

# **XAVIER**

**Stephanie Burke**

## Chapter One

"Good God, no!" he begged as he hopped off his bike, automatically jamming his keys in his back pocket, and racing towards the sounds of the taunts, the screams, the vile words that spewed into the night. He felt a cold sweat break out over his body as he raced as fast as he could towards the alley the woman had run into, expecting from the sounds of things to see the worst.

How could any male call himself a man when he forced a woman? And it was even worse when a group of men chased a woman like a pack of mongrel dogs.

Xavier's booted feet skidded on the damp pavement as he turned the corner and raced towards the receding voices. Who knew that a restless ride on his bike would turn out like this? It was just by the grace of God that he had decided to take a quick ride through the city, and mere fate that caused him to pause when he saw a flash of pink streaming down the nearly abandoned streets.

There were never many people around this part of Baltimore at night, and fewer around the warehouses and strip joints along Pulaski Highway.

He just hoped that he wasn't too late.

Leaping over a few fallen garbage cans, still rolling from a desperate attempt to slow the attackers down, Xavier skidded in what the neighborhood kids called 'garbage juice' and saw some action dead ahead.

Increasing his speed, he saw that the chase had ended, but the hunt was still in high gear.

"Low-life scum!" the female was screaming. Just as he drew close enough to get a good look at the players, a huge body came sailing in his direction. Xavier barely managed to sidestep the tumbling mass of men, when a howl, not unlike a wolf, erupted, and a second body followed the first.

"You want some of this?" she bellowed as she launched herself at a third man.

But she pulled herself up short as the man drew out a gun.

"You think you're hot stuff, bitch? Let's see how hot you are on your knees, sucking my..."

He never got a chance to finish.

Xavier leaped into action. Swinging his right foot up sharply, he connected neatly with the man's forearm and smiled as he heard the bones snap.

Predictably, the man dropped the gun and fell to his knees, squealing like a pig.

The fourth man turned to face this new attacker, and met the onslaught of a freshly launched fist that shattered his nose and spread the remains across his face.

Blood spurted as the man folded like a deck of cards, muffled screams erupting from his mouth as both hands clasped his injured snout. Xavier quickly kicked the gun under a nearby dumpster, keeping it out of easy reach and looked around to see if any more were coming.

Satisfied, he turned toward the woman...

Just in time to block a fist intent on a bit of rhinoplasty of its own.

"Tired of waiting your turn?" she sneered as she pulled back and planted herself in a ready position. She didn't take on the stance of any form he knew, but it was the stance of an experienced street fighter.

"Me?" Xavier felt compelled to ask as he stared at the woman, eyes wide in surprise.

She was rather tall, he would give her that. Tall and slim. Her hair was natural, tied back with a beaded headband, and her brown eyes shot fire. She was a beauty, he decided, looking at her with an artist's eye, but she was unconventional.

Her skin was a solid cocoa brown, smooth with only a few blemishes, and her cheekbones were the high kind that meant she would age gracefully. Her lips were full, a deep rose color that begged to be kissed.

Her body...

Had he ever seen such curves squeezed into cotton and denim? Her pink T-shirt was V-necked and valiantly struggled to hold in a set of more than ample breasts. There was the name of some bar embossed across the front, drawing attention to her breasts. Her rounded hips seemed to be dressed in some painted-on denim that made him long for a paintbrush. They led to a set of thick, shapely thighs and long legs that disappeared into a pair of black riding boots.

By the time his eyes made the circuit back up her body, he had just enough time to duck the fist that came flying at one of those examining eyes.

"Hey!" he called out. "Crazy female!" He dodged her strikes and moved back a safe distance.

"You get a good look, lover boy? Cause that's all you're gonna get!" she snarled, advancing while trying to keep an eye on the two squealing men lest they recover.

"I'm here to help, lady!" He sighed as one of the large dudes behind him made a sound.

"Yeah..." she snorted, her attention divided between fallen bodies and his face. "Prove it!"

"Prove...? Woman, I just ran the equivalent of three city blocks because I saw a flash of pink being herded toward this alley. I took out two guys who could press charges and throw my ass in jail. And I knocked a gun from the hands of some lunatic who wanted your oral services. What more can I do?"

Alena stared at the dark-haired man standing there, an almost angry expression on his face. With the skill he showed in dodging and punching, she was sure that he could easily take her down and take what he wanted, if he wanted that from her.

Even though he stared at her body like it was a piece of raw meat meant for a hungry jaguar, he had made no moves to attack her.

Her instincts were yelling at her to trust him, and she always followed her instincts.

"Okay, but if you get cute, Don Juan, it's your ass!"

"Jesus," Xavier groaned before motioning her past the two mostly silent men and the two recovering ones.

She began to run past him while he moved at a slower pace, not turning his back on the four men who still littered the alley. Once they turned the corner, he grabbed her hand and started running like his life depended on it.

"Why the speed now?" she gasped as they took off through the maze of alleys and into the night.

"Because there is one very pissed man with a broken nose back there who has access to a gun."

"So why didn't you take it?"

"And get my fingerprints all over it? No way. Not in the mood to be guilty until proven innocent."

"Oh," she managed as they broke through the alleys and ran onto a quiet street.

Once there, he led her to a large black bike that had badass written all over it.

"Get on," he breathed heavily as he pulled the keys from his pocket and hopped on the saddle.

"Look," Alena began, "thanks for the rescue and all, but I don't really know you and..."

"Get on the bike!" he growled, turning to stare at her with the most intense black eyes she had ever seen. That gaze held power, and strength, but more importantly, she saw...honor.

Shrugging, she hopped on and hoped she wasn't getting into worse trouble than what she'd had with the four wannabe thugs who followed her after work.

Besides, it was one man. Surely she could take on one man. Even if he was distracting her with the most perfect body she had ever seen.

## Chapter Two

The first few drops of rain caught them by surprise, but the deluge that followed instantly soaked them both to the skin.

Alena whimpered as she leaned down against her savior's back, then shot up, causing the bike to swerve dangerously as something occurred to her.

"Where are we going?" she screamed, only to have her words torn away by the wind and the rain.

He barked something, but she could only tell by the vibrations in his chest. The deep rumbling bass of the huge engine prevented any words that might have been spoken from being understood, and that suited her just fine.

Sighing, she moved closer to him again, getting what protection from the elements she could. She would have to trust in him and in her prayers, because she was silently praying. Praying that she had done the right thing, that she would be okay, and that the honor she had read in his eyes was accurate.

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The sound of the engine revving down pulled her out of her miserable funk.

Though it was summer, the rain was cold and uncomfortable. It made her hair products and her make-up run down her face and sting her eyes. When the rain suddenly stopped, she looked up to find that they were in a garage.

She jumped as the motor cut off and she realized she was in an enclosed place with a strange man whose name she didn't even know. Before he could speak, she decided to be the aggressor; it was safer that way.

"Just where am I and what are you planning on doing?" Her glare was heated enough to melt the polar icecaps and her hands were on her hips as she leaned forward, nearly shouting in his ears.

"Because if you are thinking what I think you're thinking, you need to know that I'm not that type of girl and this ain't that type of party."

Her accusations were met with a strained silence as he slid down the kickstand and made to rise from the bike.

"I said..." she started again, her voice loud and filled with authority.

"Don't you ever take a breath between words?"

"I... What?"

"Take a breath and exhale. Or are you waiting to do that?"

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes widened as she stared at the man. How dare he speak to her that way? She could kick his little lily-white ass if she wanted! How dare he...climb off his bike and calmly walk away? Didn't he know she wasn't through with him? Maybe it was

time she let him know she wasn't through and no one ever walked away from her unless she first gave them permission!

She hopped off the bike and followed the broad-shouldered man through a door that led into the house. She stormed in, uninvited, after him.

"Wait! Wait you...you...man. What is your name anyway?"

"Do you always run into people's houses while you insult them, *mami*?"

"Mommy? I ain't your mama, boy! Do you know who you are dealing with?"

"Actually, no," he shouted.

Alena followed the sound of his retreating voice through a rather tidy mudroom and then through another door, doing her best not to drip too badly.

She knew she was reacting without her manners, but she didn't need to multiply that sin by putting water stains on his tile floor. And a nice hand-painted tile it was, she decided as she used both hands to hold up the sodden remains of her Afro, the silk scarf that originally held it back dropping into her eyes.

"Well?"

His deep voice startled her, pulling her attention from the brightly painted floor tiles and drawing her deeper into the house. The next room she entered looked like it had once been a kitchen, but now appeared to be one huge studio.

Her sodden condition, her misplaced anger, and her strange fascination with this man were all forgotten as she stared at the paintings that lined the walls, sat on easels, and were stacked against the corners of the room.

There were so many of them. She inhaled and drew in the sharp scent of paint thinner and oils, chemicals that usually hung on the art majors at her school. Slowly spinning, she felt dizzy as the beauty of what she saw affected her.

There were portraits of women, beautiful women in all stages of undress. Old women, young women, plain women; all made beautiful, all made equal, by the talent and skill of one artist. And there were still lifes of flowers, fruits, and vases - all plain, ordinary objects that seemed extraordinary through his eyes and on his canvas.

And the landscapes! They were absolutely breathtaking.

She slowly turned until one painting caught her eye. A small canvas, only about twelve-by-fourteen, but the power it exuded! It was a picture of a little girl, a sad little girl whose big brown eyes were swimming in tears, her bottom lip seeming to quiver as she stared at a trio of retreating children, the one left behind.

Alena could almost feel the child's pain as she stared at the other children walking away, leaving her alone, betraying her. She blinked at that last thought. Why on earth did she get a sense of betrayal?

Wonderingly, her hand reached out, wanting to caress that chunky cheek, wanting to help ease that child's pain, if only a little. Her arms quivered and tears filled her eyes as her fingers lightly caressed...

"What are you doing in here?"

Alena jumped and jerked back from the painting, her eyes going to the man whose voice was suddenly thickly accented in anger.

And her breath caught.

The man was standing before her, long hair wet and curling around his shoulders; trailing down his back, his bare back. The thick muscles in his chest flexed as his fists clenched in the towel he held, his chest shining with dampness.

She followed the muscle play and was caught by what had to be a tattoo, maybe two, encircling his left bicep, a dark tribal design more intricate than a Celtic knot and more graceful than any tribal had the right to be.

For a moment, she missed the anger glinting in his eyes. Her gaze was following the cobblestone path that led past dark nipples to the sweet indentation of his navel. It continued down the thin trail of hair that led to the waistband of his low-slung black jeans. That conveniently brought to her attention the huge bulge that pressed against the damp and slightly clingy denim.

"I said, what are you doing in here?" he growled, drawing her gaze back to his.

"I..."

Guilt rushed in, making her blush. She knew she had invaded his personal space, but her pride kept her from looking away. Instead, she went on the offensive again.

"What? Did you think I would try to boost something from you? That I'm here to steal your shit? Just because my skin is black don't mean I'm a thief."

"*Chica*, don't hand me that you-fit-the-description crap. My skin is a little less brown than yours, but that little less brown ain't getting me shit. In fact, it caused me a whole heap of trouble. So you can take that racist shit and shove it up that delectable ass of yours 'cause I ain't buying it. I asked you what you were doing because I am not accustomed to people waltzing into my place and snooping. And you can consider yourself lucky because I don't explain myself often."

"Humph," Alena snorted, embarrassed and put in her place. She rallied with, "I would consider myself reproached reproached if I knew who I was apparently offending and burdening."

"Xavier. Xavier Bustamante at your service. And may I have the pleasure of being introduced to the one who offends and burdens?"

Alena rolled her eyes and fought back a relieved giggle. His anger seemed to be dissipating as he lifted the towel in an impressive display of musculature to slowly rub at his head, momentarily covering his eyes and breaking the spell that held her paralyzed.

"Um, Alena Queen."

Xavier peeked at the woman Alena through the folds of his towel and decided that he liked what he saw. Despite the prickly attitude and the aggressive personality, Alena was really a nicely put together woman.

His first impression of her being curvy was not exactly correct, he decided as he looked at her. Her breasts were large but firm in her sodden T-shirt, her skin an intriguing shade of cocoa that he decided was unique and all her. Her hips were a little heavy, well-rounded, just the way he liked them. And her ass... There was something to be said for a woman who had a fine ass like that. It was intriguing, watching her nervously look away and present her back for his unobserved inspection.

Her back was...graceful was the only word that he could come up with. It curved like a swan's neck, bending softly and flowing into her flaring hips, looking like the cradle of life. A

decent ass was his one weakness, he thought as he watched it sway as she stepped closer to the painting.

Alena sighed as she turned away from the good-looking man. Okay, so she wasn't compromising her principles by ogling a white guy, but man, he was white enough.

In the bright light of the kitchen-studio, she could see he had a distinct darkness to his skin that was not brought by frying his ass in the sun like a baby seal. Nor was it the orange color of the tanning beds a lot of the co-eds she knew flocked too during the first hint of spring.

Xavier had some color up in him, and it wasn't artificial. Judging from his accent, she decided that he was Hispanic. And judging from his attitude, she was in hot water.

She had invaded his privacy, after he had helped with the wannabe thugs back there. And he had gotten her away to safety when one guy pulled out a gun. And she had thanked him by sassing him, marching into his house like she belonged, then staring at his stuff.

Girding her loins, she turned to face him, an apology on her lips, when she got something dumped over her head for her troubles.

"Hey!" her muffled voice was lost under a towel smelling of Spring Rain fabric softener. She peeled it back enough to glare at the man, but only caught a glimpse of his back as he walked away.

"Don't drip on my floor," he called back as he disappeared down a hall.

Loathe to follow and invade more of his personal space, Alena chose to glare at him instead, narrowing her eyes as she dabbed at her hair and face. Seething was the only way to describe her temper. She stood there, visions of a Latino's death spinning through her mind as she stared at the spot he had occupied.

Sure he was a hot bod and all that, but he needed a lot of work in the personality department.

She blotted all the water she could, scrubbed the raccoon eyes off of her face, and wrapped the towel around her body. She was suddenly aware that the air conditioning was on and that she was in a very thin, very wet T-shirt.

"Hey," she called after a moment of standing there alone. "Xavier?"

When she got no answer, she started to walk towards what had to be the heart of his house, manners be damned. She needed to get home and she had no idea where she was.

"Xavier? Let me call a cab and this little black child will be out of your hair."

She paused in her attempt to follow, and decided it would be best to look for a phone in this room. She had invaded enough of his space and didn't want to desecrate his house any more than she had to. Spinning around, she began a visual search that took in a huge refrigerator, a decent stove that looked as if it had never been touched, and more artist's supplies than her college store had, but no phone.

She was reaching for a pile of stained rags when his deep bass caused her heart to jump into her throat.

"No need to take a taxi. I'll take you home."

"I don't want to be a bother."

"I said I will take you home. I only drove here first to get my car."

"Your car?"

"It is pretty foolish to ride a bike in the rain, Alena. If I may call you that?"



"Better than some of the things I've been called," she muttered to herself.

He paused for a second, tilting his head to the side and examining her, before tossing her a bundle of material.

Instinctively, she caught the soft bundle, before shaking it out to see what he had given her. It was an oversized sweatshirt. Well, oversized for her, but on him, she decided that it would almost be indecently tight.

"Be that as it may, *bruja*, it is getting late and the rain is coming down harder."

"I *said*," she said, emphasizing the said, "I didn't want to be a bother."

"Look, let's get a few things straight. That chip on your shoulder is no match for the chip on mine. It is raining and it will be hours before a cab will come out here to fetch you, and I don't want you here that long. The sooner I get you home, the sooner my obligation to you is over and I can get on with my life. Are we clear?"

"I didn't ask you to help me," she grouched as she tugged on the sweatshirt, tossing him the towel but glad to have something dry covering her.

Over the course of their conversation, while he was being all alpha and stuff, her nipples had decided it was time to become amazingly hard. She tried to hide her blush in the shirt, not wanting to see a knowing smirk on his face. But her comment was the best she could come up with on such short notice.

"¡*Americanos!*" he spat. "I did you a good deed, *beba*. And when someone does you a good turn, you accept it gracefully to show your respect and gratitude."

Rolling his eyes, he started toward the door they had originally entered, not even bothering to see if she would follow. *Quarrelsome woman*.

Rolling her eyes and mocking his "I did you a good deed" Alena followed, her lips in a pout. But that pout turned into a gasp of pleasure when she saw what he was uncovering.

Sitting unnoticed towards the back, shining in its newly revealed glory, was none other than a '67 black-as-night, totally refurbished GTO, the muscle car of muscle cars.

"My God," she gasped, walking towards the car as if in a trance. "Do you know what this is?"

"What? Not the low-rider you were expecting?" His sarcasm was thick enough to slice as he eyed the woman walking towards him.

"Look, you brown mother-fucker. I am so sorry you have to wait another generation to blend in with the powers that be, but you have no right to get your tacos in an uproar over me."

The sudden racial slurs, coming from her in all her Afro-centric splendor, was enough to make him...burst into laughter.

"*Cariña*, tacos in an uproar?"

He began to laugh so hard it made him forget he was planning on taking his baby out into the rain to get this woman home because his everyday car was in the shop. Made him forget his prickly treatment of her was not because she was black, but because she was American. Made him forget his anger for a moment.

It straight out confused her.

"Get in the car," he chuckled as a few stray tears ran down his face. His damp hair curled enticingly around him, a black halo for a dark angel.

Blinking rapidly to break her fascination with the asshole, Alena opened the car door and slipped into its firm leather seats. In trying to dispel her attraction to him, she forgot she was riding high in her dream car, and that she should be plying him with a million questions because it probably would be the only time she got to ride in one.

But she remembered as he climbed into the car, the small space quickly filling with his rich scent, and revved the engine.

"You're taking this car out in the rain?"

"Be grateful," he answered, his voice still filled with amusement. "My last girlfriend never even managed to make it into the passenger seat."

"I am not your girlfriend."

"Praise God for that!"

The rest of the drive was made in complete silence, Alena pointing out the directions in which he had to turn, and Xavier thinking that her pout was kind of cute.

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It was a quick ride, barely fifteen minutes from his rather suburban neighborhood to her school, fifteen minutes that a storm raged outside, and a hurricane was bottled within.

"Thanks," she all but snapped as he pulled into the circular drive of her dorm. Then she paused as she rested her hand on the car's door handle. Then shaking her head, she opened the door and placed one foot outside, shifting her weight. "I really mean it," she added sincerely as lightning flashed, illuminating her face.

"Wait!"

The loud command had an instant effect on her, freezing her in place as she looked questioningly toward him.

In that second, in that very moment, Xavier saw what his mind had been searching for. That tilt of her chin, the expression in her eyes, the way her lips moved... she was it.

"Wait," he added again, a bit softer. "I need you."

## Chapter Three

"Oh no, you don't!" Alena snapped, her eyes going wide as his words registered. "I already told you, this ain't that type of party. Thanks for the rescue, but..."

"Not like that!" he growled right back. "Are you crazy? If I wanted sex, I wouldn't have to proposition a waterlogged damsel in distress who doesn't have the sense to keep her mouth shut and think when being offered a gift."

"If you are calling it a gift now..."

"No! I want to paint you."

Alena's mouth dropped open into a perfect oval as she stared at Xavier. Then it was her turn to explode into laughter.

"You? Me? Paint? Oh God, that is rich!"

She laughed so hard, she collapsed back onto the seat, shaking the car with her mirth.

"You find something funny?" Xavier was growing livid! What was it with this woman? Didn't she know who he was? Didn't she know that she was laughing at his...his...vision?

"You want to paint ...me?"

She laughed so hard, tears fell from her eyes.

"You laugh at what I do?"

"What do you do? For all I know, the real artist who painted those pictures could be on vacation and you are his..."

"Gardener?"

That shut her up. Jeez, this man had more racial hang-ups and defense mechanisms than she did! "I never said that," she sighed. "So you're a world famous artist?"

"No. I am a tattoo artist."

"And you want me to pose for your next tattoo?" she asked, trying to puzzle out why he had so many paintings in his home if he were into tattoos!

"No, I am an artist, but I do tattoos for a living."

"Okay. That makes sense." Maybe he was trying to get his ends met like she was, any way possible. Why else would she be a bartender at a strip club?

"And I want you to pose for me."

"I don't know if I can do that, Xavier. When?"

"Afternoons."

"Can't. Got to work."

"I'll pay you."

"Sure." *Starving artists*, she thought. Then again, he was driving a nice car, had a nice bike, and access to a very nice house. Maybe it was...

"And no, I don't sell drugs."

She flushed with embarrassment.

"Not every Latino you see is a Blood."

"I never..."

"Look," he interrupted, brushing aside her denials, "will you do it?"

"Work, remember? Not all of us make good as a tattoo artist. Why do you think I was running down that alley? For my health?"

"I told you I'd pay."

"I make two hundred a night in tips, and I work four nights a week."

"I'll pay you fifty an hour, minimum of six hours five nights a week."

Alena's eyes bulged as she did the mental math. Fifteen hundred dollars a week! The man was either rich, stupid, or into porn! But she had to take a chance! To have a cushy job for the evenings after her early morning classes, and still get home before midnight!

"No nudity! And I ain't no 'ho, so no peep show parties. My clothes stay on!"

"If I wanted you nude, I would have asked for nude!"

"Are you serious? You had better not be playin' me, Xavier! I have friends in low places!"

He rolled his eyes at her thinly veiled warning. Again he asked his muse if it was certain this was the one, or had his artistic encouragement taken up smoking crack when not on duty.

"I am not playing a game. This is my craft, Alena."

Nodding, Alena took a deep breath. "I need your social security number, your address, your tax ID number, your..."

"Green card?"

"You said it!"

Chuckling at her spunk, Xavier shook his head before he answered. "I will bring you a proper contract to read over, and all the information you requested, tomorrow."

"Right at this spot?"

"Right at this spot tomorrow at two."

"Good, my last class ends at one. I'll bring a friend along."

"Fine."

"Fine, great, wonderful! I hope I'm doing the right thing in trusting you, Xavier. Because if you're on the up and up, you may have saved my life."

"Not saved it, *beba*, merely altered it."

With those words ringing in her ears, Alena alighted from the car and watched as it disappeared into the dark stormy night, blending in with the nearly black skies.

"I hope you are legit," she muttered, staring as if all her hope was in that one hunk of metal. She turned to make her way into the dorm.

## Chapter Four

"I hope you know what you're doing."

The dour voice came from Elise, her best friend since high school.

Elise was dressed in her imitation Brooks Brothers Lady Lawyer suit and was doing her best LA Law.

"That's why you're here, girl," Alena replied, again, for the hundredth time.

"Well, someone has to look out after your black ass, and it looks like it's going to be me."

"Why did I ask you to come along again?"

"Because Elise knows best," she intoned in her best Mommy Dearest voice.

"Elise can kiss my..."

"And because contract law is a specialty of mine. But I do take classes in other aspects of the law. Remember, this girl's got skills."

"Yeah?" Alena arched one eyebrow as she stared at her friend, who came equipped with magnifying glass and briefcase, looking professional and just from her ethics class.

"And I'm not charging?"

"Ah! Now I remember!"

Alena chuckled as she looked over at her friend, wondering how she ever managed to get her dreadlocks into that serious bun at the base of her neck.

Elise chuckled back as she peered over the rim of her gold wire frame glasses, and nudged her friend with her shoulder.

To go to this meeting, Alena had her wondrously natural hair hidden beneath a brightly colored head-wrap, and wore a long, gauzy, natural-colored shirt. The oversized tunic seemed to make her float and the scarf she had tied around her waist matched the head wrap, adding a bright splash of color to the neutral outfit. Her open-toe sandals were more open toe than sandal, but she could pull off the look.

She nervously gripped the strap of a worn denim book bag as she looked down the street, then checked her watch again.

Alena looked damn good, and she never even noticed. "So," Elise sighed as she tore her gaze from her friend. "Tell me what white bread is offering again?"

"He is not white."

"Thank God for small favors."

"Elise?"

"What?"

"If you go off on another one of your 'The Man' speeches, I'm going to send you away and take my chances."

"Fine!" Elise threw up her arms in surrender, a good-natured smile on her face. "I'll behave."

"So help me, Elise, if you make me blow this..."

"I said I would behave. Jeez! Okay! So tell me about not-so-white bread."

"His name is Xavier Bustamante and he's a tattoo artist."

"Say what? I thought he was talking painting, you know, with a brush?"

"He is. But everybody's got to pay the bills, right?"

"I guess. You know the average tattoo artist doesn't do too badly in the income department. I've heard of a good one making over ninety-eight thousand a year. So is your boy any good?"

"How would I know?" Alena answered as she chewed on her bottom lip, recalling the painting of that little girl. The pain had almost poured from the canvas. "I was only at his house long enough for him to get his car and get me here."

"I still say it was crazy of you to go with him in the first place. What if he had hurt you?"

"You mean more than the four goons with the gun who chased me into the alley?"

"You know what I mean. He could have caused you more harm than good!"

"It was fight off one with no perceivable weapons, or fight off four with a gun. I think I'll take my chances on the devil with fewer horns."

"It was still stupid."

"But no more stupid than working as a bartender in a strip club to pay off my last year's tuition."

Elise sighed, knowing that this argument would end the same way it usually did.

"I told you, I got your back, girl. You don't have to work there."

"So I can accept charity or act like a gold-digger with you as my Sugar Momma?" She arched her eyebrow at the sudden flush on Elise's face, but continued with her point. "I'm not going out like that, Elise. I work hard for what I have, and I refuse to let anyone or anything stop me. And when I get what I want, I can say that I don't owe nobody nothing."

Elise nodded, sighing as she stared at Alena's familiar face and changed the subject.

"I understand. So, what are his terms again?"

"Fifty dollars an hour, guaranteed six hours a day for five days a week. No nudity, no peep shows, everything legal and legit."

"Sounds too good to be true."

"Sounds like a man with purpose. And Elise, his eyes looked so honest."

"So did the devil's when he told Eve to eat that fruit. And now we have menstrual cramps, labor pains, and have to put up with minimal wage jobs."

Alena's laughter was high and catching, but eased off as the familiar black car rolled to a stop in the drive.

"Damn fool," Alena sighed. "Putting that piece of art on the road."

"You mean, paying for gas for that nineteen-nineteen get out and push."

"Shh!" Alena chuckled as the car stopped in front of them and the driver leaned over to stare at her across the empty passenger seat.

"Xavier," Alena intoned, growing serious as she stared into his big black eyes.

"Alena."

She struggled to suppress a shudder as his accented voice nearly purred her name. Damn, but he had a sexy accent. She looked over at Elise to see if she noticed, and winced at the woman's drawn expression.

"Um, this is Elise Sanders. She is--"

"Studying for the Bar," she snapped as she glared at the man. So this was the mysterious tattoo artist. He didn't look all that great to her. "And will be going over the contract you brought, if indeed you brought it."

Arching an eyebrow at her highhanded tone, Xavier shrugged and looked over at Alena. "You can call off your pit bull. I have the contract and you will find everything in order."

She didn't know why, but Alena blushed as she nodded. Maybe it was Elise's attitude or her rude behavior, but something was going on between all of them.

"Pit bull? I'll have you know..."

"If you ladies will get into the car, I can take us someplace where we can go over this contract in comfort."

"Your house, no doubt."

"No," Xavier replied, still not paying Alena's friend, the would-be lawyer, much attention.

He hated lawyers. He hated them almost as much as he hated...

"I intended to take us to Phillip's for lunch."

"Downtown?" Alena asked, wondering who was going to pay for this, though she loved the seafood there.

"Unless you know of a closer restaurant?"

"It's a big expenditure," Elise pointed out, growling internally as she stared at the man.

"I'll write it off," Xavier replied, his voice sounding benign, his demeanor that of a king bestowing favors on his subjects.

"You just can't..."

"Thank you. Phillip's will be fine," Alena cut in, glaring at Elise. Her gaze easily read, *Get it under control, girl*.

"Fine," Elise snapped and stared pointedly at the door.

"Well, get in," Xavier offered. "The engine is running."

"And I thought you were going to be a gentleman and open it for us," Elsie added, just loud enough to be heard.

"And I thought, such a liberated woman as yourself would look upon it as an attempt to usurp your power or as a comment on your inability to take care of yourself."

"Sounds like you heard the drill before," Alena added, growing nervous in the tension that flowed between Elise and Xavier. "You know, the rank and order."

"Remember that girlfriend I mentioned?" he replied to her with a smile.

"The one who didn't get a chance to step foot into this car?" She smiled as she pulled the door open and pulled the seat back, motioning Elise to get in the back seat. No way would she trust her friend not to go for his throat while the car was in motion.

"So I guess you made the poor girl walk," Elise snapped as she gracelessly plopped into the back seat.

"My girlfriend was the last of the die-hard feminists. She insisted on walking, rather than climb into a symbol of male penile envy."

"Penile envy?" Alena snickered. "Really?"

"Not that I was very envious," Xavier said with no small bit of modesty.

Elise's snort from the back seat was embarrassingly loud, but all Xavier did was grin. "And you can't find out about it. That's not in our contract."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm sorry," Alena moaned softly as the car drove through the streets of Baltimore. "I have no idea why she's acting this way."

Lunch was a disaster, and that was putting it mildly. They started off by reading the contract, surprising Elise by its professional preparation. Everything was listed there, including a release that would give Xavier the right to display any paintings with her image.

In return, she was getting paid professional model's fees and didn't have the hassle of posing in front of a class. In short, she was getting everything she needed to get ahead, and Xavier was getting unskilled labor.

After Elise looked over the contract and reluctantly gave her the high sign, she proceeded to go into full militant mode.

The waiters were looking at them funny because they were with a man who was not necessarily black, probably thinking they were prostitutes. Okay, so maybe she was exaggerating the whole thing. But still...

When Xavier asked if she had any dance training, Elise started in on the myth that all black people could dance or were only good for sports and entertainment. On and on it went, with Xavier making a comment and Elise seeing the monster of de facto racism in every word.

When Xavier added that he was not even a native-born American citizen, but had dual citizenship through a Commonwealth, Elise started in again. She went on about how the Latin people moved in and worked for pennies on the dollar, preventing good Americans from finding jobs.

At that blatantly racist comment, Alena had enough.

She called for the check and for a taxi for her so-called best friend and hoped that Xavier wouldn't hold a grudge. Elise could get back to campus alone, because she wasn't going with her!

Through it all, Xavier sat with a strange expression on his face, as if his worst thoughts had been confirmed, though he offered to drive her back.

Now that he was taking her back to the campus, she hoped that he would not retract his offer. Well, that wasn't exactly right either. She hoped that his feelings hadn't been hurt, that he would not form a negative opinion of her whole race based on what Elise had said and how she behaved. She was used to being judged at a glance, and she hated that anyone else would be subjected to the same thing.

"And you apologize for her?"



His question caught her off guard. Of all things, the last thing she expected was this calm question. Anyone else would have been expressing anger or a cold dismissal.

So she just gaped at him.

"Your girl was trippin'."

Alena felt the need to blush again, but forcibly withheld it. She finally settled on. "Elise has issues. I suspect her parents watched *The Color Purple* one too many times when she was being conceived."

Xavier snickered at that one.

"And now she doesn't like men?" he asked, making Elise blink in confusion.

"Of course she likes men. She just thinks that anyone who isn't black is out to get her."

"If...you say so." Xavier chuckled as he shook his head. There were a few things about Elise that he had noticed, but if her friend chose to remain in the dark, that was her own business.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, *chica*. Nothing at all."

Alena wore a look of confusion until he stopped at the circular drive in front of her dorm. She was grateful for the fact that Elise was not there to add to the confusion.

"Tomorrow, Alena."

"Tomorrow, Xavier," she repeated as she climbed out of the car and slammed the door shut.

"And bring that head-wrap!"

She looked back over her shoulder, eyes widening in surprise, giving her the look of a startled doe. Then she nodded once before turning and making her way towards the door.

Xavier watched as she disappeared inside and shook his head at himself.

An obviously militant friend, an aggressive but ultimately sweet amateur model who probably couldn't hold still if her life depended on it, and a swelling erection in his pants. What had he gotten himself into?

## Chapter Five

“Don’t move!” he growled at her again. “You are not making this easy!”

Alena rolled her eyes as she struggled to hold the weird pose Xavier had put her in.

At first, she decided he was just being male when he came to pick her up in a huge monstrosity of a truck dedicated to poisoning the testosterone levels of any male in its immediate vicinity. Annoying and male, but he had put that precious car back in hiding so she didn’t say anything.

When he blasted classical music like Mozart was Eminem, she said nothing, thinking that his musical tastes were varied. She liked just about all types of music, even a few country songs, not that she would let anyone in her dorm know. So that in itself was fine.

But when she walked into that house and he handed her the bleached linen she was supposed to wrap around her body and the flaxen cord to hold it up, she decided he was certifiable. You had to be insane to try and get a woman to wear that and consider it clothing, but he pointed out that, like the contract stipulated, she would not be nude. Just precariously clothed.

And it felt like it was about ten degrees in the place, not the atmosphere to go around in without a bra, risking the headlight problem!

Sure it was fine for him to run around in a thin figure-accenting T-shirt, showing off the thick padding of muscle that would keep him warm and show incredible strength with every flex, but she was just plain cold! It would make her nipples hard...or give her an excuse for having hard nipples from watching his body move in those worn jeans as he bent to retrieve a huge sketchpad.

“My ancestors are from Africa,” she pointed out as she held the offending piece of material as if it were a shield against the sexual urges slowly taking over her body.

He snorted and mumbled something under his breath like, “So were a few of mine,” but he pointed to a room not too far inside the house and went back to organizing his canvases.

Maybe it had been too long since she last got laid, she thought as she watched his package ripple within the confines of his tight jeans. No undies? With classes and her night job, she had neglected that part of her emotional health.

Then she blinked as she stared down at her so-called dress. Now she was trying to justify her sexual attraction to the long-haired man! What was happening to her? In a huff, and more to get away from him than anything, she turned and stalked off to the room he directed her when she first entered the house, a guest bathroom.

Expecting the usual squalor of a male sanctuary, she was pleasantly surprised to find the bathroom spotless. There was even a nice window treatment and decorative soaps! A *man* who kept decorative soaps! Heaven!

Laying her ‘outfit’ across some plush color-coordinated towels, she quickly stripped off her street clothes and stared at the bleached linen in horror. This thing would make her ass look fat!

But it would nicely show off her muscled legs. But her ass would look fat!

And the natural color complimented skin that was not exactly high-yellow. But her ass would look fat!

"I'm keeping on my bra!" she screamed back to him defiantly as she held the material against her chest and tried to figure out the mechanics.

"No you are not!" his faint sounding voice called back, and she cursed under her breath.

The damn bra had to go too! "If I didn't need this job..." she snarled back, then slid her bra onto the pile of clothes she draped over a conveniently placed clothes hamper.

The weight of her breasts against her chest was almost pleasant as she rubbed the pressure lines that had developed from the underwire contraption she used to prevent her breasts from dropping to her feet. She remembered what happened to big breasts when not properly held into position. She had seen this as her grandmother from the south aged. That woman could play Hacky-Sack with her boobs. The thought of her body doing that just plain terrified her!

But as always the unrestrained feel appealed to her, making her feel natural and comforted by the slight weight that pulled at her back. It kind of made her feel...well, like a woman. And she loved being a woman.

Sighing, she held one edge against her upper chest, right between her breasts, and began to wind the material around her, like she and her sister would wind their mother's sheets around them as they played dress-up.

Her mother never got angry at the wrinkled sheets and had sometimes wrapped herself up and joined in.

She sighed at the memory. She really missed her mother and sister.

But she wound and wound until the surprisingly long piece of material was fully wrapped around her body. She then reached for the rope thing.

Recalling some pictures from childhood excursions to the Smithsonian's Egyptian exhibit, she tucked one edge of her wrapping in to hold it in place, and then wrapped the cord around her waist, crisscrossing it between her breasts, and then wrapping it around her upper chest.

It took several tries, and she finally understood why Egyptian rulers had hordes of servants, before she got it to hold up right.

"My ass is going to look fat!" she grouched to herself as she garnered up the courage to look into the mirror behind the door.

"Well, now," she breathed as she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

Her head-wrap was on, as requested, and it went well with the bleached linen. But it was the makeshift dress itself that was the real draw. It was tight enough where she had tied the cord to let anyone know that she was all woman, but the rest just skimmed her figure, flattering her long legs and her shapely curves.

"Must be one size fits all," she mumbled as she held her hands to the side and turned this way and that, checking out the rear view in the mirror. "Those Egyptians were wise."

She was lost in contemplating her own reflection until there came a great pounding on the door.

"Are you done?"

"Are you Moses trying to get water from a rock?" she shouted back.

A confused yet masculine "What?"

"You're striking that door like it was a rock and you expect something good to pop out of it. Hold your horses, buddy! Perfection takes time."

"I don't want perfection!" Xavier shouted back. "I want you!"

The door swung open so fast it almost hit him in the nose as he jumped out of the way.

It had taken her a long time to wrap that cloth, and he was ready to begin. He had even allowed time to rewrap the cloth correctly, and his timetable was about to be compromised. But now he stared down into the brown eyes of death as she huffed out of the room.

"What did you say to me?" she growled, getting up into his face.

His mouth lost all moisture.

She was positively stunning!

The slightly yellow material, with its natural folds and wrinkles, brought out the creamy smoothness of her skin and made her complexion positively glow!

Her eyes shot defiantly up at him, reminding him of a brave warrior while her form showed off why the Egyptians had a plethora of effective birth control methods.

Her body was damn near perfection in form and figure, her shape well-rounded and lush. Her legs were strong, the muscles of her calves standing out in the knee length wrap, her toes unadorned and manicured neatly as they curled slightly from the cold tile even as she growled at him, a delicate feminine thing he would not have expected.

He wanted to put a ring around one of her toes. It would be...cute. "I, uh, I said I was ready," he stammered for a moment as he felt a hot rush of blood to his cock and swallowed deeply as he hoped to hide his reaction from her.

If she knew the ideas that had popped into his head as he took a step back and viewed the whole show, she would have gone running and screaming as fast as she could away from him. How perverted was it to want to tie her up with that cord, unwrap her like a Christmas gift long overdue, and lick, slurp, and chew every inch of her exposed flesh?

*I bet she'd taste spicy*, he thought.

"But I wasn't!" she snapped as she backed down a bit.

That made his eyebrows snap together in annoyance. The crazy *bruja*! Who did she think was running this show?

"Oh, so you are the *prima donna* now," he growled, "when you haven't even stepped foot on the stage."

"How hard can it be?"

Apparently very. She swore that he put her in this uncomfortable position on purpose.

Here she was, Alena Queen, destined to be the world's best children's author, bent over at the waist and peering over her shoulder like a the world's biggest Egyptian tart! Flirting was one thing, but to have her butt stuck out, one leg bent forward "just so", and he kept grumbling, and her breasts threatening to let gravity win the battle between weight versus want and pop free at any moment, made her want to kill him!

"This is uncomfortable," she called over to the man who was gleefully doing page after page of sketches, chuckling to himself.

"That is why artist's models get paid so much," he called back in a singsong voice. Then he added thoughtfully, "What, *chica*, you think that I'm the world's biggest sucker? That I was paying for just a pretty face and a hot body to play statue in some chair in the middle of a flower garden?" At her continued silence, he added, "*Chica*, you have been watching the wrong movies on television."

She grumbled back to him as she tried to hold that blasted flirtatious pose.

"What was that?" he called back as he moved around her and took a different position to sketch.

"I said, let me bend you over and show your ba-dunk-a-dunk-dunk to the world and make you stand in this ridiculous pose while someone stares at you and makes smart-assed comments."

"Ba-dunk-a-dunk-dunk?"

"My rear? My posterior, my derriere, my ass, man!"

"And a lovely ass it is."

At her growl, he added, "Really, it is! I know asses and yours is one of the lovelier ones."

The blush that immediately covered her face was not one of arousal, she tried to tell herself as she felt her walls begin to soften and prepare themselves for masculine possession. She hoped that this linen didn't show a wet spot!

"Speak of something else," she squeaked as she tried to stop undressing him with her eyes as he hemmed and hawed over her ass.

"You talk to me. Tell me about the real Miss Alena Queen."

"Me?"

"You. It will help me add personality to my sketches. And move your head a little to the right," he asked as he took a closer position to her, sitting on the ground getting a good side view.

"Me. Hmm. Well, I am twenty-six and I have two majors in college."

"And they are?"

"English Journalism and Early Childhood Education."

"Noble professions," he gritted out as anger flared in his voice. "So I guess you want to be the one to get the big headlines, break the next big story?"

"God, no," she chuckled, wobbling a little but regaining her position before she toppled on her most touted ass. "I want to be a writer."

"Sensationalist?"

"Nah, nothing like that. I want to write children's stories."

A smile blossomed on his face again at her words.

"I like children," he sighed, as he added another stroke to the sketch he was completing and began to move into a different position in front of her.

"So do I. When I was a little girl, I wanted at least five. There was only my sister and I, and that was fun, but I loved to have little babies to spoil. I was the younger of us, so all my baby practice was with dolls."

"Where is your sister now?"

"Dead." Her flat tone let him know to let the subject drop.

"I'm sorry, *beba*. Your poor parents..."

"Well, they ain't feeling much either, cause they're dead too."

"Alena!" he stopped sketching and dropped his pencil unnoticed to the ground. "No auntie, no family? To lose your whole family..."

He felt a tear flow down his cheek as he tried to contemplate life without his *familia*.

Where would he be without his mother's fresh attitude and the loving advice she gave so freely! What would he be without his mother's love and comfort? And his father! He remembered all the time his father spent with him and his brothers, teaching and playing when they were young, directing and correcting when they were older, and now that he was a man, just bonding and showing understanding, just being with him, supporting him no matter what.

And his brothers and sister! He just couldn't imagine not going to the beach in Miami with his family every time he visited, the barbeques, the dancing and playing. And when the younger siblings were sent off to bed, just having a drink with his parents and his older siblings, just enjoying the life that he had been given.

He couldn't survive without his family. And yet Alena Queen was.

"If it would not be invading too much, tell me - what happened?"

Sighing, Alena wished she had never opened her big mouth.

"I don't want your pity."

"Pity is the furthest thing from my mind."

"Short answer, practical joke. Long answer, murder."

## Chapter Six

"Murder?" He was stunned, incredulous - this was much worse than he expected.

"Murder. Murder and a few good lawyers." She was clearly not amused.

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? Feel sorry for my parents and my sister. They're the ones pushing up daisies."

"You don't have to if..."

"Hell, I'll tell you," Alena said as she broke her pose and dropped wearily to the ground, careful to keep a grip on her linen. "It's no big secret anyway. I'm surprised you don't hear about it in the news. It happened about ten years ago."

His eyes darkened, but his voice was calm and steady. "Ten years ago, I was...preoccupied."

"It was all over the news," she sighed. "There is this footbridge, an overpass that stretches over I-695 near White Marsh." She sneered the name of the small province known for its well-off citizens. "My parents were rushing to my gymnastics meet."

He lifted surprised eyes at her comment.

"Yeah, I did gymnastics, and even competed for awhile. You don't get gams like these," she intoned in her best Mae West while lifting up one leg to display, "slinging drinks to non-tippin' drunks in a titty bar."

He held back a chuckle and positioned his sketchpad to hide what her display of leg had caused.

"Well," she said, the smile dropping from her face, "I was there early, with the team, you know, and my parents were going be there when the actual meet started."

She sighed sadly and Xavier could tell she was getting to the painful part of her story.

"They were riding along, minding their own business. I mean, I can tell you what probably was going on. Alanis would be bouncing in the back seat talking about her favorite apparatus or the music I had for the floorshow. Alanis," she sniffed as a tear filled her eye. "Alanis was a dancer. She took gymnastics when she was younger, stopped when I started. And that girl could move. She spoke with her body, Xavier. My mom would be talking about the leotards the team would be wearing. She headed up the fundraisers to buy them and they were beautiful. My dad would be talking about how his daughter would be on the Olympic team next year, even though I was way too old to do it. It would have been talk, you know, just family talk."

Her nose began to burn and her eyes itch as she struggled to continue.

"Well," she paused to clear her throat. "Well, on this bridge, there were these, um, two kids. They said they were playing around. But one of them thought it would be a good idea to take this hunk of concrete from the bridge. You know, those things are always falling apart. So

he decided to take a chunk of it and as he stated, 'chuck' it at the next car he saw. Unfortunately, a bright red minivan was too big a target to pass up."

"No!"

"Oh yeah. He threw that chunk and it landed right in the windshield."

There was silence for a moment as the tears ran down her face and she sniffed hard, struggling to get her nerves settled and finish telling her story.

"They said that my dad died instantly, some chunks of glass, um, severed his carotid. I had to look that one up. But what killed him was having chunks of his skull slamming into his brain after the concrete went through the glass."

Xavier inhaled deeply, tossing his sketchpad aside as he reached out and wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

"Um, he lost control of the car and it ran into a, uh, an oncoming semi. They said no one suffered."

"¡Madre de Dios!" Xavier whispered, horror in his tone as he pulled Alena to him, her head dropping to his chest as she struggled to regain her composure.

"It's been ten years, you know? You'd think that I'd be over it."

"How can you get over something like that?"

"Well," she sighed as she used the flats of her hands to swipe at her red eyes, "you don't get over it going through the courts."

"What happened?"

"It seems that the boy who actually threw that concrete came from some rich family in White Marsh. His lawyer said that he was just expressing youthful exuberance. Youthful exuberance, my ass. This wasn't the first time that asshole did something like this; this is just the first time he murdered somebody, a whole lot of somebody's. But the jurors bought his bullshit. He killed off my family and left me all alone and he got a suspended sentence 'cause he didn't understand the dangers of what he was doing. That asshole was out on the streets four months after he took everything away from me. And the worst part is that I heard his lawyer agree with his father that my family would have just been another statistic anyway, that drugs or gang-bangs would have gotten them sooner or later. And when they brought up the fact that I was an orphan, they said that the state should emancipate me, that there were no placements for a 'child of color' or one of my advanced age."

"¡Dios mio! Alena! That is not true! That is just a stereotype, just the uneducated guesses of ignorant people. And I am sure that anyone would want to take in a child as lovely and talented as you must have been."

"Yeah," Alena sniffed as she rested for a moment more, took a little more comfort from his embrace, then pulled away.

"Yeah, well, it's history now. Water under the bridge."

"What did you do?"

"Well, Elise's parents were close to mine. So they naturally took me in until I was eighteen and went off to college."

"At least you had someone to turn to, some family."

"Yeah, Elise's parents were great and Elise was...is... like a sister to me."

"You are close."



"Oh, the closest." Alena grinned. "You should have seen her when we were younger. She is very pro-Black, I'm sure you noticed. And she wanted to start up the junior Black Panthers at our high school. Instead of tea-parties, we had make-believe peace marches."

She giggled as she looked over at Xavier who was fighting back a grin.

"She started a riot in school once, claiming that the status quo was offending us by serving the fried chicken and watermelon salad combination."

Alena giggled as she recalled the messy food fight and the trouble that ensued.

"And don't get me started on her theories on black-cherry gelatin. Her grandfather was a Black Panther and I think he warped that child. But Elise was with me when the father made his comments. I still remember the riot she almost started in the court house."

"And now she's followed you to school."

"Well, we started together, but I had to take a few months off every year. My parents didn't have much insurance and what we did have went towards a civil suit that went nowhere. I had to work to pay my way through. Auntie Karol and Uncle Sam are great, but I couldn't ask any more from them. So I worked during the summer to pay for fall classes. I teach gymnastics at a local school, but now the season is over so..."

"So you bartend at a sleazy titty bar."

She chuckled at the sound of his accent saying those harsh slang words.

"No, now I am a model."

"And not a very good one."

Xavier tried to give her a superior look but it was lost in the grin that twitched at his lips. Alena was a strong woman, stronger perhaps than any other woman he'd ever known, except of course, for his mother.

And he couldn't hold the pretense as she flashed him one of the most brilliant smiles he had ever seen. Her teeth weren't perfect; she had a slight overbite and there was a small gap there, but that in no way distracted from her beauty.

And her smell...she smelled like green apples, fresh, crisp, and sweet.

He looked into her big brown bloodshot eyes and felt his heart lurch. More disturbing was the swelling between his legs that returned with a vengeance.

"Hey," she protested, her expression lightening as well as her mood. "Cut me some slack. This is my first day."

"And this is what I'm paying for?" he joked as he nudged her arm with his elbow before he retrieved his pad and rose to his feet. "And we are done."

"What?"

"You are no good to me like this," he said as he reached down a hand to assist her to her feet.

"But..." she protested, thinking about the money that she was not going to get to help fill her nearly empty coffers.

"No buts. Go get changed and I'll feed you."

"Do you think you can fix everything with food?" she snorted as she took his hand and rose to her feet.

Funny, she never realized that she only came up to his chin, and she wasn't exactly among the ankle-biter population.

"Not everything, but I can take this time to explain what I need."

"As long as you pay me."

"Pay you, *mami*? I'm feeding you."

"Well, I am worth more than that."

"Red beans and rice?"

She snickered at that. "I was expecting more than that. I want some real Mexican food."

"Me too, but I'm not Mexican."

"Cuban?"

"Nope."

"You are Latino, or do I need to look towards the South Pacific?"

"Porto Rican."

"The Commonwealth? Neat."

"Go change."

"Does that mean I get authentic Porto Rican food?"

"It means that you have fifteen minutes to change and get back here or I'll eat everything myself."

Chuckling, Alena walked to the bathroom, keeping a firm grip on her wrap, but she paused long enough to shoot him a look over her shoulder.

Xavier was kind of hot, hot in a not-a-brother kind of way. But he was hot.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, where is the grub?" Alena asked as she emerged fully dressed from the bathroom.

"It's on the way."

"You don't cook it yourself?"

"No. I have people for that."

"Oh, you have people," she giggled as she moved further into the converted kitchen. "So where are we supposed to eat?"

"The dining room."

"You have a dining room?"

Xavier rolled his eyes and gestured towards a doorway that led deeper into the house.

She followed, her curiosity building as she wondered what kind of house Xavier would keep, if it actually was his house.

"This is your house?" she asked as she stepped into a beautiful but practically empty room. "And where is the furniture?"

"Yes, this is my house," he said, sarcasm strong in his voice. "Now would you like to know something else, like my social security number or my penis size?"

"Um," she stuttered. Knowing his penis size could be helpful for the future. But then she put the breaks on those thoughts. Xavier was not for screwing. Xavier was, in essence, her boss. "Not touching that one."

Before he could answer, there was a knock at the door and Xavier went to answer it.

She stayed, staring at the long wooden table that was large enough to seat at least six people and still have elbow-room. There was an interesting conglomeration of twisted metal and wire that served as a chandelier, though it seemed to fit right in to the stark, almost modern feel of the place. There was one large picture window that overlooked the side of the house and extensive flowerbeds there, that brought in the fading light of the day. Candles sat on a matching wooden sideboard and in sconces set into the walls. There was a single Oriental rug on the wooden floor, a floor that was polished to a shine so bright, you could see your reflection in it. The room was simple yet elegant.

There was a single table runner running down the center of the table with a large bowl of fruit right in the center, underneath the chandelier. As she drifted closer to get a look at some of the exotic fruits in the bowl, Xavier walked into the room, an enticing spicy smell wafting from a tray filled with the food he carried.

She turned and caught her breath at what she saw.

Xavier had let his hair out. It flowed long and luxurious, slightly curly, down his shoulders and back, his face framed by the erotic silken fall. The muscles of his chest strained against the cotton T-shirt, rippling with each of his movements.

His eyes were slightly closed, inhaling the scent of the food, looking like a man lost in the throes of ecstasy. A slow grin spread across his face as he stepped closer, his whole body seeming to glow in the pale light given off by the chandelier.

He looked like hot nights and satin sheets, like sweaty bodies and an active exchange of other bodily fluids. Then he slowly licked his lips and Alena could not help but notice the length and thickness of his tongue.

Which led to thoughts of her thighs wrapped tightly around his head, her hands tangled in that glossy black hair, seeing his eyes peer hungrily up at her from between.

Then he winked.

"Sit. Eat."

She sat. She ate. And she got the hell out of there as soon as manners permitted.

\* \* \* \* \*

*What does my mother know?* Xavier snorted as he gently hung up the phone. It was his habit to talk to his mother when he was disturbed, and there was something about this woman that disturbed him.

He wasn't quite sure what it was, but she made him feel things, and that couldn't be good.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he ran a frustrated hand through his hair before he rose to his feet and began to remove his clothing. A hot shower, a soft bed, and a dreamless night were just the things he needed to correct his perspective on Miss Alena Queen. But she did have a wonderful ass, he acknowledged. Even if it was attached to the smartest mouth he had ever encountered.

He padded naked into the bathroom and started the water flowing from his showerhead. Nice and hot, he decided, as he waited impatiently for a few seconds, then slipped under the steaming water. He groaned as he felt the tension begin to ease in muscles that were tightened by being around her for so many hours!

But as his mind flitted to her, he felt a warm tingling in his body.

"No!" he gasped as he felt the syrupy sweet feeling of lust that began to seize his body.

He looked down in disbelief as his cock lifted its head and looked back.

"Alena?" he breathed, as if in disbelief. His body wanted Alena?

As he watched, a persistent tingling grew in his balls. As they began to churn he knew that he had to do something about this sudden arousal or he would be walking funny the next day. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture the most erotic thing he could. He moaned lightly as his hands began to caress his chest, dropping low over his stomach. There she was. Lying on her back, big brown eyes staring at him. Naked, she arched her back a little, making her breasts with their dark tips sway and bounce.

She licked her lips, leaving behind glistening flesh that would feel so hot and wet and tight on his dick. She grinned as she spread her legs a little, just enough to let him see the trimmed patch of hair that shielded her delicate pussy lips.

Concentrating his gaze there, he could see that they were glistening, dewed for him, just for him. "Yes," he moaned as his hand reached out blindly for the body wash, squeezing a bit in his palm before he worked up a good lather. Concentrating once more on his mental image, he watched as she spread her legs wide, her breath whispery as she called his name.

"Xavier," she whimpered. "I need you so damn badly. Come and fuck me, Xavier! Please! I need it bad."

Who was he to argue? He pictured her pouting in frustration as his hand firmly gripped the base of his now throbbing cock. "Shit," he groaned as a flash of pleasure tore through his body, making his legs tremble as his balls churned.

She was sucking on her finger now, her mouth working furiously as she applied suction and leered at him. She wanted his cock. She wanted it inside her mouth, she wanted to run her tongue along the head and pull it deeply into her throat.

He moaned as he imagined how it would feel, that hot wet suction straining to pull his hot cream right from his churning balls. His hand began to move up the thickly veined flesh, his thumb rubbing over the head as he imagined her teeth nipping there.

But she was not done. Her fingers trailed down her chest to pinch at her nipples. She gasped as her head arched back, a whimper rolling from her open and panting mouth as she tortured her own breasts with this pleasure-pain. Her head snapped back and her big brown eyes bore straight into his.

"Fuck me, *papi*," she breathed. "I need you so bad!"

Her fingers left her swollen nipples and continued downward, through the trimmed curls that shielded her pussy from his view to tease at her swollen lips.

"I want you to suck it for me," she breathed as her fingers parted her glistening folds of flesh and exposed the milky-white head of her clit. "Right here," she moaned as she dropped her thumb to rotate over the slippery hot button.

"Fuck, yeah," he groaned, leaning over as his fist slid rapidly up and down his cock. The time for playing games was over. He needed to bust a nut right now!

"Do me!" his dream girl whispered as her fingers pulled away before two of them traced her weeping opening. "Xavier!"

Then they plunged deep.

"¡Ai, papi!" Alena screamed, her whole body lifting into the touch. Her heels pressed hard into the mattress as her hips arched up, swallowing her rapidly thrusting fingers, her screams of rapture flying from her throat. "Xavier, Xavier, Xavier! Please!"

"Damn," he grunted, sweat shining on his body as he felt his balls begin to lift. His fist was a flying blur, matching Alena's fingers thrust for thrust as she pleased herself, her brown eyes begging him, *him*, for completion.

"I'll give it to you!" he panted as he stroked faster, harder, and stronger. His free hand slammed against the tiled wall for balance as he felt the muscles of his back tighten.

"Yes, Alena! ¡Si, mami!" he growled as he felt his balls rise up at the first climatic pulses at the base of his spine.

"Fuck that pussy!" she gasped as, in his imagination, Alena tossed her head back and screamed.

"Alena!" he gasped as he felt his cock pulse, then stream after stream of white-hot cum was shooting from his cock, coating his hand and splashing against the walls, only to be washed down the drain by the running water.

"Yeah," he sighed as his cock rapidly became too sensitive to handle.

He released his softening flesh as he exhaled deeply, relieved of the tension and the stress that had hounded him since Alena came into his life.

Then his eyes flew open in shock. "Damn it!" he growled as he realized that his dream woman had morphed into that aggravating woman...and that she had led him to one of the most intense climaxes of his life.

Shaking his head at his own sorry self, he continued to wash, cleansing away the sweat that shined his body far easier than he could rid himself of the detailed images of Alena spread hot and horny for him.

Maybe, he thought, tomorrow would be better.

## Chapter Seven

"Can I look?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I said no."

"You are being an ass, Xay."

"My name is Xavier, and is it being an ass to want your model to shut the hell up and sit still?"

"Oh! Can we say frustrated much?"

"¡Bruja!" he snarled and Alena held back a giggle.

She had been posing for Xavier for about a week now, and he was a maddeningly fun and frustrating boss. And she would even consider calling him a friend.

Theirs was an intimacy born of a thousand conversations, of soft contact and an understanding voice. There was also the underlying sexual tension that neither thought to acknowledge for fear of what would happen to their burgeoning friendship.

Holding completely still was a lot harder than she thought, Alena groused to herself, and she often got cramps in odd places. But Xavier swore that his sketching was almost done.

And just in time, too! She was getting tired of holding the same poses for hours on end! If she thought she was getting a cushy job, she was sorely mistaken. Xavier was demanding in his orders, very exact and exacting.

She was still having nightmares about the time he had her holding a huge ball overhead for hours. Every time she twitched, he screamed and started over. That day when he called a halt, she almost cried in thanksgiving.

But today he had promised was the end of the torture and he would get his drawings on the canvases he had prepared the week before. She was anxious to see what form she took in his eyes.

"Hey! I looked that one up! I am not a witch!"

"Better than calling you a..."

"If you state any word that starts with a B and rhymes with witch, I'm going to dot your left eye with my right fist."

Xavier chuckled at her threat, not concerned at all.

He and Alena seemed to have developed a wonderful rapport. They would insult each other the times they were together, neither taking offence at the good-natured insults, and each trying to come up with the more creative burn of the day.

"Would I do that?" he asked as he flipped the page and started yet another drawing.

"If you thought you could get away with it, yes."

"Then you don't know much about me or my people. We respect women, no matter how ornery or aggravating. I would never call you something vulgar. My mother would kill me."

"You a mama's boy, Xavier?"

"My mother makes you look as tame as an overfed pig."

Alena blinked at that, trying to keep her positioning on the bed, lying flat on her back, her head hanging off the bed, her Afro framing her face. What was his family like? He rarely spoke about them.

"And don't you move!" he added, shooting her a nasty glare. Xavier took his art seriously.

He scribbled for a few moments, making a few last minute adjustments and then he nodded, satisfied. His last sketches were complete. Closing the pad, he grinned up at Alena, his whole expression changing into one of contentment.

"Now I get to see?"

"Now you get to sit so I can start my paintings."

"But we've been at it for hours," Alena whined as she slid the rest of her body down off of the bed and flopped to the floor, the oversized T-shirt and shorts she wore flopping around her.

While Xay's shirt all but swallowed her, his shorts fit her in the hips like a glove and his tiny waist was about her size. It was odd having a man whose clothes fit her damn near perfectly, but she wasn't complaining.

She loved the smell of Xavier, a scent that even laundry soap and fabric softeners couldn't kill.

"Which is why we eat and I take you back. You know, I should be charging you gas money."

"I should be charging you gas money," she mimicked, grinning, then pulled herself to her feet.

Xavier gasped at the predatory look on her face, before she managed to hide it behind a glib smile.

But the sight of her lithe body rising from the floor, all grace and exquisite muscle- play, nearly stole his breath.

And the look she was giving him! Was this going to be the end of their benign play-acting?

Her eyes radiated hunger and desire. He could see her nipples harden beneath the thin white T-shirt and for the hundredth time wondered how those tiny fruits would taste. He took one step toward her, mouth open to ask if she felt the way he did, if she was tired of playing games.

But before he could react in any way, there were two sharp knocks on the door and it was flung open.

"Xavier!" a deep voice called out. "You got that flash done, man? Your client called me and he is anxious... Oh! Excuse me! I didn't know you had...company."

Alena quirked one eyebrow as the rather tall man with the rakish blond hair leered at her, the flash of hunger leaving as quickly as it came.

"It's not what you think, Mark," Xavier sighed as he tossed his sketchpad aside and turned to stare at the man. "And I thought it was polite to wait to be invited in before you invade. Stupid American," he sighed, though there was a lot of affection in his voice.

"And what would I think, you having a hot bodacious babe running around in your shirt and nothing else?"

"First of all," Alena broke in at this point, well past the embarrassed stage, "you should know better than to judge a book by its cover. But then again, you are blond."

"Ouch! The kitty has fangs!" he gasped, still staring with interest at her legs below the overlong shirt.

"And the kitty has a brain," Xavier added as Alena geared up for action.

"And this kitty has claws, white boy. Where do you get off coming into this house and casting aspersions on us? So what, you can't get laid! That doesn't mean every woman you see is easy or fair game. You don't even know me, yet you just opened your big fat mouth and called me a whore by your actions." Her eyes narrowed as she slammed her hands on her hips, her glare positively lethal as she stared at the speechless Mark.

"And that assessment of my body, that I'm some bodacious babe, is an insult, you stupid idiot! If you want to compliment me, you give me a straight compliment out of those lips that I assume you use to kiss your mamma. And I would hope you don't think that those paper-thin insults that cross your lips are actually compliments. Try that with your mother and see if she don't slap you silly."

"Damn," Mark gasped, his eyes glowing with admiration. "You sure pick them feisty."

"You bleached-blond idiot!" Alena screamed. "Me and the Latin Lover over there are not an item! I am his model!"

"So is that what they are calling it?" Mark leered back. "You can model for me anytime. My number is--"

"Nine-one-one if you finish that statement!" Alena hissed before turning on her heel and stomping from the room.

"Now, why would you do that?" Xavier asked as he rose to his feet to stare curiously at his friend and business partner. "I have never seen her so riled up before and it is unlike you to insult ladies."

"Just wanting to see the caliber of the chick you're diggin' on, man," Mark laughed as he moved to pick up the sketchpad. "So you boinking her, or what?"

"That was crass." Xavier winced because in that rather crude way, he was thinking about boinking her.

"That was honest. Crass would be saying that you could have picked someone a little less ghetto and a lot more giving, but she seems like a good tumble."

"Mark, that was the dumbest thing that ever crossed your lips. And she is right. Do you kiss your mother with those lips?"

"Yeah, but I don't use tongue. So, is it true what they say about Black women? I could never get a sister interested in me long enough to find out first hand. And you never asked any of them to model before. I have to try that, appeal to the vanity a bit, get them softened up, and then move in for the kill, you dirty dawg!"

Now Xavier was getting pissed. What right did Mark have to come into his home and stir up this hornet's nest of trouble? If this is the way the typical American male spoke to women, no wonder the women were cutting off men's penises and tossing them to the dogs.



He opened his mouth to deliver a sharp retort, but before he could speak, a voice hissed from behind him.

"Like you perverts would interest any sister with good taste." Alena was dressed in the denim shorts and tank top that she'd worn earlier.

Her eyes were narrowed in anger as she stared at the two men, hurt entering her eyes as she looked over at Xavier. She had thought that they were developing some type of friendship and from what had happened before Mark arrived, maybe a bit more. But now it looked to her that he was just another type of playboy, a bit more smooth than the rest, but a real player.

"Alena," Xavier began but was cut off by her icy glare.

"Save it, Xavier. I knew this gig was too good to be true."

She shouldered past the two men, shooting Xavier one last look before she turned away pausing at Mark to whisper in his ear, "And it's true. A sister like me could break your back, little white boy."

The sound of the door slamming was her parting shot as she fumbled for her cell phone, calling Elise for a ride, not wanting to admit it, but knowing that maybe she had been right about Xavier all along.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I told you they were all alike!" Elise shouted, looking down at Alena as she sat on her frilly white bed spread, looking more like a little girl than an adult as she relayed what had happened.

Moving to sit beside her friend, she patted her arm in comfort as she silently decided if this was the time to press her advantage.

"I didn't think Xay would be like that. I mean, he never gave any clue that he would be such a dog!"

"They are all dogs, honey," Elise smiled, pulling Alena around until her head rested on her shoulder.

Feeling the comfort of that familiar embrace, Alena sighed and relaxed against her friend as she had done so many times in the past. "Not all of them?" Alena whined, again visiting that place in her memory when her trust had been shattered.

"All of them. They are all snakes, sneaky snakes. That's why I hang with you and Trichia and Sheryl, and a few other sisters. I avoid the men." She wrapped her arms around her sad friend and ran her fingers up her arms. "They creep like fungus or mold, growing on you until you are forced to acknowledge them, if only to find the correct fungicide."

Alena giggled, the ticklish sensation making her pull away, but it brought a smile to her lips.

"And after you acknowledge them, you can kind of forget they're there. But then when you try to let them know that they are irritating you and breaking you out in rashes, they explode all over you, burning and making you tear at your skin to get them away!"

Alena exploded in giggles, curling into a ball to get away from her friend's grabby tickly fingers.

"You are sick! Stop!" she shrieked, writhing on the bed, unaware of the picture she presented, looking tossed and soulful, her brown eyes sparkling as her cheeks filled with warmth.

Leaning over her, Elise flexed her fingers in a threatening manner.

"Stop" Alena shrieked again, her laughter explosive as her friend loomed over her.

"And then they...spread!" she roared, just before she pounced.

Alena's head whipped back and forth on the bed, her body arching and writhing, her smile almost blinding in its intensity.

Looking up at her best friend, she giggled as she licked her lips, dry from her gasping laughter, and tried to calm down.

Elise stopped suddenly, all amusement draining from her face.

"What?" Alena's concern was instantaneous.

Elise stared at those glistening lips, her breath caught, her eyes wide open. Didn't Alena know what she was doing to her? Staring down at that face that haunted her nights and invaded all her fantasies, Elise felt the courage to finally take a chance. Sucking in a deep breath for courage, she lowered her head.

Alena froze, confusion filling her eyes, and then their lips met.

*I have never felt lips so soft*, Elise thought as her eyes closed and she gave into the warmth spreading through her stomach. Her heart pounded in her chest as her limbs began to quiver. This was her dream, her fantasy, her every desire made flesh, and she was in her arms.

Alena's eyes were spread so wide open she felt the tissues holding them in place strain. What the hell? Shock froze her in place until she felt a tongue touch her lips.

No! "What the hell?" she screamed, breaking the lip-lock, as she placed her palms on Elise's chest and shoved as hard as she could.

Elise blinked, as the spell she was under was forcibly broken as she was shoved off the bed to plop unceremoniously on her butt. What had happened?

"Are you fucking out of your mind?" Alena screamed as she swiped the back of her hand across her mouth, trying to wash away the disturbing feel of her so-called best friend's lips on hers.

A motion that, combined with her embarrassment, fear, and the pain of her breaking heart, served to majorly piss Elise off.

"What? Your little brown boy is good enough to kiss but not me?"

"What are you talking about? I never kissed Xavier and he never put the moves on me when I was down about something."

"Could have fooled me! That wetback got your nose all open. Look at you, jumping hoops for him, acting like some bitch in heat because his friend mouthed off. What, you planning on committing hara-kiri after saying it with flowers, like Ophelia in those damn DWM stories you like to read?"

"What are you talking about, you crazy bitch?" Alena screamed, her mind noting a grain of truth in what Elise was saying, but her anger overriding all else.

"You jonsen over that mother-fucker, Alena! Tossing off your own people for him. If it wasn't for him..."

"What? I would fall into your arms and everything would be peaches and cream? What in the name of all that's sacred would make you believe that I flip-flopped that way, Elise? When have I ever showed an interest in any woman, especially you? When did I tear up my hetero card and invite you to turn me on? What were you thinking?"

"I thought that you would be down on men." Elise rose to her feet, all injured righteous indignation.

"Well, you thought wrong."

"It's that boy."

"Man."

"Whatever. Why you got to be trippin'?"

"Me trippin'? What about you? You come up here, pretending to be my friend, then you're all lips and tongue, attacking a sister."

"You wanted it."

"I never asked for that!"

"You did, talking about how you hated men and shit. What was I supposed to think?"

"You were supposed to think that I was a friend in pain. You were not supposed to take advantage of me. What the hell is wrong with you? I wanted it? That sounds like the rapist's defense to me, counselor. I suggest you get the hell out of my room and go back to your ethics class and take a refresher."

"You dismissin' me?"

"I'll make it clearer. *Get the hell out!*"

Alena turned her back to her best friend and sister and stayed that way until the door slammed behind her. Only then was she able to break down, tears flooding her eyes, her shoulders shaking with racking sobs.

Funny thing was, she only wanted one pair of arms around her to comfort her, and he was with his jerk-off of a friend.

## Chapter Eight

"Why did you have to do that?"

Xavier glared at Mark as the man smiled, bemused, as the hot chick stormed out of his house.

"So, that is the woman you don't care about that you keep talking about, even though you care nothing for her or her feelings?"

"Shut up."

"Well, I guess you were wrong, about caring about her and all."

"Shut up. What you did was crass, man, crass and wrong. How could you do that to any female?"

"Especially one that you claim to care nothing about?"

Xavier glowered.

"I was proving a point."

"That my partner is a *pendejo*?"

"That you care more than you would like to admit. You should have seen yourself, all moony-eyed, hanging on her every word. You got it bad, man. Why don't you just admit it?"

Stubborn, Xavier shook his head. He didn't feel that way about Alena.

"All you talk about is Alena did this, or Alena did that. Half the regulars think that you're married to the girl. If you care for her so much, what is the problem with showing it?"

"I don't..."

"Is it the racial thing? I never thought that you would have a hang up about that."

"I don't."

"Then if it is not the racial thing, why aren't you out there trying to improve black-brown relations?"

"It's complicated, Mark. And you just made it more so. You insulted her and you insulted me. Alena is a sensitive woman who..."

"Who was about to jump your bones when I walked through the door."

"No, she is sensitive and... What?"

"Maybe you were lost in a cloud of your own hormones, but that Alena chick was about to jump your bones and go for a long ride."

"Why do you persist with this, Mark? And why am I listening? I should be pounding your face into the floor!"

"You're listening because you know I'm right. She likes you, Xay-Man! Why do you think she got pissed about a little teasing?"

"That was not a *little* teasing."

"Well, maybe I overdid it a bit, but the point is, she was hurt that you didn't hop up and pound my face, as you say, into the floor. She wants a lover who'll fight for her."

"I am not looking for a lover!" Xavier finally exploded, shouting as he threw his hands up into the air. "I don't need a lover, especially an American with more ass than brains! She is a *bruja*, Mark, a real witch!"

"That you want!"

"*Carajo*, man! I don't want her."

"Honesty, bro!"

"Okay, so she is a sweet person! She has strength and has dealt with a lot, but that does not make her lover material."

"So only Porto Ricans have the lockdown on love?"

"I didn't say that."

"So your major objection is that she's American, or is it because she's black? Sounds like prejudice to me, bro, if those are your major objections. And here I thought the main qualification for a lover is that they love you back with the same intensity that you love them."

"She does not love me."

"So she puts up with your surly attitude and your closed mouth for the goodness of her heart and a paycheck."

"A damn good paycheck."

"And a lot of aggravation. I posed for you before, dude. You are brutal."

"I would never be brutal to..."

"Her. Why are you doing this to both of you? If you want the girl, go and get the girl."

"How can I trust her?"

"I know! She has taken such great advantage of you so far, Xavier. Look at her trying to get more money out of you and stealing your art work and slapping her name on it too! Why that bitch! She's just like the last one!" He briefly paused. "That was the past, bro, not Alena."

"Okay, so she had nothing to do with that crap."

"And yet you're punishing the both of you. Real smart, Xay. I've never met a man as smart as you. Why, you should give lessons in picking up women, you Latin stud you."

"Okay, okay," Xavier sighed as he threw his hands up in the air. "So I screwed up."

"And what are you going to do about that?"

"I'll go and get her. You know the way out."

"Indeed I do," Mark called after the retreating back. "And don't worry about that flash. I'll call the client and..."

"No! I'll take care of that too."

And then he was gone, chasing after the woman who touched something in him after spending so much time alone.

## Chapter Nine

"Alena? You have a visitor!"

Alena dragged herself out of her self-induced cocoon of misery and lumbered across the cold tile floor to the intercom that blinked at her from her door.

Slapping her hand on the answer button, she growled, "Whoever it is can go to hell!"

She was not ready for the melodic voice that purred back. "I am already there."

"Xavier?" Surprise made her voice go up at least three octaves.

"Mami, will you let me in?"

"If you don't, I will," the student working desk security called back, lust in her voice.

"What do you want, Xavier?"

"To speak with you, and not through this blasted box, *chica*."

"Fine," she agreed reluctantly, not wanting her business all over the dorm where gossip spread like wildfire.

She automatically ran her hands through her hair, then she realized what she was doing and what snake she was doing it for.

Alena felt tense, wondering what begging ploy he was going to use to get forgiveness. She sat on the edge of her unmade bed and wondered what else could go wrong. Damn, but she was sinking deeper into misery than she thought possible.

Eventually there was a tap at her door, and she reluctantly rose to let him in.

"What?"

She shouted in his face as soon as the door opened enough for her to give voice to her ire.

"Is that any way to greet your boss?"

"Fuck my boss. The man's a horny asshole who has even bigger jackass friends."

"Well..." A flush raced across Xavier's cheeks as he tried to remember the speech he rehearsed on his way over. Then he decided to take a page from her book. Be aggressive!

"Guess what, *chica*? I am not responsible for what every man in the world does!"

She blinked at having her own tactics thrown back in her face, but she was an expert at this. There was no way he could win!

"Well, I didn't see you," she stabbed a finger in his chest, "making any effort to shut him the hell up!"

"Well, before I could, you came in, mouth blazing and attitude growling, and stormed out. And don't poke me in the chest."

"I poke you where I want to, Mister Mucho Asshole!" She demonstrated by poking him again, even harder. "And I wouldn't have had to say anything if you weren't standing there like some slack-jawed yokel at a whorehouse for the first time!"

"Whorehouse?"

"Are you calling me a whore?"

Now her hands were on her hips and she was getting ready for action.

"I didn't say that!"

"Well, you said something! Don't make me have to get black on your brown ass!"

She was beautiful, her face sparkling with life, her eyes blazing, her chest heaving in that skimpy tank top.

"Don't make me go Latino on your ass," he retorted, tossing a leather bag to the floor, his breath heaving in his chest, his pupils dilating as he watched her lick her lips and lean forward aggressively.

"What?"

And before she could move again, he was jerking her into his arms, his mouth slamming on hers, his tongue forcing its way in.

"Mmm," Alena gasped, her eyes wide as she felt Xavier funnel all of his anger, his frustration into that kiss.

Xavier was kissing her! Her whole body began to tremble as her eyes slowly closed, almost against her will. Xavier was kissing her...and she was kissing him back. Her arms reached around his body, her hands gripping the tight T-shirt he wore, feeling the heat of his body, feeling his muscles tense at the contact.

"Alena," he growled, his hands traveling down her arms to grip her ass. "What are you doing to me?"

But Alena had no verbal answers. Lust quickly fueled her system as her hands reached down to cup his ass, to pull him tighter to her, to feel his growing length against her stomach. "Xavier," she gasped. "Please tell me you have protection."

She was not yelling at him, screaming rape? She was not calling foul? Xavier pulled away from the lush sweetness of her mouth, and carefully examined her face. There was some sadness there, he realized, the trace of tears, a soul-deep hurt.

"What happened?"

Trembling, Alena shook her head and squeezed him tighter.

"Alena?"

"Make me forget, Xavier." Her breathing was rough and her voice needy as she looked up at him with those big brown doe eyes. "Make me forget. Take away the pain."

"Alena..."

And then her hands were in his hair, tunneling through to massage his scalp as she pulled his mouth to hers, wanting to lose herself in the oblivion of his kisses. Xavier understood her needs. Xavier would help her; he would be there for her when she needed him.

Growling low in his chest, he wrapped one arm securely around her back as he dipped down and placed the other behind her knees.

Xavier lifted her as if she were as light as a feather, as if she had no more substance than a dream, and then she was floating. He carried her over to her bed and carefully laid her in the center, his eyes promising wet, sloppy, hot things that would make her scream.

"For now, *mi corazón*," he breathed. "And then we get to the bottom of this."

"Stop teasing!" Alena demanded as she rose up to tug at the bottom of his shirt, lifting it over the washboard abs that trembled underneath, feeling his damp heat sinking into her skin. "And take this off!"

"As my lady wishes," he replied.

With graceful moves, the shirt was slowly lifted then tugged over his head, making the muscles of his arms and chest contract as he lifted the flimsy cotton over his head. He tossed it over his shoulder, not caring where it landed, and ran his hands over his chest, stopping to close his eyes in pleasure as his fingers rubbed over the hardening brown nipples that tightened under her gaze.

His eyes opened to half-mast as he stared at her, the hunger unmistakable. His hands trailed down his stomach to the growing bulge in his tight black jeans. Still gazing at her, his fingers trailed over his growing meat, his thumbs pulling the fabric taut and outlining his erection.

"You want this, *mami*?" he said softly as his tongue trailed over his lips, leaving them shiny and glistening in the bright lights of the room.

Muted, dazed, Alena nodded back, her heated gaze trailing over his body as the walls of her pussy clenched, leaking moisture into her quickly dampening panties.

"I want you."

"How much?" he asked, lowering his body to loom over hers, his hands going to either side of her head, surrounding her with his intense heat and his male scent. "Tell me."

"A lot." Her breathing was labored now, her eyes wide as this god of a man hovered above her.

"Not good enough."

With a wiggle of his hips, he made a place for himself between her legs, spreading them enough so that his hips fit against the growing wetness soaking through her panties and her shorts.

Then pressing his crotch against hers, his head lowered for another brief kiss, before he nuzzled her chin up, his tongue licking at her neck.

"Mmm, Xavier," she sighed, her arms wrapping around his nearly nude body, arching her neck up for a deeper caress.

"You smell so good, *mami*," he moaned before his mouth latched onto the sensitive webbing of skin between her shoulder and neck.

"Xay!" she gasped as she forced more of herself into his mouth, shivering as he applied delicious suction and nipped at her flesh with his teeth.

Her moans filled the room, making her shiver in ecstasy as her clothes became too tight, too confining, an annoyance to be rid of. Her legs slid up his denim-clad thighs, opening herself for more friction as their hips began an indecent grind against each other. She whimpered as her sensitive clit was abraded enough to send her desire spiraling higher, but not enough to bring her the release her body craved.

Shifting his weight to one arm, Xavier let his fingers tug up her tank top, his sensitive artist's hands caressing the trembling skin of her stomach, wondering at the softness of a woman who appeared so tough. "I want to touch you," he begged as his mouth trailed



downward to nip the tops of her breasts. "And when you are begging me for it, I'm going to power-fuck that tight little pussy of yours!"

Alena gasped at the hot dirty words pouring from his mouth, but they turned her on so damn much! Then the top was pulled over her head and her bare breasts were exposed to his hungry gaze. Despite the lack of bra, she remained high and firm, tempting him to revert to his childhood as his mouth began to water.

"My God," he breathed, his fingers reaching out to graze one nipple. "Perfection." His mouth sucked on her and she screamed her pleasure to the four walls!

"Yes, Xavier! Suck them hard!"

And he was, pulling the tender nipple into his mouth, grazing it with his teeth and soothing it with his tongue. As his mouth was working over her, his fingers trailed down the hot flesh of her stomach to the humid heat between her thighs. Sliding back a little, he let his fingers cup her pussy, groaning into her skin at the feel of the wetness that awaited him.

"Yes, Xavier!" she growled, arching up sharply into his caress.

"I love it when you say my name, *mami*," he groaned as he pulled away from one breast and transferred his attention to the other.

Alena's fingers dug into his back, pulling him closer as her head whipped back and forth on her pillow and she bunched her hips hard. "Stop teasing me!"

Xavier pulled back to look at her and almost lost his breath at her beauty. Her eyes were flashing both lust and fire, and her body trembled as she worked her hips against his hand. She was nearing the end of her control.

"Make me," he demanded, before he moved back and his hands jerked at her remaining clothes, tearing them from her body.

Her hands were not idle. As he worked her damp shorts and panties down her legs, her fingers were tearing at the buttons that held his jeans closed. Then one hand was slipping inside to grasp at the soft hardness of his swollen cock.

"Jesus!" he gasped as he froze.

That was what Alena was waiting for!

She pounced. Pushing him back on the bed, she worked his pants down far enough to give her something to play with.

"Now, baby," she purred, "the real fun can begin!"

Before he could move to push her away, her hand was around the base of his cock and her tongue was tracing the veined surface.

"You taste salty, Xay. Salty and sweet."

He grunted, pushing his hips up into her caress. But she pulled back, one hand around his base holding him up at eye level.

"This is a lot to work with, baby," she sighed as she mentally measured his length and girth. He had to be a good ten inches of thick man flesh. It would be a challenge, but the growling, sweating panther beneath her was worth the effort. Dropping her head quickly, she engulfed the mushroom cap of his cock, her tongue stabbing into the slit and tasting his precum as it bubbled to the surface.

"Ahhhh, Alena," Xavier gasped. "Do it! Do it, baby. Suck me!"

But Alena let her tongue lash around the heat, hitting the knot of nerves below the head before her tongue gave kittenish licks to the soft skin that covered his swollen cock. She smiled as he writhed beneath her knowing caresses. She so loved torturing the man!

Then she was licking him from base to tip, licking with the flat of her tongue, making his hips jerk as he cursed in Spanish and English.

His hands moved down to tangle in the thick cottony softness of her hair, not forcing her head down, but gently massaging her scalp, connecting with her, showing his pleasure and appreciation of her actions.

"Good boy," she murmured.

"You don't know how good I can be."

She looked up the tense length of his body into his dark eyes, his midnight voice sending shivers through her. Instead of answering, she dropped her mouth, never breaking eye contact, and swallowed him to the root.

"Alena!" he gasped, amazed that she could, then growled as she swallowed once, the muscles of her throat caressing his throbbing cock.

Slowly she pulled back, letting him slide from her throat in measured lengths as her tongue lapped his flesh. Before he could recover enough to think, she did it again, burying her nose into his pubic hair and moaning in delight at his spicy scent. Again and again she did this until his toes curled and sweat poured from his body.

"Enough!" he finally managed to growl. "When I come it's going to be in your sweet pussy, Alena. Not down that wicked throat!"

She pulled back and arched her eyebrow in challenge before he struck. She soon found herself on her stomach with a hot, horny Latin man hovering above her. There were two thumps as his shoes went flying before she heard the sound of his jeans being pulled from his body. Turning her head, she finally got a chance to see all of that magnificent body in the raw.

There was another tattoo on his leg. Unlike the stalking jaguar on his shoulder, this one was a dangerous looking snake that curled around his calf. She watched the snake's body ripple as he took a step toward the bed, drawing her gaze up.

Up past the powerful thighs that looked to have hours of thrusting power in them, past the wet cock. She nearly came as she thought about it splitting her, filling her to the max. Up past the washboard stomach, the muscled chest and powerful shoulders, up past the wild hair and into the eyes of a sexual master.

She froze as she saw the heated look in his eyes, and shivered as they raked over her naked form.

"You have one hot ass," he purred as he placed one hand on her back to hold her in place.

She felt the heat of him settle over her. The hot wet feel of his cock sliding along her plump ass made them both groan, but his mouth at her shoulder, biting and lapping, made her tilt her head to the side, begging for more. Fire coursed through her veins and her legs began to shake as the feel, smell, the very thought of him, made her pussy soaking wet. She arched her hips up and back, wanting him to slip down enough to caress her dripping opening, but Xavier pulled back.

"Not until you beg!"

Then his tongue was flowing down her back, nipping at her sides, stopping at places that made her shiver and returning to them repeatedly. As he did this, his hips took up a slow steady grind on her ass, the large head of his cock tapping at her opening from behind, but not entering.

"Next time I take you," he purred into her ear over the loud moans and gasps that left her throat, "I am going to take you doggy style, Alena. I am going to lift that sweet ass of yours, hold you in place and ream your pussy from behind. Would you like that?"

Her answer was to try and lift up to make it happen right now, but Xavier held her down as his fingers trailed over her ass, massaging the cheeks before sliding down the crack, brushing against the sensitive rosebud before he grasped his cock and rubbed it deliberately against her now drenched opening.

"Please!" Her voice was faint and filled with longing as she felt herself giving in to the sexual frustration ruling her. "Please, Xavier!"

"Please what?" he asked before he shifted his weight off of her legs, gripped her shoulders and flipped her over onto her back.

Her eyes were wide and hungry, and dilated as she stared into his. Her lips were glistening from the flicks of the little pink tongue that flashed out to caress them, wetting what her panting breaths had dried. Her nipples were hard as diamonds, pointing straight up at him, begging for his attention, and her legs were a wild sprawl that invited him to enter.

"Please," she asked again, her hands slipping over her waist and down through the hair shielding her pussy. Her fingers parted as they caressed the lips, then she growled as she pressed them down, stimulating the sensitive folds for both of their pleasure.

Then, like in his fantasy, her thumb dropped down to caress her clit, her fingers growing coated in her leaking dew. It was too much for him. Pulling her fingers away, he stuck them in his mouth, moaning at the taste of her as his fingers reached for his jeans.

After a few seconds of fumbling, he managed to pull a condom out of the pocket, an extra large condom, dropped her fingers from his mouth and used his teeth to tear the package open.

"You come prepared," Alena recovered enough to whisper, and jerked as he dropped the wet condom on her stomach and dove headfirst between her legs.

"You taste so damn good!" His words were muffled as his tongue traced over her folds of flesh, drinking in her dew, moaning at the first of many screams flowing from her throat. Then his tongue was lapping at her opening, sliding in as far as he could go, flicking her with his tongue.

"Yes! Do me, Xay!" Alena bellowed as her hands tangled in his dark silky curls, tugging and pulling him closer. Her hips arched up as she gyrated against his caress, directing his tongue where she needed the stimulation the most.

His tongue moved from her opening, licking her juices from his lips, and began to gently lave her clit.

"Oh God, Xavier! Please!" she screamed as he felt the first ripple of her impending climax. Her legs began to stiffen and tremble as she felt waves of electricity shoot up her body. Then she froze as her inner walls gave one massive shudder and started rhythmically clenching.

"Oh God, *ohGod ohgodohgodohgod!*" she murmured over and over as the waves of release tore through her.

Chuckling, Xavier rose above her, reaching for the condom, and quickly sliding the pale lubricated sheath over his throbbing erection. "Still want me?" he asked a breathless Alena. Her answer was to lift her legs slowly, spreading them out into a split, before dropping them behind her head.

"Holy shit!" Xavier breathed, before he was on her and his head pressed against her opening.

"Okay?" he asked and her answer was to lurch up, trying to force him in.

Slowly, he began to sink his shaft into a wet hot tightness, a perfection the likes of which he had never experienced before with any other woman.

She was gloving him, sheathing him perfectly! He growled as inch after inch pressed inside her, spreading her, touching her every erogenous point.

"More, yes!" Alena moaned, loving the delicious feeling of being penetrated, of being filled to overflowing. She shuddered as he pressed fully inside, his large balls slapping coolly against her ass in a contrast to all the heat they were generating.

"Ready?" he whispered, his hands reaching out to grasp hold of her ankles as they lay above her head.

She nodded, lost in a sexual daze.

"Then let's ride." He pulled out until only the large head of his cock remained inside, then sharply plunged back in.

"Yes!" Alena screamed as she threw her body against his, eager for more of a pounding. "More!"

Xavier started a low but strong rhythm, gaining speed with each movement as the ridges of his cock caressed her internally, striking nerves and setting them on fire.

Alena became one large sexual organ, her moans blaring as shockwaves of lust shot through her body. Then they were moving together in the age-old dance of thrust and parry, slamming into each other, increasing the pleasure and moving closer to nirvana.

"Xavier!" Alena finally screamed as she felt her body building rapidly again. This climax refused to be denied or held back, and Alena welcomed the culmination of this amazing act.

Faster and faster, Xavier moved, plunging into the heart of her. His back tingled, signaling his own release, his balls churned in their fleshly sac, his blood screaming for a release he could only find within her body. Then he felt it begin, the pressure that signaled his body to let go.

"Alena! *Mami!*" he bellowed as hot seed shot from his body to be caught in the confining latex.

Seeing and hearing his climax rush upon him was enough to drive Alena that extra degree and over the precipice. Her whole body snapped upwards as the screaming climax roared over her senses, bring tears to her eyes and a weightlessness to her body.

"Xay!" she gasped then seemed to go boneless as his body gently covered hers.

Her legs slid down his arms, down the sweaty body until they rested comfortably around his hips, pulling him even closer to her.

"*Beba*, you are amazing," he purred in reply.

A few moments later, Xavier carefully rose from her, holding the condom as he pulled out and looked around for a place to dispose of it. Spying a box of tissues, he carefully removed one and wrapped it before tossing it into a nearby wastepaper basket.

"I'll take that out when I leave," he whispered.

"Leave?" Alena managed, cracking one eye open from where she was drifting in the clouds.

"You trust me..." Xavier backed off as he read something spectacular in her eyes.

"I'm not going to rush you off, Xay, not after that! Especially if I have a shot of getting it again." Her joking words were belied by the serious look in her eyes.

Reaching out for the leather bag he had earlier dropped on the floor, he reached in and pulled out a worn stack of papers in a tattered cover.

"Here!" He thrust the papers at her, his eyes showing an almost fearful wariness as he looked from her to the stack in his hands.

"What's this?"

"My sketches."

Seeing the faint tremble in his arms, Alena smiled and placed her hands on top of the large ones holding almost desperately to the drawings. "Show me later," she murmured, reading the relief mixed in with the slight disappointment in his eyes. "After we rest up and we can view them with a clear head and an open eye."

He smiled at that and thrust the bundle protectively back into the bag. He settled on the bed beside her, wrapping his body around hers and holding her close.

"I..."

"I know," she interrupted as she pulled the comforter over both of them. Soon she was lost in the most wondrous sleep she'd ever had.

## Chapter Ten

It was the absence of the warm presence beside her that woke Alena up from the best sleep she'd had in months. That and the scratching sound. She blinked her eyes several times to clear her vision, then focused in on the blur at the foot of her bed.

"Xavier?"

"Shh. Don't move."

"But..."

"Woman, I am almost done. Can't you lay still for a moment?"

Figuring she could yell at him later, and she was too tired and sore to move anyway, Alena relented and let her body relax.

"Finally. Cooperation!"

She rolled her eyes at that one, languid enough to let his comments go.

"And yes, I know you are itching to tear me a new one, but I need you to lie still."

A very loud indelicate snort was her response.

"It is not easy for you, letting something you perceive as an attack go. I understand that. It is your nature to fight. You are a real fighter, Alena. That is one of the things I find most attractive about you."

Her eyebrow quirked. Conversation, actual conversation from Xavier? This was singular! The man was as closed-mouthed as a clam, except, she blushed to remember, when he was making love. Then he was the most vocal man she had ever met.

She opened her eyes again, just to stare at the naked man at the foot of her bed, sketching on a stack of computer paper he had obviously found on her work desk. A determined look covered his face.

"You know, this is not easy for me - trusting someone, I mean. It has taken me quite a while to even feel comfortable about having a model again."

*Why?* Her eyes easily asked that question as she stared at him, watching his face as his jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed.

"It was a model who started a lot of...you would call it bullshit."

She opened her mouth to begin the barrage of questions, but he growled out again, "Don't move! *Caramba*, woman! You are difficult!"

She was difficult? She didn't have loud-mouthed friends who spoke before they thought, or a problem opening her mouth to say anything more meaningful than insults. Well, maybe she had the insult problem, but she was a lot less guarded than him!

"As I was saying before I was interrupted," he continued as she snorted at his words, "a model started all my troubles and a few good reporters escalated what was a simple fraud into the scandal of the art world. You may not have realized, as you were occupied about ten years ago, but that damn female tore my life apart."

"What...?"

"Did I ask you to speak? Lay down and be the beautiful lump that you are!"

She let that one go because he tacked on beautiful, but her feathers began to ruffle. It was in the subtle tightening of her muscles and in the agitation in her fingers.

"As I was saying, she was an art major who decided that it was a great idea to take credit for what I had done. Stupid I know, but she thought that she could get one over on the dumb wetback who barely spoke the language. She waited until I had three successful art shows, international acclaim, and offers from private dealers, before she went public."

Alena rolled her eyes, but held her tongue. There had to be more to the story.

"Well, she expected me to roll over and give her what she wanted to shut her up, but I basically ignored her and went on with my work. I got a new model and started preparing for the next show. I was a bit too naïve, not taking her threats seriously."

"What...?"

"Hush! Don't move! I am getting to that. She took her sob story to the local papers, which, believe it or not, are always looking for a good scandal, especially when the target is so obviously un-American. They raised a few questions and before I knew it, I had private investigators checking out my family, going through my finances, taking over my life. My shows were being canceled and those private dealers who had wanted a piece of such a passionate new young artist disappeared into the woodwork."

Wow, she thought as her eyes widened.

"Do you know how hard it is to get work in this country when everyone thinks you are a fraud? Do you know how much money you make per painting, how much an agent charges, or how quickly they can drop you because of some clause in a contract? Well, I went from having a healthy bank account, sending money home to my family on a regular basis, having a secure future, to having nothing but my bike, my house, and my beat-up old car. So I did the only thing I could do. I ran home to Porto Rico and my Mama with my tail between my legs and she sent me right back here. She told me, after kicking my ass, to fight and not to give in to tyranny. My mama has a way with words."

He eased up off of his sketching, cocked his eyes and critically viewed it for a moment, and just when she thought she was going to get the okay to move, he started to sketch again.

She huffed, but a warning look from him settled her into her place again.

"So I came back here and got a job as a tattoo artist. I know it is not as glamorous as attending gallery openings in my tux, but I had bills and a plan and I needed more capital. So I went to Mark and he immediately gave me a spot to work and apprenticed me for a year or so. And during that year, I managed to find a great attorney who decided to take my case for a minimal fee and started digging."

"All through this thing, not one iota of proof was produced against me. That made my lawyer suspicious, so he got the papers and demanded a court trial."

He added a few more sketch lines and then began to rub with his fingers, doing something that took his total control for a moment.

"Well, she had managed to get a slide, I don't know how, probably when I was preparing to paint her, but she got one and she reproduced one of my earlier works. Her mommy and daddy had enough clout to pull a few professors who swore that she had shown them that

painting when she was admitted to university. Problem was, she did not pick the right painting."

"How...?"

"Hush, woman! I am getting to that. She picked a painting that I used two years before her pocket professors swore she painted that picture. It was the painting I used as part of my portfolio to get into Bridgeview. If the *puta* had bothered to research, she would have seen that the piece was no good to her. But my lawyer just gave her enough rope to hang herself then presented the copies of my portfolio, including the dates."

"She, the professors that vouched for her, the reporters, they all wound up looking like fools, and I never even had to take the stand."

"So what happened?"

Xavier shot her a look, but allowed her to move as he went back to his shading.

"I won an exorbitant amount of cash from the little witch, bought half of Mark's business, and vowed never to have another showing again. The collectors came calling, the critics claimed to know that my vibrant talent was mine and mine alone, vowed that they never believed her lies. But I had had enough. Just can't trust you *Americanos*, not when it comes to something important."

"Excuse me?"

"She did try to save face by claiming to be pregnant with my child, but I ignored that too. My lawyer threatened another suit, and her lies mysteriously disappeared."

"May I speak now?"

"Yes."

"Good. Get over it."

Of all the things he expected her to say, that was not it. "Get over it?"

"Well, duh! Get over it and yourself, man. Get a life!"

"You have no idea what I went through!"

"And it must have been tough, but look at what happened. You are a partner in a successful business, you have honed your art if what I saw was any example of what you have been doing lately, and most importantly, you retained your dignity. So yes, get over it!"

That said, she rose to her feet in all her naked glory, and padded across the room for her robe.

"I don't believe you!"

"I don't believe you! Look at you, mister big bad artist! Hating Americans when your jackass of a partner is American and guess what? The woman you just screwed into the mattress is American! I guess we are good enough to screw and to use to get ahead, but not good enough to trust."

"I didn't say that!"

"Yes, you did! Not in so many words, but your actions prove it. You don't trust me!"

"I didn't say that!"

"Well, you trust me enough to split my legs like a wishbone and make a wish! I guess trust in other situations doesn't matter."

"I do not think you would do these things, Alena."



"But I'm American!"

"You are different!"

"And you are prejudiced!"

"I am not!"

She tied her robe in agitated jerks before she looked up into his shocked expression.

"Well, you are something close to it. Prejudice doesn't have to be racial, Slim. It can be religious, ethnic, or political. In your case, you got a case of blue balls over all Americans because of what one bitch did to you."

"And the reporters...?"

"Have you ever seen something reported on the evening news that took place around black folk?" At his nod, she continued. "And which black folk do they pick, Xavier? The most uneducated, poor, non-literate, ebonic blacks they can find! Then the whole world gets this picture of the black race! You know I actually had someone tell me that I didn't act black? How do you act black? Black is what I am! So I don't act like an American. An American is what I am, Xavier. How am I supposed to act?"

Xavier sighed and tossed his makeshift pad of paper to the bed and rose to his feet.

"Your words, they make sense, *beba*. I never looked at it from that perspective."

Anything Alena would have added to the acknowledgement of her correctness was lost as she got a good view of his naked body.

He was sitting there naked and sketching her! His muscular smooth body was sitting there in an unclothed state, and she got out of the bed to put on a damn robe!

Only one thing to do. The robe slithered to her ankles as she reached out and grabbed two good fistfuls of his hair and pulled him in for a kiss.

"I was right," she murmured before she let her tongue lave along his lips.

"Maybe," he conceded as he stepped in closer, dragging her naked body close to his, loving the feel of her bare breasts pressed against his hard chest. She was so soft in all the right places.

"Maybe you were wrong."

"Maybe."

"Then what do I get as a reward for showing you the error of your ways?"

"For giving me something to think about."

"For both."

His lazy smile was filled with a lustful heat.

Then she was flying through the air, landing on her stomach. Giggling, she looked over her shoulder, her eyes glinting in delight. "So, we're going to get rough?"

"You like it rough, *mami*," he purred as he buried his hands in her hair, pulling her head back as he bent over her, exposing her neck to his teasing kisses.

"You're so sure of yourself?"

"You're a big girl, *beba*," he growled as one hand trailed down over her cheek, caressing her neck then dipping lower to cup one swinging breast.

"What am I supposed to say to that?"

He bent low over her back, letting his heat, the smell of him, the aura of barely leashed sexuality that surrounded him, wrap around her.

She shivered and a low moan escaped her throat as she closed her eyes and inhaled, breathing him in.

"When I call you *mami*," he whispered, his warm breath sending tingles down her spine, "you are supposed to call me *papi*."

Uncontrollably, she arched up into his body, trembling at the feel of his hard cock against the quivering flesh of her ass.

"You want me," he whispered as his hands left her breast to travel low over her stomach and into the thin bush of hair that protected her folds.

She moaned and tossed her head back as her arms turned to rubber. She braced her elbows on the bed and lifted her ass high, wanting more of the delicious contact with Xavier.

"You want this?" he asked again as his fingers began to circle her clit, feeling her juices begin to flow.

"Mmm," she purred in answer, her hips following his motion and wanting more.

His low chuckle made the breath leave her body as she struggled to catch her breath.

"Just fuck me, brown-boy," she growled, ignoring his chuckle as he began to grind against her ass.

Xavier sucked in his breath at her actions, losing a bit more of control as he sank one thick finger into her wet pussy.

"¡Dios mio!" he growled then pulled back enough to let his tongue travel over the salty skin of her back.

"Xavier," she gasped, slamming her body back, wordlessly begging for more penetration. "You are... I can't!"

"You can and you will," he answered before he laid a small bite on of the flesh of her right cheek.

Alena gasped at the bite, but moaned as his tongue laved the small pain away. Besides, his fingers were now pressing deeper into her, a second then a third joining the first and just barely touching her internal sweet spot.

His other hand trailed down her back and around to caress the skin he had nipped, kneading her gently, growling at the soft resilient flesh.

"You have one great ass," he purred. "But I think I like what is between your thighs better."

He thrust his fingers deep inside her, drawing screams and gasps. God, he loved seeing her like this, submissive and begging beneath him. Her body was writhing and trembling. She was thrusting her hips up and back, trying to get more pleasure, dependent on him for the ecstasy her body was searching for.

"Xavier!" she screamed. "Now!"

His hand left off caressing her ass to grip his hard cock and give it a few pumps. The head was glistening and wet with his need, the whole length throbbing.

With her tight wetness around his fingers and his hand stimulating his own cock, Xavier threw back his head and growled. He was ready.

Releasing his hard flesh, he reached for his bag and another condom. Within seconds, he tore the package open and had his length sheathed within the cool confining latex.

"Remember, baby," he breathed as he bent over her again. "When I say *mami*, you say..."

He trailed off as he positioned the swollen head against her wet pussy, removing his fingers to grip her waist tightly. Moaning, he rubbed the head against her clit, feeling her jump and shudder.

"Please," she whispered, her whole body shaking uncontrollably. There was a storm building inside her, and it was trying its best to rage free. Xavier, his hot hard cock, his musky smell, the unique taste of his salty skin, it was all feeding the raging tempest within her. She wanted it to break free, she wanted to soar with the wild winds and feel the electricity pulse within her veins. "Please, Xavier!"

"*Mami!*"

Hearing what he wanted to hear, her total submission to him, Xavier braced himself and slammed his full length deep within her.

"*Papi*," she wailed as fire exploded through her body.

Xavier started an immediate hard rhythm, pulling her back into his every thrust. He paused for one second, adjusted his position, then slammed back inside, striking her sweet spot with unerring accuracy.

"*Papi!*" Alena wailed again, throwing herself back, striving to increase his rhythm, wanting her satisfaction now.

Sweat glistened on both their bodies as they moved faster and faster, his blood pounding in his head, her screams filling the air.

A loud stream of Spanish erupted from Xavier's throat. Calling out the names of several Saints as his pleasure rose and the passion began to take over, he lost himself to ecstasy.

"Fuck me!" Alena screamed as she felt her muscles tense and tighten. It was coming! It was coming! She was going to... "*Papi! Xavier!*" she bellowed and her muscles clamped around his swollen flesh, milking it with intensity as shards of pleasure spiked her nerves. "Yes, Xavier! I'm there! I'm coming!"

The sight of his Alena going wild beneath him, the feel of her muscles strangling him, the words she was screaming, were too much for his control.

He felt his cock swell even larger, felt the seed churn in his balls, felt his hips slam down and lock.

Then his hot cream was exploding from his body in never-ending spurts. The feel of his hot cum filling the sheath, combined with the clenching muscles of her pussy turned his spine to water.

"Alena!" he gasped as his hips began to instinctively drive his cock deeper. Then he collapsed on top of her, remembering to roll to the side at the last minute.

"Alena, *mami*," he breathed, pulling out of her then pulling her body close to his.

"Mmm, *papi*," she sighed.

Her first reward had left her screaming, causing a raucous round of clapping and cat calls from anyone walking down the hall past her door.

*Xavier*

## Chapter Eleven

Her third gift, a tattoo, paled in importance to his previous gift.

Her second was that Xavier let her look through his personal sketchpad full of a few ideas.

"No one, and I mean no one, touches my pads," he solemnly informed her. So she reverently took the pads and placed them back in his hands. That he asked her to was enough for her. Then she tried to fix her mind on the idea of a tattoo. Not that she was scared or anything, but they did those things with needles!

"It won't hurt!" Xavier soothed as they climbed off his bike at the front door to his shop. "Not much, anyway."

"You didn't say that before!" Alena took a step back, but a strong arm around her waist prevented her from further retreat.

"What? Did you think it was going to be orgasmic? They do use needles."

"They do use needles," she mimicked in her worst whiney voice. Still complaining, she let Xavier lead her into the converted house. Wincing, she slowly began to smile as she saw the huge television in what had to be the waiting room. Football was on. Go Ravens!

The next thing she noticed was the scent of the place. Underneath the smell of potpourri, there was the hospital antiseptic scent that told of extensive cleaning and sanitizing. On the walls were page after page of bright colorful pictures.

"Flashes."

"Huh?"

"Those pictures are flashes."

She didn't even know that she had spoken out loud, but at least she had the name of the things. Walking over to the nearest wall, she smiled as she saw a detailed drawing of a small fairy sitting on a tiger lily.

"We have over a thousand, if you are looking for something special, or we can draw something up for a small extra fee."

She recognized that voice. Joy? Not! It was Mark.

"Hello, Mark," she fairly hissed, her eyes narrowing as all the things he said came flashing back to her.

"If it isn't the bodacious Alena Queen. Charmed, Milady! And you grace us with your royal presence."

"Knock it off, blondie." Xavier growled as he wrapped his arm protectively around Alena. "You made your point earlier."

"Oh! Good! Then you got laid! Everyone, twenty percent off all ink!" he crowed into the empty room.

"You are lucky that no one is here or you would have to honor that," Xavier sighed, as he shook his head at his friend. The man was worthless! "And just because you ain't getting any, there's no need to advertise that fact, white boy."

Mark's laughter was contagious as he examined the two.

"So, you two work everything out, and no, I don't mean in the sexual sense?"

"We are working on it," Xavier replied as he unwrapped himself from around Alena and moved towards his workroom, Alena following.

"Hey," Mark called out, catching her arm as Xavier disappeared behind a door.

"You had better have a good reason for touching me." Alena's eyes were narrowed, her muscles bunching as she prepared to fight for her freedom. She couldn't stand strange men grabbing her person.

"I do," Mark assured her as he quickly removed his hand and she turned to face him. "I want to apologize."

That piqued her interest. "I'm listening."

"All that shit...stuff I said before? I didn't mean any of it."

"So you said it because it's a great way to pick up chicks?"

"Hmm, I never tried that before! Mainly because my wife would bang her foot up my ass." He grinned at the thought.

Maybe he was into the kinky shit!

"But," he continued. "I said what I said for the Ice Man in there."

"Ice Man?"

"My pet name for your boyfriend. Never met anyone so cool under fire. Unfortunately, the fire he was tempered in kind of singed his good parts a bit. He naturally has an unforgiving nature and what that slut did to him just made it all worse."

"And that pertains to me how?" Alena arched her eyebrow and stared at the man, waiting for him to tell her what she didn't already know.

"You are the first woman who has... I don't know. You touched him. There is something about you that appeals to him like no other woman has. I mean, he's had maybe two relationships after that court thing and each one passed so fast I hardly got to know the girl's name, rank, and social security number. That was a joke," he added when he saw her eyes narrow.

"I understand you have a warped sense of humor, but again, what does all this have to do with me?"

"Thank you for noticing my sense of humor. It's refined, you know!" he added and relaxed a bit when he saw a grin tug at her lips.

"Like crude oil is refined so that you can lube up squeaky machine parts?"

"Something like that," he laughed. "And I just wanted to let you know that you must be something special. I have never seen Xavier worked up like this over any woman. And I said all of that to get him to admit how he felt, Alena. He is not one to admit his emotions openly, and I wanted him to remember that he thought you were worth fighting for. I hope you feel the same way."

"I think he's worth it, Mark," Alena sighed. "I feel in my heart he's worth the fight. But the question is, does he think I'm worth fighting for?"

"He does, Alena," Mark insisted as he took a step forward and gently clasped her hand in his. "He does. He just needs to dump that pigheadedness of his and not hide behind it. He may not look it, but he spooks real easy."

"Alena? Are you coming?" Xavier called from his room, impatience sounding in his voice.

"Hold you horses, *mi amigo*!" Alena hollered back, rolling her eyes at his highhandedness. "And give me one good reason to accept your apology, Mark. Your heart may have been in the right place, but your foot was in your mouth, deep enough to be adjacent to the foot I was about to shove up your ass."

"Um, you are getting a tattoo today?" he asked, quirking his eyebrows and struggling to erase the image of her words from his mind. That indeed sounded painful.

"I was planning on it. Though I know I gave in to peer pressure to get it, I always wanted one."

"I think this is worth an apology," he said as he released her hand to dig into a black leather hip pouch he wore around his waist. He handed her a small bottle of gel.

"Poppers or something to make me forget the pain? Mark, you shouldn't have!" Her sarcasm was clearly evident as she held the bottle up to the light and stared at the pale green liquid.

"Well, it will help you forget the pain, but it's not a drug. You are looking at a topical anesthetic, guaranteed to lessen the pain of tattooing with no adverse effects to the mind, body, or ink."

Her eyes widened in amazement.

"We use it in cosmetic tattooing when we have to do large areas. So is that worth accepting my apologies?"

"Honey, it's worth me thinking about bearing your young! But you are married and I am off the market, and it would be a match made in hell!"

"Why you always gotta be putting the white man down!" Mark sighed sadly, as he tried to give her big puppy-dog eyes.

Alena's laughter was loud and cheerful as she shook her head at the posturing man.

"I am thinking that your wife has her hands full!" Alena giggled as she gripped the bottle and turned away. "And your apology is accepted on probationary terms. You open your mouth again and start spouting garbage, and I'm corking it with my fist."

"Yes, ma'am!" He saluted and clicked his heels as he turned and headed for the office, getting his schedule in order for the day.

Alena walked towards Xavier's work area, limbs shaking a bit as she tried to hide her fear.

Well, nervousness was maybe a better word. She had a thing against needles on principle, and she hated pain. But she was determined to get this tattoo. Hoping that Mark hadn't exaggerated about the pain-numbing properties of the gel in the bottle, Alena straightened her shoulders and marched into the room, ready to pick out her flash and ready to take the pain that would go along with the birth of her choice of tattoo. Maybe a phoenix being reborn from the ashes. She didn't know why that image struck a cord in her, but the idea spoke to her. Yeah, maybe a phoenix would be perfect.

*Xavier*



## Chapter Twelve

"I'll call you tomorrow, as soon as the swelling goes down," Alena groused as she wrapped her arms around Xavier's neck, leaning into his strength and warmth, absorbing both, as they stood in the entrance to the dormitory.

"It didn't hurt much," Xavier whispered, his lips ghosting over hers, dropping small chaste kisses that tingled as they traveled over her face.

"You were not the one under the needles."

"It was one needle," he corrected, hugging her tighter. "And it is barely three inches long. You can complain when we start getting into tattoos that run under your arms and across your back."

"Who said anything about getting another one?" she asked archly, shivering at the memory of those burning eyes staring at her body, caressing her skin, setting her nerves on fire.

"People usually fall into two classes, the ones that keep getting inked and the ones who get one and only one for the rest of their lives."

"I think I fall in the one and only one category."

Xavier snickered and pulled her tighter into his arms, relishing the feel of her softness that could not be denied, even buried under the barrier of her clothes. "We will see."

"There is nothing to see, man! One is enough."

"You didn't feel it." His hands were slowly creeping down her back to let his fingers begin making caressing circles on her full cheeks, slipping into her back pockets and pulling her tight against his growing erection.

"Okay, so Mark's gel worked, but I felt sorry for those other people who got...inked today."

"Inked is an acceptable term," he chuckled. "And those people were very satisfied with what they had."

"And no one minded me watching."

"People who get tattoos generally are the most non-judgmental people I've ever met."

"I noticed. And I also noticed that you didn't have any trouble inking Americans and taking their money."

"Good business."

"They trusted you to stick needles into their body, and you trusted them to hold still and not ruin your creations."

"I see what you are attempting and..."

"And just think about it, Xavier. All of us Americans can't be so contemptible. You are still living here, you know."

"*Hummf*," he grunted, refusing to answer.

"Just think about it, okay?" she giggled, pulling his head down to take his mouth in a hungry kiss.

Her tongue invaded his mouth, marveling that he still tasted like fruity candy and the underlying essence of Xavier.

"Mmm." Her moaning response to him was extremely loud and arousing at the same time. She felt her body tighten as she pressed against him, feeling the rising passion flow in a burning path up her back and neck, settling in to remind her all that he was capable of delivering to her body.

Pulling away from the kiss reluctantly, Xavier sighed as he let his fingers caress her ass one last time before he stepped away.

"Tomorrow," he moaned. "It is a weekend and you are going to spend some time with me."

"A big bad American like me?"

"The erotic, exotic, beautiful black woman, you."

"And how can I turn down such a wonderful invitation, Xavier? You are so poetic."

He peered at her in the dim light.

"What?"

"Was that sarcasm or were you sincere?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

"Good guess."

With one last smoldering look, Alena turned and made her way through the double glass doors that led to her dorm room.

She had originally not planned on spending so much time with Xavier this weekend, but she had to take time to pick out her phoenix, and then get her nerves together to sit on the dentist's chair and let Xavier wash, shave, and apply the blue tracing on her flash.

It took another few minutes to get her nerves together to let him start the process. Then there was the numbed stinging as he applied the thick black outline to her left shoulder. The coloring process took a lot longer, but she was pleased with the results.

Wincing at the raw sunburn-like feel of the new tattoo, Alena waved at the woman behind the security desk and made her way to her floor. "I told you muthas," she sang as she fitted her key in the lock. "I ain't never scared."

"Well maybe you should be."

Alena jumped at the sound of the voice and turned to see a seething Elise behind her.

"Scared that my best friend might try to jump my bones?" she asked, then swung her door open, not really in the mood to have her good vibes blown to hell by the woman.

"That was uncalled for." Elise caught the door as it swung closed, and followed Alena into the room.

"So were your actions, but that didn't stop you."

"And you ran right into the arms of the man."

"No, I ran straight into the arms of *a* man, Elise. Something you apparently didn't expect me to do."

"And after he did what you told me. You are pitiful."

"No, he actually came running to me, but that is not what is pitiful. What is pitiful is having someone make moves on you without your permission and then get pissed when they are rebuffed."

"And I bet you were all ears."

"Yes, out of respect for our friendship, I agreed to listen to what he had to say."

"And you won't offer me the same consideration?"

Sighing, Alena tossed her bag to her bed and sat beside it.

"I'm all ears."

"Well, I just wanted you to know that what I did was hard for me."

"For me, too."

"I can imagine." They shared a smile, their old camaraderie coming to the surface before remembered events slowly killed the amusement. "But I was sincere in wanting you, Alena."

"Why? Because suddenly I had someone interested in me and it looked like he was on the up and up?"

"No. I've always wanted you, Alena."

"And you chose to let the feeling be known by forcing your tongue down my throat?"

"Well, I was afraid."

"Afraid that I would reject you? Elise, you know better than that. I may not return your feelings, but you are my sister. I love you too much for that. It may not be the love you want, but it is almost as strong."

Elise looked angry for a moment, before a calculating light lit her brown eyes.

"Not strong enough. You ran right to that man and apparently forgot all about me."

"Now, what are you trying to pull, girl? I don't like your tone when you mention the man I'm seeing."

"More than seeing. I can smell him and sex in here like it was sprayed around like perfume. You trying to rub my face in it or what? Is this your way of getting back at me? Sleeping with the first pale man who acted like he wanted you?"

"Excuse me, miss, but who asked you to come into my room in the first place? Who asked you to get all up in my business and try to dictate the terms of my existence?"

"You did! When you came crying on my shoulder about that boy."

"That man! And all I needed from you was an ear to listen and a shoulder for support! I never asked for a tongue bath or the come-on, so check yourself!"

"Why him?"

Elise stood there, face pinched in anger, fists clenched tightly, and demanded answers.

"Of all the guys you could have picked, why him? If not me, why not a brother? What are you going to do when his case of jungle fever fades and you are left with a broken heart?"

"I don't believe you!" Alena rose to her feet, her face twisted in anger and pity as she stared at the woman she thought she knew. "How can you ask me something like that? Why Xavier? Because he is a kind, compassionate man who understands loss and knows how to deal with it."

"He will never understand you, he will never understand what it is to be black, to be pushed around and talked about, and treated like a second-class citizen because of your color! He will never understand!"

That gave Alena a pause. How could he understand? It was not easy being black, let alone a black female, and that was something he would never understand, that no man would understand. But...

"He understands enough, Elise, especially after dealing with you."

"I never--"

"Gave him a chance. You never tried to see things from his point of view. How do you know what he understands and what he doesn't? Do you have to be the one getting shot in the head to understand that it hurts? Do you have to be the one overdosing to know that it isn't pleasant? Do you have to be the victim of a rape to understand it's wrong?"

"If you are saying that I--"

"All I am saying is that you need to watch what you say and think before you speak, Elise. What kind of human being judges someone based on the color of their skin?"

Then Alena grabbed Elise's arm and forcibly turned her to face the mirror.

"That is the person who preaches justice and law for everyone, and yet can't get her mind out of the civil rights march of the sixties."

"You don't understand!"

Elise stared at her face, eyes red-rimmed and trembling. She stared and she tried to understand why Alena didn't want her.

"I understand that you are a hypocrite! Keep lying to yourself, girl. Then maybe one day you might actually believe that bullshit yang you're spouting. This has nothing to do with Xavier. This has nothing to do with any other man. This has to do with you and me. Rather, the lack of you and me, 'cause I don't swing that way and it ain't gonna happen."

"If it wasn't for him--"

"I would still be busting my ass making Thug Passions for the assholes in that titty bar. I would still be overworked, underpaid, and struggling to make all my summer courses and still trying to find the funds to start the fall."

"If it's money--"

"I am not a 'ho or a gold-digger, Elise! I never take what I don't earn. I work hard for Xavier, and I get paid well. But that has nothing to do with understanding and friendship."

"He will never understand you."

"Maybe, but know this. He understands that the way to my heart is not through anger, threats, and physical assaults."

Elise sucked in a deep breath at that, and then turned to face the woman she loved.

"So that's it? That's the way it's going to be?"

"So that's the way it's got to be."

"And you tossed me over for a man."

That was the straw that broke the camel's back, as far as Alena was concerned.

"No, you selfish bitch!" she shouted, losing her patience with people who refused to see the truth when it was right in front of their eyes. "There never was, and never will be, a you and

me! What drugs are you on, Elise? I am not attracted to you in any way, shape, or form! You are not what I go to sleep dreaming about at night! You are not the one that fills me with fantasies! And you are damn sure not going to be the one to warm my bed at night! Get your shit together! We will never be together like you want, and I am seriously doubting our friendship right now!"

"You don't mean that?"

"Better believe it, bitch! Now get the fuck out of my room! I don't need to see your face for a good long time!"

"You can't mean that!" Tears rolled down Elise's face as her friend's words blossomed in her mind. Then cold anger took over. "You will be sorry! When he tosses you out on your fat black ass, don't come crawling to me! I won't be there!"

"Who asked you to be?" Alena screamed back and walked over to the door, wrenching it open, and pointed to the hall. "Leave!"

"You'll regret this!" Elise growled as she left.

"Not any more than I already do," Alena snarled as she slammed the door shut, sounding the death-knell on their friendship.

## Chapter Thirteen

Xavier rolled over in his bed, Alena's words flowing through his mind. The knowledge that she was dropping, as she would put it, made sense though it was at odds with what he'd believed for so long.

Maybe it was stubbornness that prevented him from changing his thinking. Maybe it was refusal to believe that she could be right. Maybe there was a grain of truth to what she said. Or more than a grain, actually.

He knew he was guilty of painting everyone with the same brush, so to speak, but he had good reason. The press, the lawyers, his so-called friends who deserted him at the first hint of scandal...

It was hard to trust again. More than that, it was dangerous. But there was something about Alena. She made him want to believe. And that could be more dangerous where his heart was concerned.

Sighing, he punched at his pillow before rolling over onto his back, one hand absently stroking his chest while the other rested behind his head.

Alena.

He closed his eyes only to be plagued by images of her smile, her laugh, her face twisted up in passion. There was so much about Alena to love.

He remembered the sounds she made while twisting beneath him in surrender, the sharp gasps that escaped her throat as her legs spread wider in an effort to get him closer to her aching heat. Then when she peaked, her eyes seemed to grow even wider, her breath caught, her lips parted in a silent scream as her nails dug deeply into his back.

He thought of the murmuring sounds she made as she rode out the waves of her climax before her body went limp and unresisting in his arms.

Alena was special. No wonder he loved her so much. He closed his eyes as fingers trailed below the sheet that was tented by his swollen cock as he replayed all that was Alena in his mind.

His other hand slipped beneath the thin covering to wrap around the thick base. He groaned as he knocked the sheet away and fisted his erection in a tight grip.

Alena was his, he decided as he began to move his fist up and down, slowly, drinking in the sharp friction that produced such pleasure. His hips arched up and sweat began to sheen over his body.

For as long as he wanted her, she would be his.

He closed his eyes as dribbles of precum slid down his length, easing some of the friction and easing his gliding fist. His low moans filled his room as he closed his eyes and pressed his head deeper into the pillows.

Alena was so sweet, her taste so addictive, her passion so contagious.

His fist pumped faster as he recalled the sight of her soft folds, all deep pinks and gold, and glistening with the moisture of her own dew.

Her clit was tiny, milky white, and utterly responsive to his every caress, his every lick and kiss.

Wet, she got so wet for him. Her thighs wrapped around his waist perfectly. And when she was on her hands and knees begging him to fuck her, her ass quivered so delightfully, it became the perfect cushion for pushin'.

"Alena," he moaned, as his fist began to tighten and his free hand dropped to tug at his balls to give just enough pain to heighten the pleasure.

*Alena was his*, he thought as his hips began to lift into his thrusts, fucking his hand as he would his woman. Alena was just about perfect and his body hungered for her. His arms began to tremble as he kept up the harsh rhythm, twisting his wrist as he moved to give more stimulation as his blood raced in his veins.

He could picture her, eyes closed, mouth open as she screamed out his name.

"Xavier, *papi*! Fuck me!" Her voice echoed through his mind as he suddenly lost all control.

"Yes, Alena," he gasped as he felt the first wave of seed travel up his shaft and explode from the head of his cock.

"Hmm, so good," he moaned as shot after shot coated his stomach and his still pumping fist.

Slowly, he eased off his motions, letting the pleasure settle deep into his mind as his body began to relax against his tangled sheets.

Only Alena did this to him, and he had no idea why.

But, he decided as he reached out for a tissue from his night table, he would find out.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Alena whistled as she made her way to the cafeteria. Sunday was going to be a good day, she decided. It was time to lay the past to rest and start over.

She was going to spend the morning with Xavier, after she got herself some breakfast and tried her best to put the events of the past evening behind her.

In deference to the hot August sun, she wore only a mid-thigh length tank dress of thin gauzy material in a nice natural shade. It was loose, cool, and comfortable. Around her forehead rested a headband of tan and white shells and beads, holding back her wild Afro that so represented the essential Alena.

Around her waist hung a men's white dress shirt, the perfect cover-up if the air conditioning in the mess hall was a bit on the high side. On her feet were her stacked platform wedge sandals, a throwback from the sixties, but a pair of shoes that made her legs look yards long and sleek as hell.

Earrings of old beaten gold coins hung at her ears, adding a bright splash of color to her natural outfit. She was dressed for comfort rather than sex, she thought as she slung her huge straw bag over her shoulder. Inside were all the essentials a woman on the prowl needed to prowl successfully.

She grinned as she reached up and touched the small tattoo on her shoulder. It was a bit itchy, but she decided that meant it was healing. She had rubbed lotion into the tattoo this morning and again admired the bright colors against her skin.

Inhaling deeply, she looked around at the summer flowers in bloom on the campus grounds. Today was a good day to be alive, to be free, to start over.

And she had a feeling that Xavier would open up a little more, that he would trust a little more, that he would give her a reason to keep fighting for what they had. Was it a relationship? Was it infatuation? Was it a passing thing that could quickly fade?

No. What she was feeling was real. What he expressed to her was real. They were working on something much more meaningful than a quick lay or a summer fling. She had the feeling this was going to be big.

Smiling as all these positive thoughts flowed through her head, she crossed the parking lot, walking behind the huge library on the short path to the mess. She had no sooner moved a few feet ahead when the first voice caught her attention.

"So this is the bitch that thinks she is too good for the brothers."

Rolling her eyes, she kept walking, doing her best to ignore the ignorant asses who made the comment. She was feeling too good to give a damn about someone else's hang-ups.

She took a few more steps when another voice was added to the first.

"Stuck-up 'ho. Running around with her light-bright-nearly-white sugar daddy, then comes back to this campus acting like she's hot shit. I never liked that bitch anyway."



*Well, fuck you too*, she thought as she quickened her pace. Let them say what they liked, but no one had better lay a finger on her.

"I say we teach that bitch to find her place and stick to it."

"Touch me, and you'll be one FUBAR motherfucker," Alena hissed as she stopped to face the two who thought they knew her so well.

With no small surprise, she noted that it was two of Elise's hanging partners, Tricha and Sheryl.

"What?" she insisted as she braced herself for a fight. "Got lots of lip when you talking behind a sister's back, but when you are faced with the person you dissin', you ain't got shit to say. Stupid project 'hos."

There was silence, then a voice from behind caught her attention, right around the time the fist connected with the back of her head. She had time for a gasp of pain, then the three were on her, punching and kicking as she fell to the ground.

But Alena Queen was never one to go down without a fight, and this was one of those times she proved it. She felt herself falling, but pivoted so that she landed on her back. She managed to twist to avoid the worse of the blows and grabbed one of the girls by the leg, knocking her off balance and making her fall into another one of her attackers.

Screaming in anger, she swung out with her right arm, hitting the third girl in the stomach as she tried to jump out of the way.

"Bitch!" She had no idea who said that, but as she rolled to her feet, something slammed into her head and she lost her hold on reality.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shaking, Elise stood in the shadows and watched what she had wrought. She expected to feel vengeance, to feel justified, some sense of justice, but all she could feel was pain and regret.

Revenge was supposed to feel sweet, damn it! But all she felt as she stood there and watched them pound the hell out of what had once been her best friend, almost a sister to her, was pain and guilt.

She never meant for things to turn out this way! She had not, but then Alena kept pushing her, teasing her with her provocative outfits and that "I don't know that I'm sexy" attitude, so that she finally snapped!

She recalled the taste of Alena on her lips, the sweetness in her kiss, and the softness of her skin, the soft gasp she made just before she pushed her away.

The bitch deserved what she got! But then if that was true, why were there tears in her eyes? And why was her body trembling like a crack-head going through withdrawal? Her heart lurched as each blow fell, her body ached as if she was taking the beating herself, and yet she could not force herself to stop it, or to turn away and leave Alena to her fate.

She had not meant for her friends to take this so personally and she admittedly had exaggerated the story of what had happened.

But it was her pride, damn it, her pride had been injured! No one ever turned Elise down when she wanted something and Alena was not going to be the first.

The stuck-up bitch!

So maybe she had exaggerated when her friends saw her leaving, silvery tears tracking down her face. She had to salvage her image.

She told them that Alena had changed, that she had flipped over to the lighter side of things, that she has said some insultingly disgraceful things about black people and about their once happy little clique. It was meant to relieve some of the anger and humiliation that she felt. And she had exaggerated, like that kid calling wolf.

She had told them that Alena said their problem was they were too black, not good enough to catch the eyes of a white man. She had told them that Alena called them all ugly mistakes, that they would never make it in the real world because they were not light enough. She had a wonderful time telling about how Alena bragged about her rich artist friend, that he was going keep her around because unlike those uppity niggers that were wasting their time getting an education that they would never use because they were too Afro-centric, she was going to rise to the top on the coattails of a known racist and a man who couldn't give a damn about anything but the dick in his pants.

Oh, she had lied, and her lies fell like candy to a bunch of hungry children, so fast did her friends suck it all up.

She had laughed when they told her that they were going to teach the uppity Uncle Tom where her place was, and that when they finished with her, no man would ever look into her face with anything more than disgust.

She had laughed when she heard that, reveling in the fact that Miss Alena Queen would be so hideous after their treatments that she would come crawling to her, begging for what scraps of affection she would toss in her direction.

But now, those thoughts, those actions, seemed childish and wrong. Watching the savage beating that Alena the Innocent was getting made her stomach churn with her own guilt. She loved her. She hated her. She despised her. She worshiped the ground that Alena walked on. And for her, Alena felt nothing at all.

It was then that Elise realized that the opposite of love wasn't hate, it was indifference.

Alena was indifferent to her, and that hurt like hell.

As she pondered, the beating finally stopped, with one of the girls spitting in the face of the downed figure.

Elise winced at that show of the ultimate disrespect, but remained silent as the three giggled to themselves and raced off down the path, away from the scene of the crime.

Slowly, as if drawn against her will by some powerful magnet, Elise pulled herself from behind the tree where she was hiding, and took a step towards Alena. Her face burned and heat flashed through her body. She grew dizzy, but she forced herself to move closer to examine the consequences of her rash actions and anger. The closer she moved, the more tears trailed down her face. Sobs dried up in her throat, but she forced her body to move, to see what she had caused.

The smell of blood took her almost by surprise, as if she expected such a beating not to open the skin or break bones, but she still took another step closer.

"Alena?" she managed to gasp, as if the downed woman could answer. "Alena?"

Another step, then another.

Alena was lying on her side, her back to Elise, still as death.

"Alena, baby?" her voice whispered through her throat as she took one final step.

"Alena, oh sweet Jesus, no!" Elsie found herself covering her mouth to hold in her bile as she got a good look at Alena.

The shells, the pretty shells that had adorned her headband, were scattered around her face, the delicate strings that held them snapped and torn.

One earring lay a few inches away from her body, torn from her ear by an errant fist or shoe. Her white shirt lay twisted around her body, turning crimson as it soaked up the blood that seemed to be surrounding her like an aura.

Her face, oh God, her face!

It was...broken.

"Alena?" Elise cried out, her hands reaching out to her friend but her body refused to move any closer, to acknowledge that this was her almost-sister!

Then there was screaming, piercing yowls of pain, heart-wrenching screams of agony that filled the morning air and left a chill down her spine. Again and again that banshee screech echoed over the campus, bringing people at a run!

Only when she felt arms surround her, pulling her up against some comforting body, did Elise realize that the screams came from her.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Where is she?" The roar filled the halls and brought security at a run.

Xavier Bustamante was losing his temper, his patience, and had never been so scared in all his life. Tears filled his dark eyes as he stared at the nurse, who had a sad look of understanding on her face as she waved the guards away.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't allow you to go in. Only family is allowed to enter at this time."

"But she has no family!" Xavier tried to explain. "I am all she has!"

Sighing, the nurse stared at the distraught young man. He was dressed in a pair of suit pants and a snazzy polo shirt, dressed for brunch, it seemed. His hair was in disarray as if he had run his fingers through it countless times and his face seemed oddly ashen, changing the true rich olive tone of his skin in his grief. He was in serious pain and there was no way he could hide it.

"I understand, sir, but I am sure you understand that we have policies about this sort of thing. Only a...*fiancé*...would be given the privilege, if not a family member." She purposely stressed the word, as if hinting to him.

"I..." Xavier blinked at the woman's wording, then the light bulb went off in his head. "I am her fiancé!"

"Then why didn't you say so?" the woman said as she quickly filled out the information on a pass and handed it to him.

"She's in critical care, but we're going to move her soon, as she has improved greatly in such a short time," she added as she saw the man pale even further. "But you have to understand, sir. She took severe trauma to her face and upper body. She may not recognize you if she is awake. But then, you may not recognize her."

"But she is alive?"

"She is alive and stable, sir."

"Then what the fuck do I care about looks?"

The rather vulgar exclamation brought a small smile to the nurse's face as she directed him to the room.

She continued to smile as she watched him hurry off. "Some women get all the luck," she sighed before turning her attention to the next person needing her help.

\* \* \* \* \*

She seemed so tiny on the bed, tiny and alone. He was almost afraid to enter the room.

With her back curled, Alena seemed like a child to him, a small, lost child in need of help. And he wasn't there to help her when she needed it the most.

He remembered going over to her dorm and finding it swamped with police. When he made his way to the security desk, the student officer recognized his face and began to sob the story of what had happened.

The smile had melted off his face as he ran his fingers roughly through his hair, cursing loudly and drawing the attention of the officers who still lingered.

When they discovered that he and Alena were dating, they immediately began to question him, crowding him, and all but shouting accusations at him.

For one moment, one grueling eternity of a second, he was back to being that young man terrified by the press and angered at the accusations. But he recovered himself and began to answer the questions, provide his alibi and get the name of the hospital she had been taken to. They wouldn't tell him how badly she was beaten, only that she had been assaulted by multiple people from the looks of it.

His heart was breaking as he raced through traffic to the nearby hospital where she had been admitted, and now he stood inside her door, not knowing what to say or what to do.

"Don't."

He jumped at the sound of the frail voice, but easily recognized it as Alena's.

"Don't what, *mi corazón*?"

"Don't look at me."

He stepped closer, his nose assaulted by the antiseptic smell of hospital, and got just that much closer to his woman.

"Why not?"

There were several tubes and wires around her body. The closer he moved, the more muffled her voice sounded. The heart monitor beeped slowly with her heart, the little green line jumping every few seconds, and several clear lines dripped fluid down an IV. He prayed that there were painkillers in one of the bags because he didn't want his baby to suffer.

"Because...I'm ugly." She whispered the last, so sunk in her misery she never even noticed his approach.

His hand touched her back and she jerked as if in pain, almost causing him to pull back. But instead he moved closer, ignoring the cold metal of the bed rail that pressed into his hip.

"You could never be ugly to me, baby. Don't you know you are my sunshine?"

Her shoulder tensed, she gave one gasping shudder, then the sound of her low sobs drowned out the persistent beeping of the heart monitor.

"I tried to fight them off," she sobbed. "I tried, Xavier, but there was a third one and she got me by surprise."

"I bet you were marvelous," he responded, his voice tight as he fought back tears of his own. His baby had been outnumbered three to one? The injustice of it all! Why did it take three to attack his delicate flower who was no threat to anyone?

"They kicked my ass." There was a watery chuckle but she pulled further away as he tried to turn her onto her back, so he could look at her.

Afraid that she was going to hurt herself, he stopped trying to move her and instead placed another steadying hand on her shoulder.

"There were three of them," he said, gently massaging rock-hard muscles he knew were going to pain her for some time to come.

"The things they said, Xavier. They were wrong about you."

"Me?" He froze in terror. Did she take this beating because someone didn't like the fact that he was seeing her?

"They lied, Xavier. I know you would never use me! I know you would never hurt me."

But he had! He had not offered her his whole trust, and when he decided that she had earned that trust, he tried to open his heart to her.

What kind of man was he? How could he have done this to her? She had given him her everything, had been honest with him. She had urged him to see the wrongness in his thinking, that she was the norm, not the exception. Yet he had not seriously heeded her words until his mind decided that she was trustworthy, totally ignoring the pleas of his heart.

"Alena, I am so sorry," he said softly, wanting to take her in his arms and make the whole world right again.

"You didn't kick me in the face, Xavier!" she sighed, though he could tell she was still crying. "You didn't hold me down and beat me. This is not your fault."

"They beat you because of me, because of what we are doing?"

"No. They beat me because of..."

The gasp at the door made Xavier turn around.

Elise stood there, pale and shaking, as she observed the two of them together. She had managed to convince the nurse on duty she was Alena's sister.

"Elise," Xavier allowed, knowing how she had hurt Alena with her unwanted advances but convinced that she was still the closest thing to a sister Alena had.

But Alena's reaction was far from peaceful.

"You did this!" she hissed, and the heart monitor beeped faster as her anger caused her heart to pound.

"I-I..."

"What? Come to *gloat*?"

"What is going on?" Xavier was confused but drawing nasty conclusions about that word "gloat" as he stared at the stricken woman standing in the doorway.

"I can hear you, Elise," Alena continued. "I can smell your stench from over here."

"Alena...I..."

"You didn't know what they were going to do to me? You didn't know that they were spouting the rhetoric that you always spout? You didn't know that they would take extreme pleasure in fucking up my face? What didn't you know?"

The words were spoken in a calm voice that was even more terrifying than her earlier sobs.

"I didn't know, Alena."

"Liar. What? Did you think that I would come running to you and fall in your arms begging for the scraps you wanted to throw me, Elise? Thought I would turn into your lesbian pin-up girl, ready and eager to serve?"

"What the hell is going on here?" Xavier snarled, his expression turning dark as he noticed the growing guilt on Elise's face.

"I didn't mean for it to go that far, Alena."

"You only wanted me beat down a little?"

"I..."

"You? You did this?" Xavier's anger was instantaneous. Rage darkened his vision and all he could picture was wrapping his hands around Elise's skinny little neck and squeezing.

"I didn't mean for it to go that far. I never knew they would do this to you."

"This? You mean turn my face into street pizza, Elise? Break two ribs, Elise? Break my fuckin' nose, Elise? Break my wrist, Elise?"

"Alena..." Elise began to cry as she stepped into the room. "Please..."

"Get out of here!" The voice that emerged from Xavier's throat was barely human.

"She is my sister. I have to..."

"Leave before I forget that you are a woman and give you what you deserve."

"Alena..."

Alena stiffened, then turned to face the two people in her room.

Xavier sucked in a deep breath as tears flowed freely down his face. "*¡Madre de Dios!*"

Both her eyes were swollen and purple. There was a stiff white brace holding her broken nose in place and still her skin swelled terrifyingly around it. There was a clear boot print on one cheek and the other was covered in dark bruises. Her bottom lip was split; one dark black suture held the flesh closed. Her brown eyes, almost lost within the swollen depths of their sockets, blazed with a hatred Xavier didn't think his little *bruja* was capable of feeling.

"Alena!" Elise gasped, her hand going to her throat in disbelief.

"Now that you've seen what you wanted to see, feel free to gloat."

"I never meant for this to happen."

"Fuck what you meant, Elise. I can't prove that you put your friends up to this, and I have no way of knowing if they will ever get caught for doing this to me. But you had better not show your face anywhere around me, ever again, *sister*."

"You don't mean that..."

"The hell I don't! Be thankful that I am strapped into these IV's and monitors, or I would climb out of this bed and kick your ass personally. You're always talking about how others tear the black race down! Well, think about this. Our major problem seems to be a lack of unity! Like crabs in a pot, when someone does well for themselves, there is always someone there to pull them back to earth. The slave masters knew that when they had house slaves and field niggers, and it's still holding true today. Thank you for showing me where you think my place is, Elise. Too bad I don't agree with you."

"I never meant to hurt you, Alena."

"Well, you did, and you don't listen so well. So let's try this again. Get the *fuck* out, Elise. I never want to see your skinny ass again."

When he opened his mouth again, Xavier's deep voice froze her in place. "You heard her. Leave now, Elise. I hope you burn in hell for doing this to someone who is supposed to be like a sister to you. May you never have any peace or know forgiveness for this betrayal."

Stiffening, Elise turned to leave, tears flowing freely down her face.

"By the way, I told the police my suspicions, Elise. I hope that law degree you were fighting so hard to get has something to do with criminal law. You're going to need all the help you can get."

When Elise's footsteps were a memory, Xavier turned to look at his woman, his hurt little soldier. He had to forcibly resist the urge to hold Elise down and snap her neck like a chicken's.

"Baby," he whispered as he approached the bed. "It will be okay."

"No, it won't, and you can leave now."

"What?"

"I don't want your pity, Xavier. I don't want you here out of some sense of obligation. I know that your honor will keep you here, even if your stomach turns at the sight of me."

"Alena, be reasonable."

"I am. You never trusted me, and I don't want your guilt holding you where you don't want to be."

"But I want to be by your side, Alena. Through the good and the bad. That is what people who love each other do."

"You don't love me, Xavier. You don't even trust me! What do you know of love?"

"I know that I would move heaven and earth for you, Alena. I would give anything to take your place right now. You don't deserve to suffer alone, and I will not leave you here!"

"Well, you have to. Visiting hours are almost up."

"I refuse to leave you alone. I came here to be with you, and here is where I am staying."

Sighing, Alena turned her back to him and settled painfully into the hard hospital bed. "I am too tired to argue with you, Xavier. Do what you want."

She sounded sleepy, nearly out of it. The emotional upheavals, the drugs, and her body's desperate need to heal were all taking their toll.

"I'll be right back, sweetheart. Don't go anywhere."

"What a joker you are," Alena sighed, as a few more tears tracked down her face.

She was dozing before he walked out the door and dead to the world when he returned.



## Chapter Sixteen

*There's a tree limb scratching against the screen,* Alena thought as she attempted to move into a more comfortable position.

But there was no comfortable position. Her face felt like one big swollen balloon. There was a numb ache that had settled over her body and she found it difficult, if not impossible, to breathe through her nose. She tried to force her eyes open and discovered that action was nearly impossible as well.

What had happened?

Then she remembered. Feeling depression closing its taloned grip on her soul, she decided to think of something positive.

No need for make-up for this year's Halloween contest. She now could describe in great detail what getting the cowboy-shit stomped out of you felt like. Hallucinogenic drugs legally and cheap? She had new respect for Farrah Fawcett's character in the movie *Burning Bed*. She learned a new use for sharp biting wit and sarcastic humor when faced with an unbelievable and undesirable situation. And that about summed it up nicely, she thought.

But the scratching continued and she was curious as to what was causing it. Turning her head a little, she managed to force her eyes open and into focus. First she saw the metal IV pole and the clear plastic tubing that led presumably to her arm. Then she managed to focus beyond that and saw a huge white...something.

Jerking, she sat up a bit more, and there he was. Xavier. Didn't she tell him to leave? "W-What are you...?"

"Don't move."

"Xay?"

"Don't move, woman! Don't you ever listen?"

"You can't be serious?" Was that fool of a man planning on drawing her like this? He liked gargoyles?

"I draw what I see, and when I look at you, I see beauty."

"Have you been sipping my IV fluids, Xavier? I'm torn up, man!"

Her voice was a bit weak, but gaining strength every second. She wanted to know what was going through that crazy Puerto Rican's head.

"You are beautiful, Alena. No matter what, the outside reflects the inside."

"My insides say that I have two broken ribs and a fractured wrist, Xavier. And that neatly matches the ground beef I have for a face!"

"The swelling will go down in a day or two. Your doctor says so."

"And how did you get my personal information?"

"My mother. She read your chart for me."

"Wait! Your what?"

"My mother. She was good enough to come when I called. She is as worried about you as I am."

"Wait! Mother? Xavier? I am not up for meeting anyone's parents!"

Her right hand automatically went to her hair, but she paused when she realized that her hand and wrist was encased in white plaster. That's right! She was right-handed, and it was automatic for her to throw it up to try and protect her face.

"My mamma thinks you are beautiful."

"She was in here?" Alena all but squeaked.

"Yes, she came in as they were moving you to a semi-private room."

"They moved me?"

"You don't remember?"

"No."

"You asked that they pin the back of your gown closed because you were not giving free shows...and that the only person who could observe your ass was me, because I was your artist."

"I did not!"

"You did. Then you informed the orderlies that you could do splits."

"Well, I can."

"And that you could put your legs behind your head during sex."

She gasped.

"Then you told them to ask me if they didn't believe you."

Groaning, Alena tried to sink through the mattress and into the floor.

"And that is when my mamma said that she had raised a good son if I could make you want to put both of your legs behind your head...during sex."

"Kill me now!"

"None of that, *beba*. Not after they took so much time to put you back together."

"How long have I been here?"

"Just a day. You also have a mild concussion and they wanted someone to wake you every two hours."

"You did?"

"I did. Don't you remember begging me to get into bed with you?"

"I did not!"

"You most certainly did!" That was a new voice.

"Mamma!" Xavier laughed as the woman walked into Alena's line of sight.

His mother had long dark hair, pulled back into a loose bun. She had the same black eyes she so loved on Xavier. She was short and had a mischievous smile on her face as she observed the shocked young woman on the bed.

"You said he made love like a demon and I said, that's my boy!"

She spoke with a pronounced accent, though her words were understandable enough to make Alena want to cover her face with her pillow.

"Mamma!"

"Now be a good boy and go eat something. I worry about you."

Xavier blushed like a little boy, but placed his pad on his chair and quit the room, closing the door softly behind him as he left.

"Now, why you tell my boy to go away?" Her eyes bored straight into Alena's and her voice was steadfast.

"He told you that, too?"

"He tells me everything. So why you chase him away?"

"Well look at me! Xavier only wanted me because he was attracted to this face he could draw. Face gone, reason for him being here is gone. I have enough problems and I don't want to add a broken heart to them."

"And you're so sure he will leave you?"

"That or he will stay out of guilt. Or pity. And I don't know which one is worse."

"And you know that he feels guilt for this...this atrocity? And he pities you now?"

"Xavier doesn't trust me, Ma'am, Miss...what do I call you before I tell you the rest of the intimate secrets of my life?" Her frustration was clear as she looked at the tiny woman who'd given birth to such a huge man.

"Call me Zuca, dear. And you are so sure he doesn't trust you?"

"He apparently doesn't trust any woman who is American and he hates scandal."

"And he let you see his sketchpads?"

"I'm sure you have seen them, but I never looked."

"But he offered them to you?"

"Yeah." She looked confused and the pain in her head was fiercely making itself known. What did the woman want to know?

"Alena, I have never seen Xavier's sketchpads. He has never offered anyone the honor of observing them."

Alena slowly blinked as she stared at Zuca.

"No one?"

"No one, not even his own mother, the stubborn pigheaded boy. But he did offer to give me a nice tattoo."

"He gave you a tattoo?" This woman didn't look the type to want to be inked! She looked too PTA!

"Oh yes! For Mother's Day! I have a nice jaguar on my back. *Mi esposo* loves it. Isn't he a sweet boy?"

"Yeah, sweet. He's never let anyone see his books?"

"No, dear. And I think that alone is telling, do you not? And he offered them to you! So why didn't you look?"

"It's not my place. When he really wants me to see, he'll show me himself, not hand over his sketchpads. They are like a piece of his soul, you know?"

"So he handed you a piece of his soul. And he did this before this assault on your person?"

"You mean before I got the shi...stuffing kicked out of me? Yeah. He gave them to me day before yesterday."

"Before this attack."

"Before the attack."

"So he had no reason to pity you then, no?"

"No. I was on top of the world."

"And now?"

"I am stuck under the sole of the shoe of the world."

"And here he stays, with a woman who he gave his sketchpads to, who he gave his soul to, and you tell him to go away."

That startled Alena. She never even looked at the situation that way.

"I-I didn't mean to!"

"You care for my son, yes? It is plain to see."

"Yes."

"Then stop trying to send him away, because, believe me, the stubborn child won't go. And take a chance, Alena."

"But it hurts! Losing your heart hurts."

"As much as being kicked in the face?"

She shot Zuca as evil a look as she could manage.

"No?" Zuca carried on as if Alena never spoke. "So how bad will taking a chance hurt? And if he acts stupid, I will fix it so that he can't sit for a week! He may be bigger than I, but I am still his mama and he obeys me." The woman crossed her arms over her ample bosom and nodded her head once pugnaciously.

That brought a smile, then a wince to Alena's lips.

"So, you rest. I go get Xavier and send him back in to you. You are good for my boy. Though I believe you are as stubborn and pigheaded as he is. But you accept that in people you love, yes?"

"Yes," Alena agreed, getting nervous as she thought of facing Xavier with what his mother had helped her understand.

"Good."

Then she was gone, calling down the hall, "Xavier? Stop pouting! And fix your face. That young lady would like to see you now and you had better fix this mess, young man! I think I like that girl! She has spunk."

Alena fought back a chuckle as Xavier poked his head into the room.

"Is it safe to come in now? You will not kick me out or throw your bed pan at me?"

"Bed pan? Man, I'm getting up and walking to the bathroom."

"That is because you are filled with a steady flow of pain killers. When they wear off, you will be a shuddering lump on the bed."

"You think so?"

"I know so, *mi corazón*. So, did you have a nice visit?"

"Your mother is a steamroller disguised as a lady."

"She likes you, too."

"You gave me your sketchpads."

"You didn't look."

"It wasn't my place to look. That would be an invasion of your privacy."

"But--"

"But if you offered to show me, to tell me about them, and point out your favorites, well, that would kill some time until I go home."

She looked at him, a question in her dark eyes, her face tensing as she waited.

His sketchpads. They had been his only outlet for years. Each contained a piece of his spirit. She refused to look before but now was asking him to show her. As if she knew the importance of those pieces of paper and their carbon markings.

Could he willingly offer so much of his person again? Could he trust her?

Easy answer, he already did!

He knew it in his heart; he knew it in his soul. It just took a while for him to voice the words. And he realized that it wasn't the attack or the fact that she was in the hospital that convinced him of this.

He had begun to trust her the day she told him off in the rain and complained about him taking his muscle car out of the garage and into the storm.

Something had always fascinated him about Alena, and he knew that this fascination had turned into something more. Lying with her only enhanced what he was feeling.

"I-I would gladly show you my pictures, Alena." They were the hardest, yet the easiest words that he ever said. "I will share with you the pieces of my soul."

Slowly, he crossed the room, his dark eyes intent on the small figure on the bed. That same figure encompassed so many hopes and dreams for him.

Gently he ran his fingers through her tangled hair, careful to avoid most of the bruising. And even slower, he lowered his face to hers, placing a gently brushed kiss against her swollen lips.

"Xavier?"

"I'll share my soul with you, Alena," he whispered as he kissed her again. "I trust you with it, my soul and my heart."

## **About the author:**

Stephanie is married to the most wonderfully maddening Irish Viking ever created and has given birth to two children, affectionately known as The Viking kittens.

Stephanie's main support in her writing career has been her wonderful parents who are always willing to take her spawns, uh, children for a weekend so that she can work, her older sister Teresa, the stuffed chicken, and of course, her Irish Viking, Dennis.

Stephanie loves to write paranormal and fantasy characters with a lot of humor, because there is no such thing as enough laughter in the world. She also loves to write erotica, just to shock people, but in her heart she is a romance fanatic...

Stephanie welcomes mail from readers. You can write to them c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at P.O. Box 787, Hudson, Ohio 44236-0787.

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