driver will take you to the airport, where you can book another flight. Do you need money?"

"No, I have a Visa."

"Are you sure? Let me give you something."

"No." The word carried an edge of bitterness—or was it stubbornness?—but she quickly softened. "I'm covered. Thank you, anyway."

"All right then." He turned to the driver, who handed him his room key, and then looked back to her. "So this is goodbye."

"I suppose it is."

He nipped her lips and dragged a finger along the underside of her chin. "It was nice meeting you."

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“It was nice meeting you, too.”

He hugged her tight to his chest, showing her what he felt silly telling her—that he’d miss her, somehow; that although he didn’t really know her yet, he’d enjoyed learning things about her. Her breasts burned against him, and he closed his eyes, envisioning her nipples brushing against Marci’s bare flesh. His jeans tightened, a physical reminder of their chemistry, a memorandum of the turmoil they’d endured and beaten that morning, which had pushed their evening together beyond the ranks of the general one night stand.

“Fuck it, you might not get a flight until tomorrow morning. You should at least come up to the room and check flight schedules.”

“Maybe for a minute or two.”

Hand-in-hand, they entered the hotel lobby, inconspicuous. He pressed the elevator button, and the doors opened immediately. Once alone, and on the climb to the fourth floor, he imprisoned her against the wall, caressing her over her clothing, kissing her lips, her neck, her shoulders.

He knelt to lick her navel, and she buried her hands in his hair. “I suppose I haven’t learned my lesson about the dangers of you and elevators,” he whispered between wet kisses.

“I’m not too quick a study either, when it comes to these things.” Her breathy voice seduced on its own, but the scent of sex emanated from her skin like perfume, urging him on.

He had to have his way with her. At least one more time.

“Call the airline.”

“Now?”

“I need to know how much time I have because, babydoll”—he read the endearment off her shirt—“I’m taking every available minute.”

“I have no signal in here.”

“How’s this for a signal?” He buried his mouth between her legs, against her pants.

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“Ohhh.” She pressed her pelvis toward him. “No, I meant on my phone.”

The elevator chimed at the fourth level, and Troy popped up just before the doors opened. He led her down the hall, to suite four-twelve. Once safe inside four private walls, he wiggled a hand into her shirt, while she dialed the airline.

“Um, yes. Hello.”

He kneaded and stroked her.

“Um, I need to change my ticket from a Pittsburgh departure. I’m scheduled to leave Pittsburgh International in thirty minutes, but I’m leaving from Columbus now.” She closed her eyes and inhaled a shuddering breath the moment he thumbed a nipple.

He yanked the shirt up and the cup of her pink bra down, and a round breast bounced into his mouth, melted on his tongue.

“Ohhh. The next available flight to Chicago O’Hare, please.” She held his head to her chest and exhaled a slow, satisfied breath.

He worked the button on her capris and smoothed his hand over her tight abdomen and silky, lowrise panties—pink. Nearly virginal, begging for corruption.

She shivered. “What are the chances for stand-by? It’s oversold?”

He placed a wet kiss near her tattoo.

“Ohhh-kay. When’s the next flight?”

He shifted her pants over her hips and down her thighs and tongued her through the panties.

“Tomorrow morning? What time? 4:55. Ohhh-kay. How about another airline? Mmmm. Nothing sooner? On any airline? Ohhh. No, on second thought, just book me on the 4:55.”

So he had her for another twelve hours. *Perfect*. He lowered her onto the bed.

“Pleeease.” She breathed more than she spoke the word.

Her pants found a home on the floor. He drenched her panties with

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his mouth, weaving his tongue around the silk barrier, challenging himself to bring her to orgasm without touching his hands to her. She rocked against his mouth and pulled his hair—all the while providing a reservations clerk with her personal information. When she finally tossed aside the phone, she threw one leg around his neck and squeezed. He was going to make the next twelve hours the best of her life, prodding her with intensity, filling her to capacity, making her vociferous with pleasure.

However, when he glanced up at his panting lady, dewy with perspiration and flushed with sexual energy, tenderness overcame him. He wouldn't drill her through the mattress. Not tonight. Tonight, after everything they'd explored the night before, after all they'd experienced that morning, he suddenly wanted to please her in other ways.

Tonight, he'd make love to her.

* * *

Faith cinched her thighs against the soft whiskers on Troy's cheeks and rewarded him for his efforts with an all-out scream as she came. The man had a blue-ribbon mouth, and he deserved to know he used it well. Yet the second it was over, he withdrew and stood—erect as the flagpole tattooed on her hip—and said, "Let's slow down a bit."

What? She sprang up. Her panties, wet with his saliva, grazed against her clit. She closed her eyes amid the brief pleasure.

He adjusted his shorts and backed toward the door. "I have to collect our baggage and inform the driver he's free to go."

She nodded, but she knew her knit brow conveyed her confusion.

"After that, let's see what else I can discover about sweet little you. Do you like seafood? Let's order in. If not fish, maybe steak. Better yet, both. Think about it." Despite his rambling, he appeared calm and collected, even as he disappeared out the door in a scurry.

If not for the Boy Scout camp successfully established in his pants,

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she might have assumed he wasn't returning. But musicians never left unsatisfied. He'd be back, but what should she do, until he walked through that door? Watch television? Take a shower? Strip and climb between the covers for a nap, allowing him to find her there and wake her with whatever pleasures he'd conjured in his mind?

Her cell phone rang. It took a moment to locate it among crumpled bed clothes, but when she found it, she recognized Shontae's number illuminated in the caller ID screen. "Yeah?"

"Hello to you, too." His voice was creamy and smooth, and it reminded her she'd once felt inexplicably drawn to him. Did she still feel the same way?

"Sorry, hi. Any word on Alicia?"

"Unfortunately, no. You sound out of breath."

"I do?"

"Running to catch your flight?"

"Something like that. What's up?"

"You should be home early evening. I was wondering if you wanted to catch a movie."

"A movie?"

"And maybe dinner afterwards."

Like a real date? Two days ago, she would have jumped at the chance, but a lot had transpired since then. "I've been delayed. I won't be home until tomorrow morning."

"Perfect. We can meet for breakfast before work. I'd like to explain to you what happened with the Hotel Moraine."

Jeez, the Hotel Moraine seemed a lifetime ago. Hadn't they both forgotten it by now? "Shontae, I...I don't think it's a great idea. I've sort of—"

"Replaced me?"

"No." Or had she?

"Got tired of waiting for me?"

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“I’ve kind of sworn off musicians for a while.” *For a few minutes anyway, until the one I’m currently entertaining returns with a head full of naughty ideas.*

“In that case, I’m not a musician, I’m a youth counselor.”

She pictured his brilliant smile, the one he flashed when he knew he was being cute. Usually the image reduced her to a clitoris, but she only sighed.

“What do you say, Ms. Faith?”

“Call me if there’s any word on my girl, all right?”

“Call me when you’re back in town?”

“Deal. Goodbye.” She terminated the call and cuddled against the pillows.

This weekend was supposed to have been an escape, a glimpse into a simplified life, in remembrance of simpler times. But it had only complicated things. She didn’t even know what—or whom—she wanted anymore, and the worst element of her dilemma was that she was traveling two dead-end streets.

On one hand, she’d lived a crazy thirty-six hours, during which she’d not only met the members of Blue Silver, but reconnected with the woman she’d once been—alluring, passionate. She’d missed feeling wanted, uninhibited, desired. But on the other hand, she couldn’t continue with careless sexual escapades—even under the rhythm and direction of a man who harbored a great talent for them. If she expected to help build a life for forgotten wards of the court, she had to project a certain image, regardless of the sexless doctrine accompanying it. She was all those girls had. They had become her girls the day the state of Illinois declared them parentless children. She excelled at her job, and her job was an important one. Was there a way to bridge the two worlds? Could she have the best of both? Lack of inhibition for herself, virtue for the sake of her girls?

Troy entered with armloads of bags and dropped them on the

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carpeting. “You, love, look as if have the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

She attempted a smile and began to shake her head. “I’m fine. Just worried about Alicia.”

“We’re not so different, you and me.” He climbed atop the mattress and wrapped his arms around her. “We’re both tempted by the dark side, but grounded by some astronomical force of light. For you, the light is this girl, and others like her. For me, the light is serenity, peace of mind. You know you need the latter, but can you sacrifice the former?”

Her drenched panties said no way. “PACE principle. You can have it all.”

When he smiled, crow’s feet creased the corners of his eyes, and his dimple warmed the room. “The question is, how?”

She opened her mouth to reply, only to meet an unexpected kiss. His tongue brushed against hers in a slow, elegant caress tasting of spearmint. Deep, emotional, as if it meant something, but that was probably her imagination. They were no more than two bodies, turned on by one another, in the right place, at the same time. Their connection couldn’t possibly run deeper than that. He twirled a tendril around his finger, giving it a mild tug, and brought his other hand to her cheek.

His kiss intensified as his hands roved over her skin in a patient discovery, tracing veins in her neck, gingerly cupping her breasts, and stroking her down her sides. Before she realized she had done so, she’d straddled him, presenting her body to him. He pulled her close, and his caress traveled to her back. He massaged her from lower back to shoulders, never breaking their kiss.

The whiskers on his chin scratched against hers in a soft abrasion. Somehow, the feeling reminded her that, despite his occupation, he was just a man, like any other. With needs, desires, preferences, and problems. A leak in the roof, debits in the checkbook, and dishes in the

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sink. He'd go back to being Troy Douglas, Blue Silver drummer, tomorrow. Tonight, he was reality.

He rolled her over and ground subtly between her thighs. Just enough to let her know he was ready, but taking his time with her. Smelling, tasting, listening.

She went to work on the few buttons on his shirt he'd bothered to fasten and pulled the garment off, revealing defined shoulders, impeccable biceps.

In turn, he inched the snug t-shirt from her torso and bent to perform a slow exploration of her upper body. Kisses bloomed at her collar bone and between her breasts. His wet mouth seemed to melt over her stomach until every patch of skin had experienced the magic of his tongue, and then he came up to occupy her mouth again.

A rumble of hunger sounded amid their steamy embrace, vibrating between their stomachs.

"Mine or yours?" he asked between kisses.

He was so close, she felt his heart beating inside her chest. At the moment, his and her groans were one and the same. The thought brought a smile to her lips.

Half a second later, she found herself swept up in his arms, mid-kiss. When her feet hit the floor again, it was in an elegant bathroom. Burgundy pillar candles stood tall in the corner on a pink marble-topped vanity. A white porcelain soaker tub—a double, complete with brass claw-and-ball feet and draped with a white mesh canopy—beckoned from the center of the room. An old-fashioned, goose-neck faucet cradled a hand-held shower spray, and near it, on an ivory settee, sat a basket of pearlescent oil beads, pink bubble bath in a glass bottle, and rolled-up towels.

With an arm around her, and a squeeze to her hip, he put his lighter to the candle wicks and, within moments, the warm fragrance of cinnamon filled the room.

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“I love cand—”

He interrupted her declaration with a kiss, which only broke when she heard the rush of water in the tub. The aromatic bubble bath mixed with the candle scent to transform the bath suite into a Christmastime bakery—sugar cookies and snicker doodles. His index finger on her cheek commanded her attention, and she blinked into his gaze. “I believe I promised you a bath you’d never forget.” He nodded toward the rising suds. “Get in.”

She made the mistake of hesitating for a millisecond; he deposited her into the soaker, rear first, in her panties and bra. He, however, took his time in shedding his jeans and boxer shorts. She locked her gaze on his huge, rigid member and, again taken with the sheer size of him, mindlessly stroked him with a soapy hand.

The dimple appeared in his left cheek when he twitched a pleased smile, unclasped her bra, and pulled it from her body. “Mind if I join you?”

It would hardly be memorable without you. The words floated on the tip of her tongue, but she was too clouded in what must have been a dream to voice them. Troy Douglas, rock and roll drummer, was romancing her. After he’d had her nearly every which way he could, what was he trying to accomplish with candles and sweet nothings?

The water rose when he sank into the opposite end of the soaker, and when she closed her eyes, the rushing faucet became a rain storm in some exotic land. He took her left foot in hand and pressed his thumbs in a vertical line from heel to toes. The magic in his fingers seemed to relieve ten years of miles she’d walked, seemed to erase dozens of girls she’d failed to reach during her tenure at Daisy’s. She relaxed against the porcelain, dreading the moment he’d stop touching her, the moment when life would be real again.

His hands climbed up her leg—which had probably sprouted a bit of stubble, but she couldn’t bring herself to worry about it at the

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moment—and paused at her calf muscle. He kneaded her flesh with precision enough to evoke a just-short-of-glorious moan, and then climbed higher to rub her thigh. He repeated the act with her right leg, leaving her lolling in such bliss, she might have nodded off, had she not recently awoken from a lengthy nap.

Long minutes later, he caught her off-guard, when he whisked the panties from her body, grabbed her by the ankles, and yanked her close. Water splashed over the sides of the tub, and she gasped when the faucet doused her as if she'd floated under a waterfall. He chuckled and turned off the valve. She wrapped her legs around him and pressed her wet breasts to his chest.

"I like my women dripping wet and unclothed." His lips grazed against hers as he spoke, his erection pressed mercilessly against her sex, and his hands traveled from her ankles to hips and back again. "And I like them dirty on occasion, too, but what do you say to a good, sudsy sponging? To wash this day away?"

Rock hard, he sponged every inch of her flesh with a sea sponge drowned in soap, starting with wide circles on her upper back. She rested her head on his shoulder and enjoyed the pampering. He washed down her spine, between her breasts and legs.

She reciprocated the indulgence, using a fluffy, white washcloth—beginning with the base of his cock. He shuddered as she worked her way up the tower and down again, working her hands against his body in a slow exploration—something they hadn't taken the time to do in their previous, ravenous interludes. And it felt too good to question the purpose of the event, or to admit it didn't mean anything, when all was said and done. Tomorrow morning, she'd be back at Daisy's Halfway House, and he'd be in front of another camera, pleasing another crowd.

He caught her chin in his hand and held her gaze. "Why an American flag?" he whispered.

"Freedom."

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His smile was slow and knowing. “I cherish my freedoms, too.”

* * *

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been solid below the belt for so long without taking advantage of his condition, but he wanted to make the most of this night. Make it last. While his penis could have doubled as a coat hook, Faith towed off, dusted herself with talcum, and slipped into yet another hotel-monogrammed robe. She wore them well, and a small part of him crashed with the realization he might never see her in another. Watching her was pure decadence, as she represented a sort of liberty in his life—freedom from the men of Blue Silver, a life out of the limelight. What would life in his lighthouse be like, if he shared it with a woman like her?

“What?” She fell onto the bed and relaxed against the pillows, one sexy leg crossed over the other.

He shook his head. “Sorry?”

“You look like you want to ask me something.”

“Oh, I’m about to order dinner. Do you want anything?”

“Whatever you want. I’m not too choosy.”

“I’m going to have a filet and some tail.” He grinned when she caught the entendre. “Lobster tail, that is. How would you like your filet?”

“Medium, I guess. I like it pink, cool center, but you know—salmonella.”

He loved a woman who ate—and one who knew what she liked. He shrugged. “When it comes to filet, I say the bloodier the better, but—”

“Rule number six: some risks are well worth the taking. Rare, it is.” She rolled onto her side, cupping the pillow beneath her.

The curve of her breasts and hips left his mouth watering. He dialed room service and placed the order, which, he was informed, would be delivered in about an hour.

An hour. Was an hour enough time to please her? At this rate, he

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wanted her so desperately, it would be plenty to please him five times over, but he didn't want another quick, meaningless jolt between the sheets. "Tell me about Winthrop Harbor." He sat on the edge of the bed. "Where you live."

"Really?"

He nodded and inched closer to her.

"Well, first of all, there's nothing like morning in a harbor." A wistful gleam washed over her. "The sun rises, leaving an inspirational glow over the water. Everything's pink and pure, the scent of the lake, the taste of the air. And before the sun burns off the fog, Lake Michigan looks like untapped destiny. But given you have a boat up in God's country, you probably know that already."

His throat was dry.

"And evenings, maybe, are even better. The sound of the waves lapping against the boats, the seagulls squawking on the docks... What a way to come back to earth after a long day. The harbor is the sole reason I don't go insane after nine hours trying to convince girls their worth lies in their brains and hearts, not between their legs."

"They don't know that?" He scooted closer still.

She smiled. "They know it. They just don't know they know it. That's why they need me. I remind them—"

With a hand under her chin, he positioned her mouth at his and swept his tongue against hers, all the while working the sash of the robe. The garment melted off her like butter, and their bare bodies melded together. "I need you," he whispered. "I'm not worthy, but—"

"I need you, too."

"I need you."

Her hand had found its way to his balls, and she stroked him gingerly.

With damp, satiny hair beneath his hand, he cupped her head and massaged kisses onto her lips, imagining her on the deck of

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Tranquility, just after a skinny dip at dusk, her wet hair dripping Lake Superior onto his chest, her lips cool and hungry.

He fumbled for a condom he'd stashed in the drawer of the night table. When he retrieved one, he pressed it into her hand.

Their mouths never parted as she fitted him and guided him to her pussy, into which he dipped slowly, taking her one inch at a time. Her hips rose to meet him with every stroke, and together they rocked, finding the perfect rhythm, riding wave after wave.

When he opened his eyes, he locked his gaze with hers. Open-eyed, they continued.

This was making love. This was India. Serenity.

This was making music between a man and a woman—the type of music with simultaneous crescendos in treble and bass. Symphonic. Resonant. Inconceivable.

* * *

Faith slept in a hazy bliss of good food, tender sex, and an amazing man, with whom she'd shared it. Yet something pulled her from her reverie prematurely—the sound of buzzing on the bedside table. After a moment, she realized the sound came from her cell phone. Who could be calling at this hour? She brought the phone to her ear. “Yeah.”

“Ms. Faith?” The whispered voice came through the cell phone like an obscure background vocal.

Faith held the phone tightly and squinted at the neon green digits on the alarm clock. Just after two in the morning, Eastern Standard Time. Jesus. “Mmm-hmm?”

“You say don’t be scared to call.”

“Alicia?” She bolted upright and reached for a notepad. “Alicia, honey, where are you?”

“He don’t want me no more.”

“Are you safe? Can you give me an address?”

“Ms. Faith, he don’t want the baby.”

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Faith's heart plummeted with Alicia's first acknowledgement of her condition—and its negativity. "You have options." She turned on the bedside lamp and Troy covered his head with a pillow. "We can talk about everything once you're back, once you're safe."

"What's safe? He don't want me now he done this to me."

She nudged Troy and jotted a phone number onto the pad. "What happened? Who did what to you?"

"He got me this way, shove his dick in me a few times when I got here, and now he know I'm pregnant, he fucking some bitch in the kitchen."

Call this number, she scribbled. Talk to Shontae Pepper. Re: Alicia. She tore the sheet from the pad and shoved it into Troy's hands. He rolled over, rubbed a thumb over an eye, and regarded the message. In an instant, he reached for the telephone.

"Yes or no, Alicia. Are you safe?"

"I don't have nothing, if that's what you mean. I didn't take nothing."

"Where are you?"

"You comin'? No cops, and I ain't goin' with Ms. Daisie."

"I'll come, if you tell me where you are." Faith needled the paper with a ballpoint.

"I'm scared. Don't know what to do."

"We'll figure it out. Where are you?"

"Off Glen Flora on Elmwood. Above the laundry. You comin', Ms. Faith?"

"I'm coming." She handed the address to Troy, who relayed the information to Shontae. "Stay on the phone with me, until I get you out of there." Once again, she employed the PACE principle. *We'll get her out of there without a scratch, without a pill or a drink in her system. She'll rehabilitate at Daisie's and lead a decent life.*

"Ms. Faith, I'm scared."

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"I'm going to take care of you. I promise. We'll get through this together."

"He fucking some bitch in the kitchen!"

"Then he doesn't deserve you."

"If he don't deserve me, why don't he want me?"

"He doesn't deserve to want you, honey. Someday, you'll believe that. Someday, you'll understand."

* * *

"That was the longest ten minutes of my life, on the phone with her." In the dim light of suite four-twelve, Faith stepped into a form-fitting sundress and pulled up the zipper. "Thank you for calling Shontae. I wouldn't have gotten her out of there without your help."

"Felt good to help." At the table, Troy stared into a cup of coffee and propped his chin on a hand.

Jeez, the guy was gorgeous—even at ungodly hours of the morning.

"You've helped me, too, you know."

"Some help I am. All I did was stir up some unfavorable media coverage, and—"

His grip on her wrist silenced her. "You've helped me, love."

She wanted to smile, but she knew the drill. Soon, her plane would land at O'Hare, she'd be on her way to work, and he'd be on the road again, and out of her life for good. It was that way with semi-professional musicians, and this guy had Grammys on his mantle, for Pete's sake. She pulled away and started for the door. "Don't break too many hearts, okay?"

"I'll call."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to do a bloody thing. But I'll call."

"Good luck with the tour."

His lips parted, but he only shook his head and continued the staring contest with his coffee.

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“Good bye,” she said.

“Good bye, Rebecca Faith Hennessy. Enjoy your harbor, and don’t forget my hat.”

“Thanks.” She fingered the bill, but left it hanging on the bathroom doorknob. “But it suits you.”

He didn’t look up, even when she opened the door.

A feeling of emptiness encompassed her the moment the door closed behind her, and, while she longed to pound on the door, to embrace him one last time, she forged ahead to the elevator, through the lobby, and to the taxi stand, where her pre-arranged cab awaited her. “Airport, please.”

Once en route, she checked her voice mail. “Hey, Faithy, it’s your brother. Don’t worry, I’m not calling for beer this time. But Dad’s going to have a coronary, if he sees those pictures. Get outta town, I didn’t know you knew those guys! They’re old, but they’re on fucking MTV! Let’s get together for a drink when you get back, and, young lady, you can explain yourself.”

Great. Her picture was on MTV? Kyle had seen it and was blackmailing her for beer. What next?

* * *

Four hours later, with a tender vagina and muscles sore from three days of uninhibited action under the covers with a man who was very good at it, Faith climbed the stairs to the sweltering attic infirmary at Daisy’s Halfway House. She peeked behind a drawn curtain to find Alicia sleeping soundly in a white nightgown beneath a thin blanket.

Never before had she looked as much like a child as she did then, with her dark, wavy hair spilling over a petal pink pillowcase—Daisy preferred her clinic to be homey, in lieu of institutional—and her thick lashes fanned against her cheeks. Yet at fifteen, the girl had endured more than many adults ever would. According to court records, she’d been born with an addiction to cocaine, orphaned at five when the

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addiction overcame her mother, bounced from foster home to foster home over the past ten years, citing sexual abuse or inappropriate sexual behavior as reasons for pulling her from at least six of the homes. The child she carried was her second.

"You're going to make it," Faith whispered, feathering a hair from the girl's forehead. "I promise."

Alicia's blue eyes flickered open. Despite her swollen eyelids, red from hours of crying, she was a beautiful girl when she wasn't trying to be, naturally pretty without her usual thick, black eyeliner and deep, violet lipstick. "Ms. Faith, you all dolled up."

"So are you." Faith crossed her arms over her breasts. The sundress wasn't low-cut, but it still revealed the generous bust line she usually hid at work. "I came as soon as I could, and I didn't have time to change. It's good to have you back."

"Damn, you should always dress up."

"And you should always dress down."

"I'm pissed you sent Mr. Shontae."

"I know, but I had to. I was out of town."

"That's right...you been makin' it with a rock star." Alicia rolled onto her back and drummed her fingers against her abdomen. "I seen someone who looks like you on *Music News*."

Faith swallowed the lump in her throat, as she realized her worst fear. She wasn't a perfect example for her girls to follow. She was human, and now Alicia knew it.

"Was that you, Ms. Faith?"

"Maybe he isn't a rock star. Maybe he's just a man."

"He your man?"

"If I tell you, we'll share a secret, deal?"

"I can't tell no one?"

Faith shook her head. "It's something between us. Woman to woman."

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“Okay.”

“He isn’t my man. It was just a fling.”

Alicia’s eyes grew wide. “Holy shit, I was—”

“I understand the concept of giving all you have for the inkling of a chance a man will want you forever, but I’m proof, Alicia. Giving it all doesn’t mean you’ll get it all. The only guarantee you’ll have it all is if you provide it all for yourself.”

Tears welled in the runaway’s eyes, and Faith took her into her arms. “Ms. Faith, what am I gonna do? I can’t provide for this baby, and I can’t care about her neither. She gonna grow up the same way as me. And it hurts too much to care when I know she ain’t gonna make it.”

“So it’ll hurt, but if you care, you care. You can’t change that.” And neither could she change that, despite her casual goodbye to Troy, she’d never forget him. Once a girl cared, she cared.

* * *

Troy awoke in a cold sweat. His cell phone was ringing, the phone on the consul was ringing, his ears were ringing.

He banged a hand against his temple to knock out the pitch in his head and then answered his cell phone.

“Troy, where the bloody hell are you?” It was Brad. “We’re all ready to go on the air for the radio spot, and we’re minus a drummer.”

“I’m...” He pinched his eyes shut and kicked at the other relentlessly ringing phone. “I’ll be right there.”

“No, don’t—”

He hung up and sauntered to the bathroom. He smelled Faith Hennessy everywhere. Felt her everywhere. Needed her everywhere. Or maybe he needed what she represented—serenity. He wasn’t naïve enough to think he’d fallen for the girl, however amazing she’d been with her mouth, however ready she’d been in his bed. But he didn’t dispute his need for a grounded life, for living with purpose. And that’s

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what women like Faith were—reasons to get up in the morning.

Amid a chorus of ringing phones, he brushed his teeth, splashed his face with water, and dressed in yesterday's clothes, which smelled like her, too. He shoved his hat—the hat she'd left behind—onto his head and headed for the lobby.

Brass elevator doors opened to a swarm of photographers, microphones stuck under his nose, and two security agents trying futilely to keep the mass under control.

"Troy! How does it feel to be nominated for comeback artists of the year after only a single venue? What's next for—"

"Troy! Who is Rebecca Hennessy, and how long have you been seeing her? Is it true you're more a playboy now that you're older, wiser, and more—"

He wanted to bury his head under his arm, but he couldn't escape if he couldn't see where he was going. He couldn't see, anyway, with the constant flashing of lights all around him. "No comment. No comment." He ducked his head, hunched his shoulders, and headed for the door, which seemed too great a distance to travel at the moment.

"Come on, Troy. Just one shot. Just one quote."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Douglas," a balding, skinny twit in a red tie said. "I've been trying to phone you, to warn you." Probably the hotel manager. "The police are on their way, but—"

"Troy! Is it true you met Ms. Hennessy in India? Is it true—"

"No! No comment! Chase someone who wants to talk to you."

"Troy, there's talk of a new album. What's the word on—"

He turned back toward the elevator, toward the far corridor, toward the check-in desk, but he was surrounded.

"Troy!"

He pivoted, headed for the revolving door at the main entrance, and collided with a camera man. The world faded to black.

* * *

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“So, who’s the Brit who called my cell phone last night?” Shontae’s whisper washed over her, and his hand chased a tingle up her spine.

Rays of early evening sun shone in her eyes when she turned away from her car, leaving the key in the lock.

“You’re avoiding me.” He licked his luscious lips and stared down at her.

“No, I’m not. I’ve had a few tracks to cover today, that’s all. But thanks for going to get Alicia last night.”

“I told you I’d make it up to you. Least I could do.”

“It has nothing to do with me. It was Alicia you helped.”

“I know how much you care about your girls.”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

“About the Hotel Moraine.”

“Shontae, the Hotel M—”

“Hear me out.”

“But it’s the least of my worries at the moment. I have to get to my parents’ place and explain something to my father before he goes ballistic, and—”

“I lied to you, but I never had the chance to tell you how kickin’ you looked in that red dress that night. You should wear things like that”—he looked her over—“things like this all the time.”

Her brow knit in confusion, and suddenly, she had a headache. “Why does it matter what I’m wearing? Shontae, you don’t like me enough to give a damn, so don’t.”

“I was at the Hotel Moraine that night, filling in. All that’s true. But, as you already know, I wasn’t playing that night. What you don’t know is I was bussing tables.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Tanya called at the last minute, and I needed the extra cash.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me? Do I strike you as a woman who wouldn’t understand something like that?”

“The second you saw me behind a set of drums, you looked at me

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differently. That's all I can say."

"That's not true."

"After watching you mentally implode with the thought of dating a musician, I'm supposed to tell you I'm more of a waiter than anything? I don't think so."

"I wasn't interested in you because you played the drums." Hell, maybe she was. She didn't know anymore.

"So." He brushed his thumb at a piece of lint on his bicep. "Who's the guy from Pennsylvania?"

"It doesn't matter. It was just...I don't know...a watering when I was thirsty." Was it? Or maybe it was a taste of something she'd forever crave.

I'll call you.

You don't have to.

I know I don't have to do a bloody thing, but I'll call.

Would Troy call? His number was still logged in her incoming call file, but she wasn't about to belittle herself by using it, and her phone had yet to ring.

"So what do you say? My indiscretion with the Hotel Moraine counters your indiscretion with this guy. Call it even? I'm good for dinner tonight, and at this hour, I can guarantee nothing can stand in our way."

"I'm tempted, but I think I need some time, all right? Besides, I'm having dinner with my family." There was a time she would have extended the invitation to him, and she had a sneaking suspicion she'd need an ally when she broke the news of her public sexual act to Major Hennessy, but it didn't feel right asking Shontae to accompany her.

He bit his lip. "You tell me when you're ready." He raked a finger along her cheekbone and turned away.

She finished unlocking her door, slid onto the piping hot vinyl seat, and started the car. Blue Silver was playing on the radio. *Go figure.*

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Show one breast in an elevator, and your life takes an irreversible turn.

Daisie had denied the leave of absence Faith had requested, citing Alicia's well-being as the reason, but made no bones about the effects further exposure of the elevator incident might have on the girls. Her future was in the hands of the media. If they forgot about her, Daisie would overlook the recklessness of her weekend in Harrisburg. If the reporters delved deeper, Daisie would have no choice but to sever all ties.

Faith inhaled a slow, deep breath of Lake Michigan air. *Time to face the music.* She could only imagine what words her father may find to say.

"That was Blue Silver with 'Nothing Like the Sun,'" the disc jockey said. "The Blue Silver reunion tour is currently on hold, as drummer Troy Douglas recovers from a bout with Columbus media. Details after a word from our sponsors."

* * *

Rain came down in sheets. Faith leaned against her living room window sill, inhaling the scent of late summer off the harbor. The wet breeze tantalized her skin, renewed her like a baptism. Eyes closed, she listened to the swish of Lake Michigan's water hitting docked boats. She'd been home for nearly a month.

Alicia had been making progress in therapy, had met with several young couples looking to adopt a baby through Christian charities, and spoke of going to college in a few years. The girl who had been Faith's biggest failure was turning out to be her favorite success story.

It was funny how things changed from day to day.

The few days Faith had spent in her old shoes, spiking a Blue Silver fever, seemed a lifetime ago. Cloudy, as if it were all a dream. Troy hadn't called, but she hadn't expected him to, had she? All right, she half-hoped he'd call to invite her to the Chicago show, but the band would hit the Noble Fool Theater in three days, and she hadn't heard

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from him.

He'd given her some of the best—if not *the* best—nights of her life, but she knew then, just as she knew now, she'd only filled his time. She was nothing special to him. He'd made powerful love to her one last time before she'd left, but that was probably his *modus operandi*. How many women had felt as if they were the center of Troy Douglas' universe for a few hours, only never to hear from him again?

Music men. When would she learn?

Rule number seven—always stick to your guns.

The media had quickly forgotten about the elevator incident, and Troy had returned to the tour after taking a few days' sabbatical in Ohio. She'd learned watching *Music News* he'd suffered a bruise on the forehead, not even a mild concussion, and his time off had been more to prepare himself mentally for the mayhem of public stardom than to recover physically. He'd prepared a statement, declaring he'd always have faith in the music he played. Music remained an all-powerful force within him, governing him, and he'd continue respect it—despite his fear, if not distaste, of the limelight—as long as he remained one with the music.

Her doorbell buzzed. She rose from the sill and pushed the intercom button. “Yes?”

“It's Shontae. Soaking wet.”

She buzzed him in. Tonight was their first official date. They'd opted to skip traditional get-to-know-you steps, such as going to the movies and grabbing a bite to eat. Especially because dinner had never panned out in the past, they'd both deemed it a bad omen to plan it. They had decided to go directly to date three activities. Skip the anxiety, go for the fun.

“Hey, I'm all for spending your life having sex, but what are you going to do if this works out?” Marci had asked on the phone last night. “Swear off dinner for the rest of your life?”

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Marci had a point, but there was no way Faith was going to risk another cancelled dinner. She had to move past the constant fantasizing about a resurrected heart throb and experience a real relationship with a real man. Butterflies swarmed in her stomach. Did she even know how to date anymore? Would any man measure up to the excitement, to the lover Troy Douglas had been?

When she opened the door, Shontae wiped raindrops from his forehead and smiled. His espresso biceps bulged in a damp yellow shirt. The top two buttons remained unfastened, which brought a smile to her face. She couldn't look at buttons without remembering Troy's ineptness with them. For a man with agile hands, he'd sure met his match in a button-down shirt.

Shontae extended an arm. "I brought your mail up."

"Thanks." She took the moist bundle of bills and a small, square box from his grasp and set them aside.

"You look beautiful." He bit his lip and began to close the gap between their bodies.

"Thanks. So do you."

"Thought this day would never come."

She smiled, but no witty words followed.

He draped his arms around her and pulled her close. Her breasts squashed against his chest, and she felt the heat of his body bleeding through his rain-spotted shirt. There had been a time she wouldn't have hesitated to whisk that shirt off his shoulders, but things were different—everything was different—now.

He was hard. Everywhere. Which was no surprise, really, considering the man spent days in gymnasiums, evenings in restaurants toting trays, and weekends in swanky jazz lounges pounding away on drums. But why hadn't she sunk her teeth into a delectable bicep yet?

"Am I making you nervous?"

"No," she lied.

BLUE SILVER: MAKING NOISE

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“You’re making me nervous.” He pinned her against the plaster wall and stared down at her.

This wasn’t right. She blinked away from his gaze and stared out at the harbor in the distance. Through the waterways of the Great Lakes, she and Troy were connected. A foolish thought, but she’d found herself pondering it often. What if she wasn’t supposed to get over him? What if they were meant to be...somehow? She imagined him relaxing in the autumn sun on the decks of *Tranquility*, his Detroit Tigers cap turned backwards on his head. She’d arrive by ferry to meet him, wearing a thick, knobby sweater and comfortable jeans, but she’d be wearing sandals because he couldn’t resist her toes. *I’d like to suck on those toes while I’m nine inches deep.* She shivered with the thought of it.

“You’re blushing,” Shontae said.

“It must be eighty degrees in here. I’m warm.”

“There’s a nice breeze off the lake.” He nodded toward the harbor. “Ever take a walk in the rain?”

Walking wasn’t what she had in mind, and Shontae wasn’t the man with whom she wanted to share her rainy day activities either. “I used to walk in the rain. All the time, as a child.” Why couldn’t she hold his gaze?

“I don’t do this sort of thing with white girls.”

“I know.” She shifted her attention back to him.

“And you’re sweet, but I can’t.” He backed away.

“What?” She snapped out of her zone and took immediate offense to the surprising, though deserved, rejection.

“It doesn’t feel right, does it? Either you’re not ready, or you never will be.” He bounced his index finger off her nose. “Want to grab a pizza or something?”

BLUE SILVER: MAKING NOISE

“Maybe tomorrow. I’m sorry, you’re right, I’m—”

“Don’t worry about it.” He bit his lip and reached for the doorknob. “I’ll see you at Daisie’s.”

Great. She’d blown it. Her one chance to get over Blue Silver for once and for all. “Shontae, I’m—”

“Listen to your own advice. You’re always telling your girls to take their time, take it slow, and obey what’s in their hearts. PACE principle—you’ll be ready eventually, Ms. Faith.” He disappeared into the hallway.

“Damn it.” She chewed on her thumbnail. If ever she needed a cigarette, she needed one now, but she’d quit. Again. And what was she supposed to do with her evening now?

Netflix and popcorn. She retrieved her mail from the small table in her foyer and began to leaf through it. No new DVDs. Just her luck. But what was in the box? She hadn’t ordered anything, had she? Jeez, it was probably a gift from Shontae, and she hadn’t even noticed. But, no, it was addressed to her in block letters, and decorated with canceled stamps. It was mail.

She reached for a steak knife, cut the tape, and lifted the lid.

A worn Detroit Tigers cap stared up at her, and elation flushed through her system like a freight train. She hugged the hat to her chest and reached for the folded piece of paper in the bottom of the box. Scrawled in Troy’s script, in blue pen were the following words:

Ms. Hennessy,

I believe this hat belongs to you. With any luck, it’ll reach you before word of my most recent announcement spreads. I know you’ve been expecting an invitation to the Chicago show and, of course, you’re welcome to attend. I’ve

BLUE SILVER: MAKING NOISE

arranged for two tickets to await you at the Will Call window of the Noble Fool Theater. Bring a friend, perhaps that beer-thirsty brother of yours. I hope you have a wonderful time. Wear the hat, and if I were a bold man, I might ask that you think of me.

I regret to inform you I won't be available for a visit that evening. Not because I don't wish to see you (you often turn up in my subconscious, believe it or not) but because I will not be present. I've laid down my sticks, for the sake of inner settling. I still have faith in my music, but I no longer need to boast it. Another will take my place on stage, as I'm certain another has taken my place in your arms.

However, in the event I'm incorrect in my latter assumption, may your Vibralux keep you busy until the air turns a bit colder. Look to the east, my lady. I'll be arriving by boat, hopefully in the morning, when Lake Michigan looks like untapped destiny. Tranquility hasn't seen the likes of it in some time. I thank you for your luring description.

What happens next is entirely up to us.

Troy

Faith folded the letter, looked out over the harbor, and smiled.

PENNY DAWN

All right, so who among us doesn't have a few demons to exorcise?

Penny Dawn began her writing career at the tender age of seven, before she realized it's impossible to be All Good, All the Time...at least in the religious sense (grinning like a Cheshire.) Romantic stories with passionate twists have since become this Good Girl's forte...and she unleashes her demons on paper, over and over and over again.

Penny Dawn holds a B. A. in history and English from Northern Illinois University and is an M. A. in Creative Writing at Seton Hill University, whose alumnae include spicy novelists Jacki King, Shannon Hollis, Suzanne Forster, Dana Marton, and others. When she isn't writing, Penny enjoys tap, ballet, and jazz dance, photography, physical fitness, and renovating her 1906 Victorian Lady with her husband and two daughters.

Drop by her website www.pennydawn.com to discuss all things decadent.

* * *

***Don't miss Salute, by Penny Dawn,
available from Amber Quill Press, LLC***

Liberty Wilson deserves a few minor indulgences.

Her sister Bianca—also her roommate—is a catty bitch, constantly reminding her she hasn't had a decent relationship in months, and

judging by her reflection in the mirror, she ought to spend more time at the gym and less time staring at the mysterious ex-soldier, Sergeant Jefferson Muldoon, performing his morning ritual across the street.

But it's Liberty's birthday, the fourth of July, and she's in the mood for a few fireworks.

There's no air-conditioning at Thirty-two Sprucewood Lane, and it's nearing triple digits. Yet the heat index is no match for what happens when she enters the patriot's lair. Libby and Jefferson light an unrelenting fire, making this a birthday she'll never forget. Who needs to declare independence when coupling is this hot?

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