

ALICE GAINES

DRIVEN TO THE LIMIT

Changeling Press



# Driven to the Limit

## Alice Gaines

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## **Driven to the Limit**

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**After rehab, Lauren King returns to the only home she has... a rock star's compound everyone calls The Pit. She also returns to her only friend... an antique German motorcycle she's nicknamed Jake. Little does she know that the cycles Klaus Mannhof made have the ability to shift into human men. Mannhof designed Jake especially for Lauren. Using his special brand of magic, Jake's going to teach her to love him and to love herself as well.**

## Chapter One

After rehab, Lauren King went right back into The Pit.

Kid Dagger's ranch and recording compound had a huge main house, three guest cottages, a recording studio, tennis courts, a state-of-the-art gym, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. But everyone who worked there called it The Pit. The nickname fit Dagger's personality, which on a good day bordered on psychotic. Bad days didn't bear thinking about.

Still, Lauren had called the place home for over ten years. Her job was here. Frankly, she had nowhere else to go.

As soon as she dropped her suitcase in her room, she went out to her only safe place -- the small garage behind the larger one where Dagger kept his collectible cars.

She flicked on the light and looked at the closest thing she had for a friend -- the antique German motorcycle. The Mannhof. "Hi, Jake."

The bike never answered, of course. Still, she felt a link to it. The Mannhof resisted all of Dagger's attempts to control it, something she'd never managed.

She walked to the bike and ran a hand over the leather seat. "What's a nice machine like you doing in a place like this?"

"You decided to come back."

Dagger's voice. She turned and found him standing the doorway. "Did I have any choice?"

"We all have choices." He dangled a baggie with a quarter of an inch of white powder in it. "Want some?"

She stared at him. Only Dagger would offer cocaine to someone just back from rehab. "I gave up poison for Lent."

Anger flashed in his small, brown eyes for a minute, and then he gave her one of his phony smiles. "Okay, then, how about a quick fuck?"

"Like I said. I gave up poison for Lent."

"Your loss." He crossed his arms over his bare chest and leaned against the doorframe. Without the elaborate stage make-up and the costume that gave him a huge crotch bulge, Dagger, whose real name was Craig, looked like everyone's little brother's creepy friend. The one who kept trying to set puppies' tails on fire. Somehow, millions of girls found him sexy. Lauren had once, but then she'd gotten to know him. She'd also seen him flipped out on various substances. Someday, he'd hurt someone -- badly.

He stared at her for a minute, as if expecting her to change her mind and jump his bones. Finally, he pushed away from the wall. "Get back to work. Media bookings went to hell while you were gone."

She sighed. "In a few minutes."

"You going to stay out here with that hunk of junk?"

"It's one of the finest motorcycles ever built. You paid half-a-mil for it."

"It doesn't run."

True, the Mannhof had refused to start ever since the auction house had delivered it. No mechanic had ever managed to fix it, either. Hopelessly broken, just like herself. No wonder they'd become friends.

"Junk." Dagger waved a hand at the bike. "Someday, I'm going to melt it down into a paperweight."

"Have I told you lately that you suck?"

"Yeah, fuck you too." He turned and left the garage.

She looked down at the bike, her friend, Jake. "Don't worry. As long as I'm around, no one's going to turn you into a paperweight."

She walked to the door, switched off the light, and turned to go into the house.

*Why do you put up with him?*

Huh? "Who said that?"

She flipped the switch again and looked around. The room was empty except for herself and the bike. Come to think of it, the words had formed in her brain rather than coming in through her ears.

*I'm glad you're home, Schatzie. I missed you.*

Her eyes widened as she stared at the Mannhof. "Did you say that?"

The air shifted around the bike, seeming to turn liquid. Currents shimmered around the tires, the gas tank, the handlebars. She rubbed her eyes, but the image didn't get any clearer.

Holy shit. Was this some kind of withdrawal-induced hallucination? She hadn't even done that in rehab. Rough nights, yes. Air you could swim through, no.

She backed up until her rump hit the wall and stood there on weakening knees. In the middle of the room, a light radiated from the Mannhof, making the bike's image even harder to see. She squinted, staring into the waves of light and air around Jake. Something was happening in there. Some kind of changes taking place. The tires seemed to melt and change color from rubber to a pale tone that looked for all the world like human flesh.

Oh, no. Too weird. Too fucking weird. Some kind of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in reverse. After all she'd gone through, her mind had snapped. The counselors should have warned her.

Now useless, her legs gave way, and she slid down the wall until she sat on her butt, hugging herself.

The changes in the middle of the room continued. The form shrunk, curling into a ball of what looked like human flesh. A person. A man, lying on the floor in a fetal position without a stitch of clothing on his body. The glow disappeared, and the air went clear again, leaving only the man -- powerful legs pulled up against his body with the ankles crossed. An adult-sized human baby.

A voice whimpered in fear. Her own voice. Her heart hammered in her chest, and her throat constricted. If she could get any strength in her legs, she could get up

and run like hell. Still, as spooky as the whole experience was, it was pretty cool in a Hollywood, special effects way.

The person moved finally, sitting up. Buck naked, the man had pale skin and platinum hair that hung around his face to the jaw line. His eyes opened, revealing irises so crystal blue they almost seemed transparent. He smiled, his face taking on an innocent look of delight, like a baby who'd just learned to smile. He took a deep breath, or rather, the air around him went into his chest in a whoosh. Then, he opened his mouth and a sound came out -- the deep roar of a motorcycle engine revving.

The sound plastered her against the wall, stealing her own breath. She sat there paralyzed for a moment, staring at him. He made no move toward her but gave her the most beautiful smile she'd ever seen on a man's face.

"Holy shit," she whispered. "Who are you?"

"*Meine Namen...*" His voice came out as a croak, so different from the roar he'd just made. He shook his head, cleared his throat, and opened his mouth again. "My name is Jakob."

Jakob? As in Jake? She'd named the bike Jake the day it arrived. Calling it that had come to her out of the blue, as if she'd already known it fit. As if she'd had a special connection to the magnificent machine. Could the feeling have been real? Every scrap of her rational mind told her he couldn't be the Mannhof, and yet, what else *could* he be?

He got to his feet a bit unsteadily. At first, he swayed toward her, and she put out her arms as if to catch him. After a second he found his balance and stood in the center of the room.

"So, this is a body." He ran his hands over his face and then down his neck and over his chest. She could almost feel the skin and sleek muscles under the tips of her own fingers as his touch moved along his sides and over his hips.

"It's strong in its own way. Not as powerful as my engine, but flexible." He stretched his arms out to the sides. "Such freedom of movement. Unbelievable."

"Are you telling me... seriously... that you're the Mannhof?"

He cocked his head and stared at her as if he didn't understand her words. "Who else would I be?"

"A motorcycle isn't a who. It's a what."

"Semantics. Unworthy of you, *Schatzie*."

"Semantics, hell. What the fuck are you?"

"You watched me change."

"I watched..." She made an aimless gesture toward where he stood. "I watched a motorcycle disappear -- an insanely expensive motorcycle, I might add."

"And what came in its place?"

"Well, you." Whatever "you" was. It was male, all right, and it sure as hell looked human. From the shock of startling blond hair on his head, over a face marked by angles and curved lips, to broad shoulders, tight pecs, and -- holy shit -- a huge erection standing straight out from his torso. Her gaze fixed on that cock as her throat went dry. No motorcycle she'd ever seen had an accessory like *that*.

"This is the most wonderful of all." He closed a hand around his member and let his eyes drift shut in pleasure. "Ah, yes. I felt something like this but didn't understand."

"I don't understand it at all."

"Every time you came into the room, I had a powerful reaction."

"Motorcycles get hard-ons?"

He put his hands on his hips. "Why must you make this vulgar?"

"Sorry. Force of habit." Vulgar or not, the whole situation was so bizarre it almost demanded jokes. She was sitting on the floor of a garage staring at the place where a motorcycle had just stood. Only, now the space held what looked like a drool-worthy human male with equipment a porn star would envy.

"I sensed a need in you that reached out to my own nature," he said. "To the reason I'd been created."

She rubbed her eyes. "Great. A psychobabbling machine."

He scowled at her. "I'm more than a machine, and you know it."

"You were a motorcycle until I watched you turn into a man." She sighed. "I don't know what I know anymore."

He stared into her eyes. "And if you think talking about yourself is babbling, you didn't learn much in that place."

He might have her there. She hadn't learned anything in rehab that would prepare her for this. "All right, then. For what were you created?"

"I was created for you."

"Sexually?"

He smiled. "For sex and many other things."

"So, you're telling me I can make a machine horny."

"My machine body isn't an ordinary motorcycle."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "That's putting it mildly."

One platinum eyebrow went up. "You had a sensual connection to me too. Don't try to deny it."

How could she deny it? Anyone -- male or female -- would find a sleek machine like a Mannhof sexy. Most women would love to have that kind of power between their legs. Most wouldn't climb onto the bike naked. If Jake had truly sensed her presence in his machine form, he'd remember that night. She'd been high on Dagger's pleasure powder, of course, but she couldn't use that as an excuse. As much as the cocaine had turned her on, at least she'd had the good sense not to work off her horniness with Dagger or one of the guys in his band. She'd come out to Jake. If she could have gotten the engine going, she would have had a wild ride without leaving the garage. In the end, she'd taken care of things herself in the privacy of her room. Now it appeared one other person knew about that night. If you could call the motorcycle involved a person.

Across the room, the person stood watching her. Could he tell what was going through her mind right now? "Maybe you'd better tell me what you remember from the time we spent together and how a machine could have been aware of me," she said.

"I remember a lot of things. How is more complicated to explain."

"Try."

"I could sense but not really feel." He shrugged. "Or, perhaps feel, but not completely."

"And you felt lust for me?"

"Desire. There's a difference." He held out his hands, opening and closing the fingers. "Then, I could sense things, such as valves opening and closing. Now, I feel movement. Do you see the difference?"

Somewhere hidden in that question lay a note of reality. Subtle and yet strong. It struck a cord inside her, a truth just out of reach but part of her, nevertheless.

"Lust is sensing and desire is feeling?" she said.

"A manifold takes in air. A lung breathes. An engine runs low on fuel. A man grows hungry."

"And you've sensed things both ways?"

He smiled again. "You do understand."

"You really are the Mannhof," she whispered.

"Do you doubt your own senses?"

"Not my senses. My sanity."

"You're not insane, *Schatzie*."

"I'm sitting her on the concrete floor of a garage listening to a stranger tell me he was an antique German bike a minute ago. And now he tells me he had the hots for me when he was a machine. That doesn't sound a little crazy to you?"

He laughed, a deep, warm rumble that would have done his cycle persona proud. "From someone else, perhaps."

"But not me."

"You see, you *are* talking to a man who was a motorcycle and has wanted you since he first saw you."

Okay, none of this made any sense. It wasn't possible for a machine to want a human being. But then, neither was it possible for a machine to turn into a man, and she'd just watched that happen. She hadn't lost touch with reality while she worked the drugs out of her system in rehab, and she hadn't taken anything since. Maybe she ought

to relax and enjoy this latest twist to her life. In the pleasure and joy department, it beat anything she'd had since she'd come to work at this hellhole. If she'd gotten high on her own brain chemicals, she might as well enjoy them until the men in the white coats came for her.

"I see you finally believe me," Jake said.

"Sure. Why not?" She checked out his cock again. Oh, yeah. She could definitely have fun with this delusion. "Only, how could you be possible? And why did you pick me?"

"Enough explanations for right now. Instead, let's ride."

"Ride?"

Before the word had gotten half out of her mouth, the air started shifting again. As before, it pulsed around Jake, and the light clung to his skin. Things went faster this time, and she got up so she could approach and watch the transformation from closer range.

He crouched, and immediately his body stretched. Some flesh became rubber where tires appeared against the floor. What had been his back and chest turned into the leather seat and gas tank. In no more than a few heartbeats, machinery had replaced the man, and the air settled into normalcy.

"Jake?" she said. "Jakob?"

*I'm here.*

"You can talk to me in my mind?"

*I always could. You weren't ready to listen.*

"I'm ready now," she said. "We only have two problems. One, you don't start."

With that, his engine came to life, filling the garage with its roar. It was a magnificent sound, rich and deep. She couldn't help but smile as she pressed her palm to the bike's leather seat and felt the vibration. No wonder people paid insane amounts for a Mannhof -- when they could find one. Classic beauty, great engineering. Even an untrained eye had to appreciate the lines and the barely contained power.

*Put on a helmet and climb aboard,* he said.

"That's our second problem. I've only ridden on the back. I don't know how to drive a motorcycle."

*Don't worry. I do.*

"Still, I'd hate to crash us. You're beautiful, and I'm... well... at least I'm still alive."

*You'll be more alive after our ride.* The engine revved, sounding like a mechanical version of joy. *Come on. How do you think Dagger will feel watching you drive his bike?*

She laughed. "It'll piss him off royally."

*Climb on.*

She found a helmet on the utility bench and slipped it on then hit the automatic door opener. As the door opened, she slipped the controls into her pocket and approached the Mannhof. Jake.

She couldn't keep a silly grin from her face. Her friend, Jake, was real. And he was a man, and he was going to take her for a ride.

She climbed onto his back and released the kickstand. Together, they roared out of the garage and down the drive.

\* \* \*

Finally whole, Jake sped along the country roads with Lauren's thighs clasped around him. At first, she'd hung on so tightly the pressure of her legs against his seat had been palpable. Her palms had felt sweaty against his controls, and he'd had to exert pressure to manipulate them for her. Eventually, she'd relaxed, though, and now they rode as one entity, machine and human, past lush countryside filled with grape vines and pastures.

Lauren's laughter floated to him as he banked into a turn and came out on the other side, righting them again. She seemed delighted with their ride and for good reason. Together, the two of them made up so much more than the sum of two individuals.

Certainly, his machine identity had changed in important ways. He'd had senses before, had been able to detect wind speed, light, and temperature. Now, with Lauren,

he could feel the air whooshing by and bask in the warmth of the sunlight. They both had much to learn -- he about his human body and she about her human spirit. When he found the right place, they'd join the way men and women did and begin their journey together.

*Enjoying yourself, Schatzie?*

"Oh, Jake." Her words hardly came to him over the noise of his engine.

*Ready for the next step?*

"Lead on."

After a bit, the right opportunity appeared. To one side of the road, a gate stood open, giving access to a dirt road that went up a small rise. In the distance, the road disappeared into a stand of tall trees. He slowed as he left pavement and rode onto dirt. Though the surface was uneven, Lauren balanced easily, leaning with him so well he didn't have to worry about correcting for her weight.

Klaus Mannhof had built Jake specifically for her, but the women Klaus selected to receive his handmade bikes didn't always accept the gift without a struggle. He'd have struggles with Lauren before he could convince her to leave Dagger and the hell the man had made of her life. So far, they seemed well suited for riding together. That could be a useful tool as they confronted ugly truths and went forward together.

The trees loomed over them as they approached, casting the area underneath in deep shade. With no direct sunlight penetrating to the ground, not much could grow at the bases of the giants besides ferns. Rather than dirt beneath his wheels, now he met a fine dust that rose up in small clouds around his tires. Somehow, even the sound of his engine came out hushed here, as if they'd entered a place of worship. What a perfect setting for knowing his woman's body for the first time.

He stopped beside a downed tree. Here, the sunlight slanted in among the remaining trunks, creating shafts of gold that lit ferns and branches into brilliant hues of green. A blue bird with a head and comb of midnight black hopped along the dead tree's trunk, squawking. Oddly, the harsh note only served to underscore the peace of the place. They'd truly found magic.

Jake turned off his engine and waited while Lauren set the kickstand and climbed off. After walking a few feet away, she turned back to him, removed her helmet, and ran her fingers through her hair. She stood there, staring at him. Waiting for him to change, no doubt. Why not?

Now that he'd shifted twice, the transformation came easier. Metal and leather turned into flesh with no conscious effort. He only wished himself human, and the changes followed. Air rushed into his lungs, bringing the taste of sunshine and warm earth into his nostrils and his heart. He stretched upward and raised his arms over his head.

A few feet away, Lauren watched him. The fear had gone from her face, but she still looked wary, not facing him straight on. He had a lot of work to do with her, but that was exactly why Klaus had designed him. First he had to win her over, and luckily, her body had fewer defenses against him than her mind did.

He lowered his arms and smiled at her. "Such beauty."

She half-smiled back. "It's a pretty place."

"That isn't what I meant."

"You can't beat a bunch of redwood trees for charm."

"Redwoods," he repeated. "Is that what they are?"

"You've never seen a redwood tree before?"

"I have a lot to learn. I hope you'll teach me."

"Me? Teach someone else?" She huffed. "Good luck with that."

He studied her for a moment "What's wrong?"

She didn't answer but just stood there, avoiding his gaze.

"I thought you enjoyed the ride," he said.

That got her attention, and her chin rose. "It was amazing."

"Yet, now you seem afraid."

"This may be a little hard to understand for a guy who was a machine this morning," she said, "but it's kind of scary for a woman to find herself alone in the woods with a strange man."

"You've known me for months."

"I thought I was talking to a motorcycle. That's not exactly a deep, emotional relationship."

"A woman's bond with a Mannhof is one of the strongest in the world."

She got that wary look in her eyes again. "You should listen to yourself. That's pretty creepy."

"You think I'm creepy?"

"It's hard to explain." She paced a few steps and then stopped to look back at him. "We'll ignore for now that I've seen you change back and forth from person to machine a couple of times now."

He sighed. That could be considered creepy, to use her word. But honestly, she might have gotten past that by now. If not, why had she agreed to a ride? Just to make Dagger angry?

"Now, here I am in the middle of nowhere with a naked man." She cleared her throat. "A naked, aroused man."

Ah yes, his cock. It stood, thick and long. It was only natural that he wanted her. He'd been designed to fit her exactly, to fill her every need. He'd waited so long for her to complete the first part of her recovery in that facility. Nights of waiting and wanting, afraid she wouldn't come back and he'd have to go looking for her. When she'd returned, his machine body had readied itself for the shift. Now, his human body had readied itself to join with her. Clearly, that would prove harder than he'd thought.

"I'd never touch you if you don't want me to," he said.

She slid her arms around her ribs and hugged herself. "Then, there's the way you talk about a bond between a woman and a Mannhof. That sounds, well, stalky."

"Stalky?"

She shrugged. "Unhealthy. Fixated."

Well, now she'd confused him completely. "If you felt this way, why did you come out with me?"

Her shoulders slumped. "You may have noticed I don't exactly have the best taste in men."

"I'm not like Dagger."

"I know." She walked to the fallen log and sat on it. "Oh, hell. I don't know what I know anymore."

He joined her and sat. The bark chafed against the skin of his buttocks, and he jumped up.

She laughed. "You really aren't used to being made out of flesh, are you?"

"At least it got you to laugh."

She rose, removed her jacket, and handed it to him. "Better sit on this. You have a lot of sensitive parts down there."

He took the garment, set it on the log, and sat. She joined him and rested with her elbows on her knees. She wasn't dressed for sitting in the cool shade of redwood trees, let alone a motorcycle ride. In fact, he'd never have let her ride with so much skin exposed if he hadn't known he'd operate the controls.

She wore heeled sandals on her feet, a pair of shorts that hardly made it to mid-thigh, and a halter-top with a plunging neckline. Now, gooseflesh covered her bare arms, and her nipples had hardened and stood stiffly against her top.

A woman's body responded that way to cold, according to Klaus, but it also responded that way to arousal. His own body's response came through with no confusion. She'd dressed provocatively, showing her cleavage, much of her midriff, and even more of her thighs. She looked soft everywhere, her skin pale with a hint of a blush. That, too, could signal her desire. She might claim to find him stalky, but she hadn't put any distance between them. To the contrary, she sat close enough that he could detect the clean scent of her hair and see the slight rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed.

His heartbeat sped up in much the same way that his engine idled -- a strong and steady rhythm of life. Klaus had given Jake so much by allowing him to become human, but he hadn't meant the gift for Jake alone. He'd meant for Jake to share the miracles

with one special woman -- Lauren. Whether she knew it or not, whether she was ready for it or not, the time had come for her to accept him into her life. Not as a machine that she could open herself to, thinking -- incorrectly -- that he had no mind, heart, or soul.

This machine was also a man. A man who could make demands for honesty and intimacy. This machine could compel her to face herself. To open up to her own past, with all her mistakes, and her own future. Most of all, he could make her admit her own feelings. Especially love. She would love him. Klaus had given her no choice. More important, when he was through with her, she'd love herself.

"Hello."

He looked at her and discovered her staring at him. "I'm sorry."

"You were off somewhere."

He took her hand and rested it on his knee, curling their fingers together. "I'm back now."

She blushed but didn't pull away. A light flush colored the tops of her breasts, creeping up her throat to her cheeks. Shyness, perhaps, but excitement too.

"I'd very much like to make love to you," he said softly.

"So I gathered."

"I want you to want me as well."

She shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

"I'm not talking about having lunch or going to a movie together," he said. "I want to be intimate with you."

"Sex is sex, Jake. It's not a big deal."

"There, you're wrong. I'm going to show you how wrong you are."

## Chapter Two

Lauren's breath caught. The world had turned upside-down today, from coming home to The Pit, to discovering that the motorcycle she'd admired for months was also a man, to a wild ride through the country. Now, the man in question -- a stunning specimen she'd so far only seen in the nude and with an impressive erection -- had asked to make love to her. She'd agreed. What woman with so much as a teaspoonful of libido would refuse? But from the look in his remarkable blue eyes, she'd get a lot more than a roll in the hay. Or in this case, in the redwood duff. If the expression of innocence and raw desire gave any indication, this would be lovemaking of the type that changed lives.

He leaned toward her, closing his eyes as his lips parted. Before his face met hers, she lifted a hand to touch his cheek.

His eyes opened again. And one brow went up in a silent question. They sat that way for a moment. Oddly enough, this was the first time she'd touched him. She'd ridden here with her legs wrapped around him, but this was her first contact with the man. It felt right, so she closed her eyes and lifted her face to receive his kiss.

When his lips met hers, the contact sent a shock to her heart. Soft and tentative, the kiss drew her closer until the heat of his body sank into her skin.

She moved nearer to him so she could slide her arms around his neck and kiss him more deeply. He groaned and opened his lips over hers, moving them apart. The movement stole her breath. Over the years, many men had kissed her, but none of them had taken such care to taste every corner of her mouth, every curve of her lips. He continued, slowly and deliberately, drawing out the tension until her breath came hard and fast and her nipples tingled. A throbbing started between her thighs as her pussy

readied itself to take him inside her. Amazing. With no more than a kiss, he'd already aroused her. What would happen when he touched her there?

He groaned and pulled back. "Ah, Lauren, how could this be real?"

She looked into his face, at his parted lips and eyes grown bright with excitement. "You like?" she said.

"Klaus told me I'd feel so much more in a human body, but still..."

"This Klaus sounds like an interesting guy."

"I'll tell you all about him. Later." With that, he put his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. Now hip to hip, they could twine their arms around each other and explore while their lips met in another kiss -- this one hungrier, more urgent. She ran her hands over his ribs to his back, savoring the feel of muscle under her palms. It felt so natural to touch him, as if she'd done it for years. And yet, each new sensation took her by surprise. The sounds of his sighs, each one sending a puff of his breath into her mouth. The scent of him, warm flesh and leather. The way his fingers slid through the hair at the nape of her neck as he turned her face to give his mouth better access to hers.

The natural beauty of the place surrounded them like a cocoon. Green scents of the forest blending with birdcalls and the sunlight heating her skin. This magical man had found this magical place to make love for the first time.

His fingers trailed over her neck and along the valley between her breasts. He stopped kissing and watched his hand as it moved toward the fastening of her halter-top.

"I'd never imagined anything could be as soft as this," he whispered, as he slipped his hand inside and stroked the top of one breast.

"No one's ever looked at me the way you do."

"Fools. You're a treasure. *Ein lebendiger Schatz.*"

"Schatz?"

He smiled at her. "It's German for treasure."

"That's what you've been calling me."

*"Schatzie, yes."*

No one had called her anything like that for as long as she could remember. The endearment took this to a whole new level. He'd said he planned to show her how wrong she was when she'd said sex was no big deal. This sex -- this lovemaking -- would be.

"I want you to touch me," she said.

"I will. Tell me how."

Words stuck in her throat. Normally, anything that came into her head would come easily out of her mouth. Language foul enough to make a church lady faint. Now, she couldn't tell him how she wanted him to stroke her breast.

Her silence didn't stop him from doing exactly what she wanted, though. He unfastened the halter-top and pushed the fabric aside to expose her breast. He slid his fingers under it and lifted it, studying it as if he'd never seen anything more beautiful. When he finally, finally, flicked his thumb over the nipple, she shuddered and moaned with pleasure.

He smiled, bent, and took the sensitive tip into his mouth. Sucking gently, he teased her flesh to full hardness and sensitivity. After a few seconds, she closed her eyes and tipped her head back, pressing herself upward to him. In response, he took more of her into his mouth and continued the pressure until she went limp. Deep in her pussy, the throbbing grew. Even the most skillful lover had never brought her to this level of arousal by kissing her breasts. If he could do this so quickly and without even touching her sex, what could he do with his fingers on her clit? With his huge cock inside her?

He lifted his face and studied his work, blowing softly onto the turgid nipple. *"You're truly a miracle, Schatzie."*

*"You work miracles on my body."*

*"Klaus taught me well."*

*"Klaus needs to write sex manuals."*

"It isn't something you learn from a book," he said.

"Have you ever touched a woman before?"

He kissed her mouth briefly. "I first became a man back in the garage. With you."

"Then, why is it you know how to play my body?"

"I was designed for you alone." He pushed her top from her shoulders and let it drop to the ground. "Now, let's see if the other breast tastes as good as this one."

This time, while he caressed her nipple, she slid her fingers into his hair to hold him for support. Moisture gathered at the juncture of her thighs as she slipped into a state of arousal so intense the rest of the world faded away. Tall redwoods still stood all around them with ferns gathered at the bases of their trunks. Jays still squawked, and the sun still beamed into the spaces between the trees. All that became a backdrop for the hunger that drove her closer to orgasm. Soon, he'd touch her where she most ached for him. Soon, he'd slide his swollen member inside her. She'd come then, likely more than once. She'd feel him come inside her too.

While he loved her breast with his mouth, his hand went wandering over her ribs to her belly. His fingers left a trail of fire as they moved, making circles as they went lower and lower. Toward her crotch. She held her breath, waiting for his touch where she most needed it. She ached and throbbed, her clit stiff and sensitive, even against the soft fabric of her panties. After what seemed like forever, he reached the top of her shorts.

More. Damn, but she needed more. If he stopped now, she'd have to take his hand and put it against her pussy. Even through the cloth of her shorts, he could make her come if only he'd rub her in the right spot.

"Jake," she gasped. "Please touch me. Please now."

"Inside your panties?"

"Yes! Oh, yes, please."

"You want to climax?" he whispered into her ear.

A tremor shot through her, and she whimpered with need.

He reached to the pull of her zipper and slowly tugged it down. Then, his fingers slipped beneath her shorts and into her panties. Finally, he parted the lips of her sex and stroked her wetness.

Her whole body went stiff as her arousal rocketed up into her heart.

"Ah, love," he crooned. "You're so hot. Just what I wanted."

"I can't stand it," she gasped. "Please make me come."

"Soon." He removed his hand from her pussy and brought his fingers to his nose. "Sweet perfume. I've done well."

"Damn it, you've done more than well," she cried. "Fuck me."

"Yes. You're ready." He helped her to stand just long enough to slide her shorts and panties over her hips and down her legs. She found enough strength to step out of them and then allowed him to take her hips and pull her back to his lap.

His hard-on waited for her there, and she grasped it as she lowered herself to him. Spreading her legs, she straddled him. Then, she guided the head of his cock into her and sank lower, her back pressed against his chest. Her pussy stretched to accept all of him, and in a moment, she'd taken every inch inside her.

"Ach, Gott," he gasped. "So sweet. Hot."

She raised herself a bit and then lowered herself along his length, squeezing. "You see how you make me feel?"

"Too much. I have to please you first."

"You know how to do that?"

"Yes."

He reached in front of her to where her clit only needed a few strokes to push her past the breaking point. His thumb flicked over it, at first lightly and then more firmly. Her whole body tensed, readying itself for the inevitable. As he continued driving her higher with his fingers, he moved his hips, thrusting his glorious hardness into her. It seemed to swell, stretching and pushing while her climax built.

Her arousal went to impossible levels as his cock plowed into her and his fingers played over her clit. She floated there, experiencing her own body as she never had

before. An eternity of delicious madness, without thought or breath or any power to resist.

He growled into her ear, near climax himself. His thrusts came faster and harder, the friction on her clit pressing her on until she had to surrender to it.

The orgasm crashed over her, tightening in her belly and coursing out to her whole body. Her pussy clenched and then burst into spasms. So strong, so powerful, she couldn't even cry out.

He joined her, his whole body stiffening. He did shout as he spilled his essence deep inside her. They soared together, their spirits floating up among the redwoods as their bodies claimed them in the most primitive of all feelings.

When it had finally ended, she took a breath and looked over her shoulder into his face. It held such an expression of joy and peace, she could only sigh and rest back against his chest and let him cradle her in his arms.

\* \* \*

Dagger and some of the others were waiting in the driveway when Lauren rode Jake's motorcycle identity back into the compound. The look on Dagger's face said someone was going to get an ass chewing or worse. Fine. As long as he didn't get violent.

Jake pulled right up to Dagger where he stood between Andy, the chief engineer, and his personal trainer, Jill. The minute Lauren turned off the engine, Dagger charged up to her and almost pulled her off the bike by force. Before he knocked both her and Jake over, she set the kickstand and climbed off.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he said.

"I went for a ride."

Andy stared at Jake and then at her. "How'd you get it started?"

She shrugged. "I figured I'd try one more time. I don't know what happened."

"I didn't say you could ride my motorcycle," Dagger said.

"Your bike?" She snorted. "You wanted to melt him into a paperweight."

"Him?" Jill said.

"It. The Mannhof." Damn, she'd better watch that. She and Jake had to figure out what how to explain his appearance. Until then, he'd remain a machine to everyone but her.

Dagger's face got red. "Look, bitch. Everything on this compound is mine. The buildings, the grounds, that bike. Even you."

She stared into his face. "You don't own people, Dagger."

"Like hell I don't. You want to go back to where you were when I let you tag along with us?"

As if. Her family was probably glad they'd seen the last of her.

"You owe me," Dagger said.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You made me what I am today. Whatever the hell that is."

Dagger glared down into her face. Without stage make-up, his face was pretty unappealing. His rages made him even uglier, and he'd worked up a good one today. "Don't piss me off, Lauren. I'll kick the shit out of you."

*Would he do that?*

Jake. Damn. What would happen if he shifted to human to try to defend her? If they all saw that happen, would they turn him into some kind of freak show? Before she had to do anything, Andy grabbed Dagger from behind and held him. "No violence, Craig."

Dagger's head whipped around, and he glared venom at Andy, a guy who'd been with him from the beginning. The only one who could get away with using his real name.

"Remember your probation," Andy said. "Do you want prison this time?"

Dagger stood there, clenching his hands into fists by his side. He might not lash out this time, but they'd all have to deal with his foul mood for days.

At least the interruption would let her get Jake back into the garage.

She went to swing her leg over Jake, but Dagger grabbed her arm and pulled her back roughly enough that she almost fell. "Where do you think you're going?" he said.

She pointed to Jake. "I'm going to put the bike away."

"Fuck that. You got it started. I'm going to ride."

Shit. In one of his moods, Dagger would ride Jake like a maniac. He'd crashed more than one car, and he'd been stone cold sober for some of his worst driving. A disaster wouldn't only damage a beautiful machine. It would hurt or kill a beautiful man, as well. And if Jake tried to get control from Dagger, the resulting chaos could make matters even worse.

Dagger climbed onto the bike and gave the starter a savage kick. Nothing happened. The engine didn't even stutter.

"What the fuck is wrong with this thing?" Dagger rose up and slammed down on the starter with all his weight. Still no response from Jake. He glared at her, his face red. "How did you start it? What did you do?"

She shrugged. She hadn't even kick started it. Jake had turned on the engine himself. Clearly, he wasn't going to do that for Dagger. Thank God.

"Fucking piece of shit." Dagger tried again. And again and again, but the engine stayed dead.

Dagger swung his leg over and climbed off the Mannhof. Before Lauren could reach for Jake, Dagger pushed him over onto the driveway.

"Hey, man," Andy said. "That's an expensive machine."

"It's mine. I can do what I want with it," Dagger said.

"Chill," Andy said. "Let's go get a beer."

Dagger looked down at Jake for a minute as if he'd like to kick him a few times.

"Aw, hell."

"Come on, man," Andy said.

"Yeah." Dagger headed toward the house, and Andy followed him.

Jill walked to Jake and looked down at him. "Do you think Dagger damaged it?"

"Help me get it up so I can check it, okay?"

Even with the two of them, it took some grunting and struggling to upright the bike. After all that, Lauren looked at where it had hit the pavement. It seemed all right.

"I'll push it into the garage and check it out."

"How *did* you get it started, anyway?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Well, whatever you did, do it again. Dagger's going to burst a blood vessel if he doesn't get his ride."

When pigs flew. Lord knew her own driving record was nothing to brag about, but when she rode Jake, he took the controls. Now that she knew what a miraculous creature he was, she'd protect him from Dagger and his violence better than she'd protected herself.

She swung her leg over Jake and settled against the seat. The moment she did, the engine came to life with a quiet roar.

"Whoa!" Jill jumped back a step. "How'd you do that?"

"Magic." Magic Jake had better not repeat with others watching. She'd have a long talk with him about that the next time he shifted to human.

"What an amazing sound," Jill said. "I never thought a machine could be sexy, but... hoo-boy."

"You don't know the half of it."

Jill's eyebrows went up. "Huh?"

"Never mind." She grabbed the controls, and Jake shifted into gear and headed up the drive into his garage.

As soon as they got inside, he switched himself off. She set the kickstand, climbed off, and grabbed the automatic door opener. As the door lowered, she crouched beside Jake to check the side that had fallen against the pavement. Before she could check it for dents, he started to shift into human form. He did it so quickly this time that in a moment, she found herself staring at a strong leg with a bruise at the hip.

She reached out and ran her fingers over the skin that had started to turn purple. "Are you okay?"

He reached down and pulled her to her feet. "Fine. It'll go away in a day or two."

"I was afraid he'd hurt you."

"Never mind me. Did he mean what he said about kicking the shit out of you?"

"I don't know. Probably." She turned toward the side door, but Jake grabbed her arms and pulled her back around.

He stared down into her face. "He beats you?"

"He's a maniac. He's knocked everyone around once or twice."

"*Gott im Himmel.*"

This time, Jake headed toward the side door, and Lauren caught his arm. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to tell him that his days of shit kicking are over."

"Naked?"

That stopped him. "You're right. I'll need some clothes."

"You'll need more than that. He's not just violent. He fights dirty."

Jake's jaw tightened. "Klaus taught me how to take care of myself."

"Okay." She sighed. "He'll also want to know how you got in here. There's a gate around this compound and guards. Strangers don't get past them. We need a story about who you are and how you got here."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm a friend of yours from that place where you went."

"Rehab," she said. "Maybe that could work."

"Good. Get me some clothes. Then, we'll go to the authorities and get Dagger shut down."

"Ah, you *are* an innocent." She put her hands on the sides of his face and looked into his crystal blue eyes. "That's not going to happen, Jake."

His brows furrowed, and he looked at her as if she was speaking a language he didn't understand. "I was only going to take you away from here, but you couldn't leave your friends behind."

"You're not going to take me away from here, either."

"But I was designed for you. To make things right for you."

She dropped her hands to her sides and sighed. How was she going to explain herself to someone who'd only become human a few hours before? He called her a

treasure. How little he understood. She might have been a treasure at some point, but things had gone downhill from there to the point where she didn't deserve anything more than she had right now. None of the others were much better, and none of them would have the slightest interest in getting away from here, either. Maybe if he stuck around The Pit long enough, he'd understand. That, in itself, was a sad prospect -- someone as remarkable as Jake coming to comprehend someone as loathsome as Dagger.

She took a breath. "None of us are going to leave here because we need Dagger."

"You need his money."

"Yes, that, but there's more. We take our identity from him."

"What kind of life is that?" he asked.

She'd asked herself the same thing over and over. She'd even asked a few of the others over the years. They'd all clammed up, as if the mere question threatened them somehow. Finally, she'd given up asking questions and let herself be what she'd become -- Dagger's bookings manager and sometime fuck.

"I can make things better for you, *Schatzie*," Jake said.

"It isn't that simple."

He lifted his hand and stroked her cheek. "I don't understand."

"Leaving here isn't something I can just up and do," she said. "I doubt I can do it at all."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I belong in The Pit," she said. "I'm part of it as much as Dagger is."

"I don't believe that," he said.

"Too bad. It's true."

## Chapter Three

Dagger's compound never got completely quiet, even in the dead of night. For all of Jake's past nights here, sounds had penetrated into his garage sometimes, but nothing like what he encountered when he slipped into the main house in search of Lauren's bedroom.

Raucous laughter came out of the dining room as he passed by. He glanced in to find a half-dozen people sitting around the table by candlelight. Five young men played cards, piles of money in front of them. Four of them had half-empty beers at their elbows, and the fifth drank out of a whiskey bottle.

A woman sat on his knee, and by the motions of her arm and shoulder, it appeared she'd found something very interesting in his lap. Stroking his cock, no doubt, and the others concentrated on their game as if such public intimacies occurred all the time. She only stopped to pick up a nearby mirror and chop at a white powder with a razor blade.

Lauren said they called this place The Pit. The name fit.

None of them noticed him as he went by. They might not have noticed if the house caught fire. He left them, headed toward the staircase to the upper floor.

Upstairs, he could sense Lauren. Like a faint scent on a breeze or a dim melody at the back of his brain, Lauren's presence came through to him.

His cock thickened and hardened, remembering how it had felt to slide into her wetness. If one of the others found him now, they'd find him naked and erect. He really ought to find some clothes before he spent any more time around the others.

As he walked quietly down the long hallway, Lauren's presence grew stronger. It wasn't behind any of the doors that gave off a strange, herbal smell or nasty laughter.

Finally, at the end of the corridor, he found her. He opened the door and stepped inside.

One thick candle lit this room as well, so dim, it didn't reach into the corners. It flickered on a bedside table. Lauren lay stretched out on her back on top of the spread. Her eyes were closed, and plastic buds sat in her ears. They were connected to a tiny music player that rested on her stomach, just below the slogan *I heart Yosemite* on her sleep shirt.

Jake stood staring at her.

She seemed so innocent with her hair mussed around her face. Her breasts rose and fell softly as she breathed. Even her feet looked cute with their high arches and the pale pink polish on her toenails.

He shut the door, walked to the bed, and sat down. That seemed to startle her as she opened her eyes and sat up abruptly. Then, she took a breath. "It's you."

"Who else?"

She removed the buds from her ears. "No one."

"What are you listening to?" he asked.

"Music." She moved to put the player aside.

Jake took it from her. "Let me listen."

He put the buds in his ears, and she turned on the controls. Immediately, music filled his ears. He looked up at her. "Beethoven?"

"The Moonlight Sonata." She shrugged. "It makes me feel centered."

He removed the buds from his ears. "Beautiful music. It's nothing to be embarrassed about."

She smiled at him. "It's kind of weird, don't you think?"

"Nothing about you is weird." He stroked her chin with the backs of his fingers.

"Everything about you is perfect."

She laughed. "You're biased."

"I'm blessed."

She took the player and set it onto the table next to the candle. "You say Klaus designed you for me. How could he even know about me?"

"No one understands Klaus but Klaus. Most people don't even know he's still alive."

"Tell me about him."

How to explain Klaus? His was such a remarkable story. Many people wouldn't believe it, despite the obvious fact that he could create motorcycles that could assume a human identity. "Klaus is well over one hundred years old and has seen a great deal of evil in his time on earth," he said.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "That old?"

"He's immortal now, although he was born as human as you were." Jake paused to organize the facts of Klaus Mannhof's life in his mind. "He started out as one of the early psychoanalysts, but he never found the theories satisfying. Especially the way they looked at women."

"In those days, psychoanalysis wasn't exactly woman-friendly," she said.

"Klaus had a wife and daughters he adored. He couldn't accept the way some of the men belittled them."

Her eyebrows went up. "As in Freud's complaint 'what do women want?'"

"Exactly." He took her hand in his and toyed with her fingers. "I hope I know what you want."

She laughed, but not with enjoyment. "If you figure it out, let me know."

He leaned toward her. "I won't tell you. I'll show you."

"Very tempting," she said. "But first, tell me about Klaus."

"Yes, well." He kissed the tip of her nose before straightening again. "Klaus became fascinated with the concept of Anima."

"I've read about that. That's Jungian. The internal female that even men have."

"Quite so," he said. "But Klaus came to believe that Anima was a real entity. Not just a concept or a part of a theory."

She gave him a quizzical look as if contemplating the idea. It must take a lot for a modern human who'd been raised with her feet firmly set in physical reality to accept the idea that a spirit like Anima could be real. He'd heard the story from his designer and so had had no reason to doubt it. "The more Klaus became convinced that Anima existed, the more he wanted to meet her," Jake continued.

"Where would you even start looking for a creature like that?" she asked.

"He read as much as he could about the ancient goddess religions. The rituals, the symbolism. He finally tracked her down to a cave in France."

Her eyes got wide. "You mean, he found her?"

"She was angry at first, but eventually, he convinced her that he'd come to worship her... and more."

"More?" she repeated.

"He told her, 'Anima, I've come here to learn how I may best serve women.'"

Her brows furrowed until her expression went past disbelief to discomfort. "That's weird."

"It isn't the way most men think about women," he said.

"You win the prize for understatement."

"But surely, at least one man could care that much about women."

She contemplated that idea for a moment. "I guess so."

"Anima was so moved, she granted Klaus eternal life, and she gave him the magic he needed to make a machine that could become a man."

"Anima likes motorcycles?"

"Not exactly." He chuckled. "Motorcycles were Klaus' idea."

"Something powerful between a woman's legs," she said. "Klaus *does* understand women."

"He teaches his creations to understand women too."

"So, you're the powerful machine between my thighs," she said.

"I hope to be." He smiled at her. "I'd like to be right now."

She reached to his erect cock and closed her fingers around the shaft. "You're designed just for me."

He accepted the pleasure of her touch, reliving the miracle of their joining beneath the redwoods. She seemed to enjoy stroking him, as she smiled while her hand moved from the base of his cock to the head. When her thumb slid over the tip, he took a sharp, inward breath. Good. So incredibly good. More stimulating than flying full throttle over a newly paved road. And this was only a beginning to the ecstasy she could give him while he drove her to her own climax.

"You have a beautiful cock," she crooned. "So large. So responsive."

"It only responds to you, *mein Schatz*."

"Flattery?"

"No, truly."

"Until now, sex was only sex," she said. "Something I did because men wanted it."

How sad. No wonder Klaus had selected this woman to receive his magic. Jake would show her all the joy men and women could make together. He'd already started with their first coupling, but he had much more to share. "Did you never climax before today?" he asked.

She seemed to blush at the question, even in this dim light. "Sometimes. Mostly, with my vibrator."

"We can use your vibrator together if you want."

She looked honestly surprised at that. "You don't find that threatening?"

"Why should I?"

She shrugged. "Most guys do."

"Has another man ever used the vibrator on you?"

She bit her lip and shook her head.

"Get it out."

She released his cock, and it missed the pressure of her fingers immediately. But they were in no rush. He'd have plenty of stimulation in the next few minutes. And he'd treasure it more than the ignorant men she'd given herself to in the past.

She flipped onto her stomach and reached to the floor behind the head of the bed. As she searched, her ass wiggled up at him. Two firm buttocks, stretching against the cotton of her sleep shirt. What a glorious sight. Sometime, in the bright light of day, he'd have to take her from behind so he could cup that firm flesh while his cock entered her pussy.

After a moment, she sat back up again. Her hand held a long wand with a sphere on the end. "How do you want to do this?"

He held his hand out. "Let me use that against your clit while you tell me how it makes you feel."

She gave him the machine, and he flipped a dial on the shaft. It appeared to have two settings -- high and low. For now, he set it to low. "Take off your shirt and lie back."

She lifted the garment over her shoulders and head and then tossed it on the floor. Now naked, she rested back, her head on the pillow. Then, she parted her legs in invitation.

He lay on his side, propping his head against his free hand, and moved the vibrating sphere along the inside of her thigh. "Do you ever tease yourself a little first?"

"No, and you'd better not tease too much either, pal."

"Don't worry. I promise to satisfy you." In fact, he'd satisfy her more than once before taking his own reward.

"Sometimes I read a sexy story before I get out the vibrator. I like the kind with pirates and English lords."

"I don't think I can be one of those." He moved the vibrator up her thigh and closer to her pussy.

She stretched, raising her arms over her head. "Other times, I just fantasize."

"And now?" After a slight hesitation, he placed the sphere against the lips of her sex. Lightly at first. Just enough to make some contact over her clit.

"Mmmmm," she crooned. "Yes, fantasy."

"What are you thinking about?"

"This afternoon. Beneath the redwoods."

He smiled. She'd chosen a fantasy that involved him. She wanted him, not Dagger or some other man. He remembered those blissful moments too. The trees, the fertile smells, the tightness of her pussy as it glided along the length of his cock. He'd have that again in a moment. Right now, he pressed the vibrator harder against her sex.

"Are you going to come?"

"Soon," she sighed.

"Will you think about me when you do?"

"I'll think about your erection and how it felt inside me. Big. Hard. Oh, yes. Yesssss."

"It's hard again now." Hard and throbbing. Aching to bury itself inside her.

She reached down and grasped the shaft then pumped until it swelled even more. "I'm remembering this inside me while you stroked my clit."

He turned the vibrator to high and circled it over her pussy, pressing and retreating.

"Don't stop," she gasped.

"Are you ready to come?"

"Yes. Please, don't stop."

Her grip on his cock grew stronger. He'd have to hold himself back somehow, because neither of them were ready for things to end now. She was ready for climax, though. Her breath came rapid and shallow, broken by moans. He lay there and watched her face as she got closer. Such an expression of bliss -- her eyes closed in concentration. Her gasps turned to soft cries and then built as her body stiffened. He held the vibrator hard against her as her back arched and she shouted out her climax.

The orgasm lasted for several seconds before she lay back against the bed, sighing. He removed the vibrator from between her legs and turned it off. After setting it onto the floor next to the bed, he pulled her into his arms and held her.

"Thank you," she whispered against his chest.

"My pleasure."

"I'll make it your pleasure, too, as soon as I can open my eyes."

"I don't doubt you will." He lay in silence for a moment. "Did you really fantasize about me?"

"Don't let it go to your head."

"It already has and to my heart."

She pulled back and looked up at him. "That's sounding pretty sappy."

He kissed her forehead. "Is there something wrong with sappiness?"

She shrugged. "I guess I'm not used to it."

"Get used to it," he said. "I'm going to make you feel like a princess."

"I'm no princess." She pressed against his shoulders, flipping him onto his back, and swung a leg over him until she was sitting on his belly. A wicked gleam entered her eyes. "Right now, I feel like a devil."

He gazed up at her. "You look like an angel."

"You need glasses." She grinned down at him. "Actually, what you need is a blow job."

Blow job -- oral sex. Fellatio. She planned to take his member into her mouth. Just the thought sent his imagination into high gear. Klaus had told him this was the most intimate thing a woman would do with a man and, in fact, many women wouldn't do it at all. He must have pleased her. Now, he only needed to maintain some control so that he could please her again.

She leaned over and kissed him, her lips impossibly sweet against his own. He slid his fingers into her hair and held her face to his. The contact of her mouth against his sent a shock through him, stealing his breath. His heart pounded in his chest until it felt as if it would burst with all the love in him. This perfect woman -- the one he'd been

designed for -- accepted him into her bed. It would take longer for her to accept him into her heart, but she would. Together, they'd make a perfect whole. He existed for nothing else.

He pressed her head upward so that he could gaze into her face. Her eyes had taken on the heavy-lidded appearance of a woman aroused. No doubt, he looked much the same. His rapid pulse, the difficulty getting air into his lungs, the way every inch of him felt eager for her touch, all those things signaled his human body's readiness to couple. Now, to draw out the pleasure.

"Let me kiss your breasts," he whispered.

"That's not going to let you off the hook. I'm still going to suck on your cock."

"I'm looking forward to it." What an understatement.

"Okay." She stretched forward, bringing her chest to his face. He took one nipple into his mouth and teased the other one with his hand. Using his tongue, he teased the peak into a tight bud and then sucked her deeper.

She squirmed against his torso as he worked, and her pussy spread moisture against his abdomen. "God, that feels good."

Switching to the other breast, he lifted it with his hand and ran his tongue along the underside. Her perfume filled his nostrils -- cologne and clean woman. She groaned, telling him without words of her pleasure, and her pelvis moved faster. He sucked the second nipple into his mouth and worked it until her moans turned to gasps. She'd grown so hot, so aroused, her passion enveloped them both. In another moment, he'd have her close enough to orgasm that she'd slide back, take his cock, and guide it inside her body.

She didn't, though. Working for breath, she sat up and squeezed her breasts with her hands. The sight might have come from an erotic dream -- her nipples tight and hard, moistened from his kisses, while she kneaded the soft flesh around them.

"You are so beautiful," he said.

"So are you." She climbed off him and grasped his cock. "This is beautiful."

"It wants to be inside you."

"In a minute." Her hand stroked his shaft while she bent and took the head into her mouth. He couldn't stifle a groan, the pleasure was so intense it felt as if it would take the top of his head off. Hot and wet, her lips and tongue worked him, sliding along his length and then flicking at the tip. And all the while her hand pumped him, even reaching below to rub his sac.

She lifted her head. "Good?"

*"Ach, Schatzie."*

"Do you want to come?"

"Inside you." And yet, he'd have to stop her from the blow job, as she called it, before much longer, or he wouldn't be able to control himself. Klaus had told him a lot, but he hadn't prepared him for this.

She chuckled and stroked his cock harder until a drop of pre-cum appeared at the tip of his cock. Then, she blended it with the moisture from her mouth, massaging it into his skin. After a moment, she went back to sucking on him, sliding her lips as far down on his shaft as she could.

He grasped the bedspread on either side of him and surrendered to her loving. In a minute, he'd stop her. Just another minute. But for now, it felt too damned good.

In another moment, he was lost. The passion claimed him as the real world disappeared. Only Lauren existed, her hand and mouth making him wild. The climax loomed, gathering strength at the base of his spine. He needed to be inside her. Now.

"Stop!" he shouted.

She lifted her head but continued pumping him with her hand. "Had enough?"

"Not nearly enough." Before she could say another word, he sat up and tossed her onto her back. He only paused to part her legs before climbing between them and driving his cock deep inside her.

"Yes!" she cried. "Oh God, you're big."

"I'm sorry," he gritted as pulled back and thrust into her, even deeper this time. "I can't be gentle."

"I don't want gentle. Fuck me, Jake. Please, fuck me."

He did. He plunged into her over and over again. Fucking was the only word for it. As hot as she'd made him, nothing less would do. Mindless, blind lust took control of him. Each thrust made him wilder, drove him closer to an explosion of his soul. He'd empty himself into her in a moment. No power on earth could prevent it.

"Don't stop," she cried.

Stop? He could no more stop than fly.

"I'm going to come." She grasped his buttocks, squeezing with her fingers. "Don't stop. Make me come."

"Yes." His voice came out human, but in his mind, he'd become a machine. Pistons pumping, engine revving, he drove them both along the road to oblivion. Closer and closer to a precipice, both of them flying together. Harder, faster, they reached the climax and shattered. Her body convulsed first, tremors racking her pussy and gripping his cock. He came right after, the semen shooting out of him and into her core. They screamed together as they came with a force that tore them loose from reality.

After a long, shuddering moment, it ended finally, and they rested together, her legs still curled around his body.

"Hey." A voice from the doorway. "Who the fuck are you?"

Lauren gasped and looked over. "What are you doing here, Dagger?"

Jake looked in that direction. The man stood there, a look of pure fury on his face.

"What I'm doing," Dagger said, "is watching my woman fuck another man."

Lauren slid out from underneath Jake and sat up. "I'm not your woman."

"Everything here is mine." Dagger pointed at Jake. "Except for this asshole. Who is he?"

Jake stood up, putting himself between Dagger and Lauren. The bastard had made threats against her before. If he thought he'd touch her now, he'd have to fight Jake first. Klaus had designed him for lovemaking, but he'd also given Jake a great deal of human strength. If Dagger tried something, he'd regret it.

"Lauren invited me here," he said.

"The Pit is my place," Dagger answered. "She has no right."

"Go away, Dagger," she said from behind Jake.

"If you fuck anyone, you'll fuck me." Dagger tried to push Jake aside, but Jake held his ground.

"She doesn't want you anymore," Jake said. If, indeed, she'd ever wanted him.

Dagger lifted his hand and made a fist, but he didn't swing. No doubt, he realized he wouldn't win a fight with Jake. Bullies were cowards at heart and seldom picked on anyone who could fight back.

He glared at Jake for a minute before lowering his hand again. "I want you gone tomorrow, asshole. I don't want to see your face again."

"No problem," Jake answered. "We'll leave first thing in the morning."

"Not 'we.' You. Lauren stays."

"She's had enough of you. I'm taking her with me."

Dagger looked around Jake to where Lauren sat on the bed, still naked. "What do you say? Are you going to go with him?"

She lay on the bed and rolled over, facing the opposite wall. "Go away, Dagger."

Dagger glared back at Jake. "You leave tomorrow. She stays."

Then Dagger turned and left the room. Jake followed him and closed the door. It didn't have a lock. Finally, he went back and sat on the bed beside Lauren. "That settles it. Tomorrow, we leave."

## Chapter Four

Lauren lay curled up on the bed and listened to Jake closing the door and then announcing that they'd be leaving the next day. She'd enjoyed the sex so much. In fact, she'd probably enjoyed the secret of his existence even more. They both took her out of the cesspool of normal existence at The Pit. Now, her reality would collide with her dream. She'd have to tell Jake she wasn't going anywhere with him tomorrow or any other day.

"I'm glad that's settled," he said.

She sat up and pulled her knees up under her chin. "Uh, Jake..."

He sat next to her and looked into her face. "What?"

She stared into his crystal blue eyes and fought with herself for the right words to tell him that she was an abject coward.

"We are leaving tomorrow, aren't we?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't see how."

"You pack some things. I shift into my machine body, and we ride out the front gate."

"I wish it were that simple."

"Perhaps you should explain why it isn't."

She hugged her legs to her chest. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

"You must have some money saved," he said.

"Not much. Drug habits cost a lot."

He smiled. "Well then, we'll live on that until we can get jobs."

"You've been a motorcycle too long." She reached out and touched his face.

"What kinds of jobs could we get?"

"I could..." His voice trailed off, and for good reason. What could he put on a résumé? Part-time man, part-time motorcycle? He didn't have any degrees or work experience. Maybe he could model. He was so damned good looking with his platinum hair, remarkable eyes, and full lips. Neither of them knew a whole lot about modeling, though.

"You could work, and I could keep you happy." He gave her a wicked grin. "I wouldn't mind being a kept man."

She had to laugh. "I'd love that. If only I had the money to keep you."

"Someone else would hire you for the same job you have here."

"Booking manager?" she said.

"You've done well by Dagger, no?"

Had she ever. The man was, literally, a rock star, with one of the largest egos in that narcissistic firmament. Everyone, but everyone, wanted him, and he'd only do appearances for mega-bucks. Even then, his contracts included a list of demands that would give a hijacker a woody. She dealt with all that plus Dagger's toxic personality and hair trigger for violence and pulled off miracles.

"You'd think someone else would want me, wouldn't you?" she said.

"You won't know until you try."

"I have tried. Multiple times. I didn't exactly set the world on fire." For months, she'd sent queries and résumés by snail mail and e-mail. Dozens of them, to anyone she could think of. She'd never received replies. She'd finally gotten sick of being ignored, and she'd given up.

"No one wanted to hire you?" he asked.

"No one even wanted to talk to me."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Look, Jake. I'm no prize."

"Not true." His eyes widened, and he looked honestly hurt and surprised.

"You're my treasure."

"Yeah, I know." She sighed. "But you're nuts."

"No, *Schatzie*."

"Look, Jake. I'm a high school dropout. The only job I've ever had was for the biggest dick in the music business. For most of my adult life, I've been gorked out on anything I could smoke or snort. I'm a waste of protoplasm."

"No!" He jumped from the bed and paced the room. "You will not talk about yourself that way."

"Jake, you don't know who I am."

"Then, perhaps you'd better tell me."

"All right." Shit. She'd had to go through all this crap in rehab, and they hadn't let her make her whole life into a sick joke. They'd made her face it straight on. Hard to say which was worse -- telling her sordid history to other people or accepting it herself. Jake was the first good thing that had happened to her. Hell, he was a fucking miracle, when you got right down to it. Now, she'd have to repeat everything to him. He wouldn't think her much of a treasure at the end, but -- hell -- he was going to find out all about her some time. Might as well get it over with. Then, when he rejected her, she could get on with her life. Again.

"I was a real stinker starting in junior high," she said. "Cutting classes, hanging out with boys."

Actually, she'd been putting out for boys, but she didn't feel like telling Jake *that*. Maybe he'd figure it out for himself.

"I drove my parents crazy. They tried to help me. God, how they tried, but I knew better what was good for me."

"Lots of children are rebellious," he said.

"Jake, I was hateful. Foul mouthed. Smoking, drinking, anything I could do to piss them off. I even hurt my little brother."

He stared at her. "You hurt him?"

"Not physically, but I made the house into a battle zone. Screaming, flying vases. Everything was about me and my problems. Timmy told me once he hated me, and I couldn't blame him."

"That was a long time ago."

She threw her hands up. "Then, I got worse. I dropped out of school and got in trouble with the law. I fought anything anyone did to try to pull me back from the brink. I lashed out -- sometimes physically. Always verbally. No one could do anything with me."

He sighed. "So, what happened?"

"I ran away from home, finally," she said. "One night, I went to one of Dagger's concerts. I thought his music spoke to my soul. I know now it was only his hatred speaking to my own."

Jake crossed his arms over his chest. "When was that?"

"When I was eighteen. I snuck backstage to meet him, and that was the end of my 'normal' life."

"He seduced you then?" Jake asked. "When you were so young?"

"I was legal. Dagger's too smart to go for jail bait."

Jake clenched his fists by his side. "Too young."

"I wasn't a virgin, Jake."

He ran his hands through his hair. Frustration. He was getting to know her for real and didn't like what he was discovering. No surprise there.

"I haven't done anything much better since I hooked up with Dagger, either," she said. "At least I've worked for my keep."

She didn't add that she'd worked for the drugs Dagger had supplied. She'd talked to him often enough about her life when she'd thought he was only a motorcycle. He'd heard her drunken, drugged-out ravings.

"I stayed here. Kept working for Dagger," she said.

Jake's jawed tightened. "Kept sleeping with him."

"Sometimes." She hesitated. "Worse, I said nothing when he brought home newer, younger meat."

"And got them hooked on drugs."

"All right." She put her face in her hands. That seemed less childish than covering her ears to keep out his words. "You know who I am, what I've done."

"The woman I know -- the hurt, little girl who used to hide in my garage -- has a treasure inside her that no one but I see."

"Jake, you're an innocent." What else could he be? Until today, he'd only experienced the world as a machine. A beautifully designed and hand made machine, but still not human. He still had to learn about humans and their imperfections.

"You knew enough to rescue yourself by going to be cured," he said.

"Self-preservation only. I didn't have any higher motivation."

"I don't believe you."

"Why in hell not?"

He sat on the bed again. "Because Klaus made me for you. He wouldn't do that if you weren't worthy."

"He made a mistake."

Jake took her face in his hands and forced her to look up. "The Designer doesn't make mistakes."

Gazing at him -- at the utter openness of his expression, the determined set to his jaw, the adoration in his eyes -- she could almost believe him. For the first time she could remember, a tiny spark of hope warmed her heart. Surely, if some mythical Designer could have created a creature like Jake for her, she must have something inside her to earn his goodness and beauty.

"You know I'm right," he said.

"I know you're nuts."

"No, *Schatzie*. I love you, and I'm going to prove it to you."

*Love?* He could love her? He said he knew her. He'd sat beside her during her darkest moments, and he still said he loved her. Unbelievable.

"Lie back," he said. "I'm going to show you your own beauty."

Show her her own beauty? That made no sense at all. She stared at him, searching his face for understanding. All she found was love as he guided her back against the bed and covered her body with his own.

He stared at her for a moment, smiling, and then closed his eyes and kissed her. So softly, his lips felt like rose petals brushing over her own. She tasted him. Drank the nectar of his breath as he continued, first to one corner of her mouth then the other and finally kissing her full on.

Who could have guessed the world could hold so much sweetness? She surrendered to it. Doubts, fears, cynicism... all of them evaporated in the heat of his kiss. When he sighed, she answered. When her heart skittered in her chest, his own beat strong above it. When he ended the kiss, she opened her eyes to find him smiling down at her with that look on his face. Love. Reverence. All the things she didn't deserve but would accept, anyway.

*"Du bist so schön,"* he whispered.

"I'm not beautiful."

"You are. Every inch of you." He nibbled her earlobe and then placed kisses along the line of her jaw. "Beautiful here."

"Jake..."

"Beautiful here too." He dipped beneath her chin and caressed the length of her throat all the way to her collarbone. "Soft."

She'd slept with a lot of men and had even made love with a few, but none of them had ever treated her body with such reverence. He moved lower, his lips gliding over her chest and down the furrow between her breasts. His tenderness could draw tears from a stone, and as hard as she'd become over the years, her heart hadn't petrified yet. She could have fought, could have made a wisecrack, but in truth, he'd won. He'd gotten inside her and touched her soul. Now, she could only lie back and accept his love. Love. Who would have thought?

When he took a nipple into his mouth, she arched her back. Her body took control, responding to the pure pleasure of his mouth against her skin. He moved to the

other breast and loved that peak too. Her heart raced in her chest, and she had to work for breath. Then, he released her nipple and moved lower, over her ribs to her belly. Oh, God. He was going to kiss her pussy. Take her clit into his mouth and suck until she came.

On and on he went, his lips leaving a trail of fire while his arms separated her legs. She began to throb there, aching while she waited for the touch of his mouth where she most needed it.

*Please. Oh, please.*

Although she expected his mouth on her pussy, the shock at the contact made her hips jerk upward. He ran his arms around her thighs and held on, pulling her sex harder against his lips. His tongue flicked out and grazed her clit. Pressing, rubbing, teasing. She gasped, struggling for breath as heat spread from the point of contact to her entire body. Too much, too intense, and yet, not enough.

He didn't stop but continued tormenting her with his tongue and lips. Faster, harder. Sending her to the edge of reality and pausing just long enough for her to breathe. Then, starting all over again.

She floated in a world filled with lust and love, unspent passion and tenderness. She'd climax soon, and the orgasm would change her forever. No matter what lay on the other side for her, she'd open herself to it. Jake would keep her safe. He'd make her whole.

The tension built as her body prepared itself for the explosions. Deep inside her, the pleasure built into a huge wave. Towering upward. Ready to crest.

A cry started in her chest and rose to a shout as her pussy clenched and then erupted into spasms. All through the ecstasy, through the madness, only one thought remained. *Jake. Oh, Jake!*

As if she'd called his name aloud, he came to her. As her orgasm ebbed, he rose above her and drove his cock deep inside her pussy. Massive, powerful thrusts drove her farther and higher. His voice joined hers as she came again. They clung together, sharing orgasms, as he spilled his seed into her.

The storm raged inside them for several heartbeats, and then, they lay together as the world returned. Still impaled on his hardness, she drifted into a half-world of sounds and touch. The warmth of his body against hers. The smoothness of the comforter below her. His ragged breathing. Her own sighs. Heaven.

His lips grazed her eyelids. "Sleep, my love."

Surrounded by his love and cradled in his arms, she drifted off.

\* \* \*

Jake watched Lauren sleep. She'd finally let him touch her tonight. They'd made love before, but this time, she'd truly let him know her.

Before, when she'd only thought him a machine, she'd talked to him. She'd revealed her pain. Always masked by cynicism, of course, and vicious humor aimed at herself. She'd never shared the details, though. She'd never told him how she'd allied herself with a sadist like Dagger. And then, most of what she'd told him had come out slurred by alcohol and other drugs. Tonight, she'd shown him the woman who listened to Beethoven and regretted how she'd hurt her little brother.

She had a family somewhere. Why hadn't they tried to find her? Dagger and his entourage were public figures. Her family could have tracked her down if they'd wanted. Had they searched for her and met resistance?

She whispered something in her sleep. Mumbling, followed by his name. "Jake."

He pulled her closer and let her nose burrow into his chest. True, Klaus had designed him for Lauren, so he could hardly do anything but love her. But still, no one could hold her and not want to keep her with him. For her family not to want her -- despite what she'd put them through -- didn't make sense.

Nor could all the places she'd applied for work have rejected her. Education or not, she had a valuable talent and lots of work experience. No public figures in their right minds would refuse to at least give her an interview.

None of this made sense. The outside world must have tried to contact her. Why hadn't they gotten through?

Despite the late hour, noises still echoed through the house. Dagger and his crew clearly partied into the wee hours. If so, they'd sleep much of the day. Tomorrow, he'd look around and see what he could find out about why Lauren had become so isolated from the outside world.

\* \* \*

The next day, Jake helped himself to some clothes from one of the men's rooms and went looking around the compound. Sure enough, at eight in the morning, everyone still slept, even Lauren. She had to be exhausted after everything that had happened the day before. If Jake had been merely human, he'd probably still snooze beside her.

He didn't find much of interest in the main house. Nothing but bedrooms upstairs. Downstairs held the dining room, kitchen, and recreation room with pool table and huge plasma television. Where most people would have a formal living room, Dagger's staff had a fully equipped gym.

What was he looking for, anyway? Probably some kind of command and communications center. With all the laptops in the house and the equipment in the recording studio, Dagger had to have some powerful computers. Probably an Internet and e-mail server. If anyone had tried to contact Lauren electronically, he might find the information he wanted there.

Dew was just burning off the lawn as he walked past the pool to the closest guesthouse. One of them might serve as an office.

The first of the cottages was empty, but a second one -- set farther away from the main house behind some trees -- held more promise. The door was locked, so he peeked into a window. Sure enough, he caught sight of a desk and executive chair. Several file cabinets of polished wood stood off to one side. They'd hold records and correspondence. Just what he was looking for.

He walked around the cottage, testing windows for another way in as he went. Finally, at the back, he found an open window. Before he could make for it, two male voices came to him.

He inched slowly to the opening and quickly glanced inside. Two of the crew – Steve, in shorts and a torn T-shirt and Howie in jeans -- sat at a large conference table. Steve hunched over a computer terminal while Howie looked over his shoulder. “Did you find anything?” Howie asked.

“Shit, no, I didn’t find anything. There’s nothing to find. Dagger’s gone ‘round the bend again.”

“He says someone’s beaming rays at him.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “That’s nuts. Just more of his paranoid ravings.”

“I dunno. He seems serious.”

Steve swiveled his chair around and glared up at the other man. “You know he gets batshit crazy when he does too much coke. Was he into it again last night?”

“We all were.” Howie fidgeted, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “Come on, man. You gotta find something.”

“You’re as crazy as he is, asshole.”

“Okay, okay.” The other man started pacing. “Fake something. Make it look like you found the rays and disabled them.”

“There aren’t any fucking rays!” Steve yelled.

“Just pretend there are, or Dagger’s gonna go ape.”

“Did he sleep at all last night?” Steve asked.

“No, man.”

“Well, shit. You know what happened last time.”

“That’s why I’m telling you you gotta do something!”

“Maybe I can cook something up,” Steve muttered, “but it’ll be as crazy as Dagger is.”

Steve tapped the keys furiously, and Howie hung over him, staring at the screen. Jake leaned against the cottage wall and let his mind work. To get in there and into the computer files, he’d need to get the other men to leave. Perhaps if he thought up some distraction, he’d get a few minutes alone. If he alerted the compound that the Mannhof

had disappeared from its garage, the whole staff would check it out. How could he best do that?

Before he arrived at an answer, someone pounded on the front door of the guesthouse. "Steve? Howie? You in there?" a female voice called. After that came more knocking. Loud and frantic, as if she'd crash right through the door if she could. "Open up. It's serious."

"Yeah, yeah," one of the men answered.

"I'm not kidding, Steve," the woman yelled.

Jake peeked into the window to find that the man in jeans had let Jill into the cottage. Her face was red and her eyes full of fear.

"Dagger's flipped out," she said. "He's going to get his Uzi and start shooting."

"Shit," Howie said. "Aren't the guns locked up?"

"He's threatening everyone to unlock them," she answered. "He says we're all part of the conspiracy to kill him."

"Shit, he's out of his mind," Steve said.

The woman grabbed him by the arms and shook him. "Someone has to talk him down."

"Either that or sit on him until he comes down on his own," Howie said.

"Come on, both of you." She turned and left the room. The two men only hesitated for a moment before they followed.

Jake waited a bit to make sure they'd all left and then climbed in the window. Dagger and his insanity ought to keep them busy for a while, and he'd have time to check the computer and the files and get away before anyone came back.

Software had changed since Klaus had taught him about e-mail and electronic files, but just about every program had a search icon somewhere. He'd probably pull up thousands of files if he searched for Lauren, but with any luck, something would jump out at him. Because this machine worked so fast, the results appeared in under a minute.

One folder stuck out immediately. Inside Lauren's directory of e-mails, these lay in the subdirectory called "résumé." The first several came from Lauren sent to outside addresses. Each consisted of a cover letter and an attached résumé.

Following those came more messages coming from the outside to Lauren. He opened the first -- from a talent agency -- asking to arrange an interview. They hadn't ignored her application. They'd responded with interest, but obviously, Lauren had never received the reply.

With each click of the mouse, he found another reply to her query -- from musicians, authors, television and radio networks. Almost all of them asked for more information. The only negative ones suggested that she contact them later to see if they'd had an opening.

Jake pounded his fist against the table. Someone had intercepted these e-mails and kept them from her.

Bastard. Dagger kept his people like serfs. He made them dependent on him for the drugs they were hooked on. Then, if one of them managed to get off the drugs as Lauren had, he convinced them the rest of the world didn't want them. Who knew how many of his staff could live happy and productive lives somewhere else? Lauren would, starting today. Then, when she'd gotten away from him and had a chance to clear her mind, the two of them would figure out what to do about the others. Dagger would *not* get away with this forever.

He clicked through a few more e-mails. As the talent agency got more and more frantic to talk to Lauren, they mentioned letters they'd sent through the regular mail. She'd had paper correspondence she'd never seen.

He swiveled away from the computer and looked around for a place Dagger's people might have hidden those letters. His gaze fell on a side room. Little more than a huge closet, it had no windows, but it did have file cabinets in it. The storage room. If they'd saved Lauren's letters, he might find them in there.

He walked in and switched on the overhead lamp for a better view. The first several drawers he opened held what one would expect. Sheet music with various

arrangements for Dagger's songs. Contracts. Directories. Calendars. Nothing very interesting.

One drawer was unlabeled except for a symbol -- a skull and bones. Humor, perhaps, but also a clear warning. Of course, that drawer was locked.

He went back into the main room. If he couldn't find the keys to the cabinets here, he might find some other way to get into that drawer. No keys appeared, but a toolbox sat on the floor in one corner. He knelt by it, lifted the top, and found a heavy screwdriver and a hammer. With those in hand, he went back into the file room and began to work on the locked drawer.

After a few minutes and quite a bit of work, he managed to force it open and looked inside. Sure enough, it held lots of letters to various members of staff. Dagger hadn't singled Lauren out for mistreatment. None of his people got all their mail. Included in the pile, he found the letters from the talent agency, but he found another one too. The return address had the name Tim King. Timmy? Lauren's little brother.

He took the letter from the opened envelope and read.

*Dear Ms. King,*

*I found your name on Kid Dagger's website. I'm writing in hopes that you're my sister who disappeared a few years ago.*

*A picture slipped from the envelope. It showed a teenage girl and a younger boy. Lauren -- his Lauren -- and her brother, the author of the letter. He turned the letter over and read the end.*

*If you are my sister, I want you to know that your family loves you and misses you. Please get in contact with us so that we can patch things up and be a family again.*

*Love, Timmy*

*Verdammt Scheisskopf.* Dagger had kept Lauren away from her own family. She thought they hated her. Losing the world was bad enough, but it didn't come close to losing the people who loved her.

Now, at least, he'd be able to convince her to leave. If he took the rest of the letters, maybe he'd be able to get the whole crew to quit.

He scooped all the paper up into his arms and only then noticed a plastic bag in the bottom of the drawer. When he put the letters inside, his hand hit something else. A leather binder. He scooped that out -- a ledger of some sort. Inside was page after page of entries. Some kind of transactions with weights in grams and kilos and sums of money. Huge sums of money. Whatever these weights were, they cost a lot per gram. Like caviar or white truffles. Or cocaine. *Lieber Gott*. Dagger's drug bookkeeping. Huge amounts. If his people had taken all this cocaine, they'd all have died by now.

Actually, if you read across the fold of the pages, like a spreadsheet, the type of transactions became clear. The drugs were coming into Dagger's compound and going out in smaller quantities. He didn't just give his staff poison. He dealt it and on a large scale.

Good. With this information he could shut Dagger down. He could send the bastard away to prison for years, if not for life. Dagger wouldn't ruin any more human beings.

With everything stashed in the plastic bag again, Jake headed toward the main room. Before he got there, the sounds of voices came to him. Several of them, one Dagger's.

"Find the goddamn rays, Steve," Dagger shouted.

"There aren't any rays, Dagger," Steve answered.

"Sure, there are," Howie said. "You found them and destroyed them."

Steve groaned.

"You're part of the plot!" Dagger howled.

"Come on, man," Howie said. "Sit down and chill."

"I can't chill. My fucking head is splitting open from the rays. If it doesn't stop, I'm going to fucking kill someone." Something heavy crashed against the wall. Dagger had thrown something with glass that shattered and fell to the floor. He'd whipped himself into a rage with the help of cocaine. He'd gone past irrational and volatile to

outright dangerous. If only they'd go away again, Jake could call the police before Dagger hurt someone. Or worse.

"Okay, okay. I'll stop the rays," Steve said.

Things got quieter in the outer room. Keys clicked as Steve worked on the computer. Someone paced the room, probably Dagger. Back and forth, back and forth. Then, the footsteps stopped.

"Who's been in the file room?" Dagger demanded.

"No one. Why?" Howie said.

"The door's open." The footsteps approached where Jake hid. He couldn't escape. If Dagger found him here, he'd lose any connection to sanity. Jake's only choice to avoid detection was to shift. He dropped the bag and shifted, not even getting out of his clothes. They ripped apart and fell to the floor.

Dagger stood in the doorway, Howie and Steve right behind him.

"That fucking bike," Dagger said. "I should have known. The thing is trying to kill me."

"It's just a machine," Steve said.

"Oh, yeah? Then, how did it get here?"

"Someone put it here as a joke," Steve answered. "Lighten up."

Dagger pointed to the open file drawer. "It's been in my personal shit."

"Chill, Dagger. It's a machine," Howie said.

"Bullshit. I should have killed it before. I'm going to do it now." Dagger slammed the door closed. Keys rattled, and the lock clicked.

The three men trooped out of the other room, leaving silence behind them. What now?

Jake shifted back to his human form and tried the door. Locked, as he'd expected. How in hell could he get out of here? Before he had a chance to think of a solution, the other men returned.

"Don't do this, Dagger," Howie said. "It'll bring the cops down on us."

"Bullshit," Dagger said. "It's my property. I can burn it to hell if I want to."

Something splashed out there, and gasoline fumes filled the room.

"Think of the computers," Steve said.

"Fuck the computers. Get out of here before you fry."

"Shit!" Steve yelled. "He's going to do it. I don't fucking believe it."

"Get out!" Dagger shouted.

Footsteps faded away. Steve and Howie. Then came the sound of a match striking. Dagger had set fire to the cottage, and Jake was still inside.

## Chapter Five

By the time Lauren got to the guesthouse, flames were working their way up the walls. Dagger danced around in front of the fire, a look of pure insanity on his face.

"Die, fucker," he shouted. "Die. Die."

"What in hell is going on?" Lauren asked Steve.

"Dagger's lost it."

"I can see that," she said. "He started the fire?"

"When he found the bike in the file room, he flipped out," Steve said.

"He thinks it's trying to kill him," Howie added.

"The bike?" She grabbed Howie's shoulders and shook him. "The Mannhof?"

"Someone put it in there," Howie answered. "Picked the wrong day to mess with Dagger's head."

"Is he... it... still in there?"

Howie shrugged. "I didn't see it come out."

Shit. Jake was inside there, and the whole house would be on fire in a few minutes. "I have to get him out."

"It's just a machine," Steve said.

"You don't understand," she said.

"It's expensive, but it isn't a person."

Damn, the man she loved was inside a burning building and none of them understood. "I'm going in there."

Steve grabbed her. "I called the fire department."

"They won't get here soon enough."

"You can't go in there, Lauren."

"Try to stop me." She kicked him in the shin, hard enough that he bent to rub his leg. Before anyone else could grab her, she ran to the front door of the cottage and let herself in.

Outside, people shouted as more of the staff showed up. Voices called to her, but she ignored them. Steve had said Jake was in the file room, so she headed in that direction.

The main control room had filled with smoke and heat. She coughed and dropped to the floor in hopes of getting air. "Jake!"

The sound of his engine came to life as he butted the file room door again and again.

"Stand back, Jake, I'll open it."

*Get out of here, Schatzie.*

"No way. I'm not leaving without you."

The smoke got thicker, choking her lungs. She pulled her shirttail up over her nose and mouth, but she still couldn't breathe. She had to get them out of here. Now.

*Listen to me and then get out, Lauren. There are letters in here for you.*

Her vision blurred and swam in the smoke as she crawled toward Jake, using his mind to home in on him.

*Employers. Lots of them. They want you.*

"Yeah, yeah. I'm coming."

*There's one from your brother. Your family loves you. They want you at home.*

Her hand hit something metal lying on the floor. Keys. Someone had dropped his keys. One of them might unlock the file room. It had better, or she and Jake were both dead. After another foot or two, she found the door itself.

"Get back, Jake. I have the key. I'm going to let you out."

*Run, Lauren.*

"Shut the fuck up." She coughed again, her lungs burning. Reaching up, she found the knob and tried a key. Nothing. She tried another one. Still locked. Shit. Finally, the third one worked, and the door opened.

Smoke poured into the room, but not before she found Jake in his cycle form, his engine revving. "Okay, let's get out of here."

*I swear, if we live through this I'm going to ream you a new one.*

"Nice language."

*Get on the floor, and get some breath.*

"You need oxygen too," she said.

*I have enough.*

She got her face as close to the floor as it would go and gasped in what little air she could get.

*Now, grab that plastic bag.*

"Plastic bag?"

*Just do it!*

Sure enough, she found a sack full of what felt like papers. "Got it."

*Now, get on my back and hang on!*

She took one more breath of hot air and smoke, rose, and climbed onto Jake. The moment she did, he flew out of the file room. In the main room, he hesitated as if assessing the situation. Walls of flame shot up all around them. Lauren held her breath rather than breathe in the foul gasses, and her lungs burned. How in hell were they going to get out of here?

Then, Jake turned and revved his engine until the roar drowned out even the sound of the flames. He put himself in gear and lurched forward so fast she almost lost her seat. But she managed to hang on while they charged right toward a curtain of flame. With no choice but to trust Jake, she hunched over and clung to the handlebars for her very life. The fire burned her as they dashed through. A window lay straight ahead, and Jake shifted gears again until they leapt into the air and soared through the panes. Glass shattered all around her as they flew outside and landed on the lawn with a jarring thud.

Jake didn't stop but charged around the cottage and down the main path toward the main gate of the compound. Still coughing, Lauren sucked cool air into her lungs.

Jake's engine purred as he guided her to where police and fire personnel were just coming up the drive.

The fire trucks didn't stop but continued toward the guest cottage. One police patrol car drove up to her and Jake, and as soon as Jake came to a stop, an officer climbed out of the car, grabbed Lauren and rolled her on the driveway.

Until that moment, she hadn't even realized her clothing was on fire. Pain shot through her now, though, as the burns hit the pavement. She shrieked and almost passed out, but then the officer picked her up and carried her to the lawn, where at least she could feel grass against her skin. Not much better, but a little.

A pleasant looking blond man, he stared down at her. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I had to do that."

"Thanks."

*Give the officer the sack,* Jake said.

She looked over at where he lay on the pavement. The policeman had knocked him over, but with any luck, he hadn't been damaged. They were both alive.

*Give it to him,* Schatzie.

Miracle of miracles, she still had the bag in her hand. She held it up to the officer. "I think you'll find this interesting."

She had no idea what was in there, of course, but if Jake wanted him to have it, that was good enough for her.

The officer took it from her. "Now, let's get you to a hospital."

"Take my bike with us, please."

"It'll be fine here."

She grabbed his uniform. "Please. I need him... it. Please!"

He studied her face for a minute. "I'll see if I can find someone to drive it behind us."

"Thanks." She rested back against the grass.

*I'll be there, Schatzie. I'll never leave you.*

\* \* \*

Lauren sat on the front terrace of Dagger's house -- or soon-to-be-former house -- looking down the drive toward the entrance to the compound. Outside the boundaries of what had been her world, a whole new life waited for her. She only had to reach out for it.

Why did that scare the shit out of her?

Jake came out from the house and dropped a duffel bag onto the flagstones. "This ought to do it."

She looked at the things they'd packed. They'd only be able to take whatever could be strapped to Jake after he shifted. But then, there was so little worth keeping.

"Ready to go?" Jake asked.

"More than ready." She took a breath. "It's just hard."

He sat on the bench beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. "Dagger needed to be shut down."

"As bad as I knew he was, I had no idea how low he'd gone. He probably wrecked hundreds of lives."

"He won't get out of prison until he's an old man. If then."

She patted his knee. "We done good."

"You did. It would have all burned in the guesthouse if you hadn't rushed in there like an idiot."

"I'll have to testify at his trial," she said.

He lifted her chin and pressed a kiss to her lips. "You can do that too."

She smiled. "I suspect I can do anything if I have you."

"Just try to get rid of me."

She ran her arms around his ribs and rested her head on his shoulder. "I think I'm most worried about seeing my family."

"How did they sound when you talked to them?"

"Great. Better than I deserve."

"They love you, *Schatzie*."

They'd sure sounded as if they did. Mom had cried, obviously with relief and joy to hear from her. Dad had called her cupcake as he had when she'd been a little girl. Timmy... Tim... had been full of stories of what all he'd been up to since she left home - lots of them about his friends at the high school she'd dropped out of. She had a chance to deserve their love, and she'd sure as hell take it.

"You're scared, aren't you?" Jake said.

"Yeah. I guess."

"Everything will be fine," he said. "You'll reconnect with your family. We'll find jobs."

"Thanks to what you found in the file room, I can believe that now."

He looked down into her face, his crystal blue eyes full of adoration. "I always believed in you. Whatever you do, I'll be there to cheer you on."

"And keep me happy in bed, I imagine."

He laughed. "We do that for each other."

"I love you, you know."

"I love you too. Forever."

She kissed him then, taking the honey from his lips as if it would be her last time. It wouldn't be the last time, though. She'd have him every day and every night for the rest of her life. With his love as a base of support, how could she fail?

A familiar roar came up the drive. She broke off the kiss and looked in that direction. "That sounds like your engine."

"I'm sitting right here," he said.

She shaded her eyes. Someone -- a woman -- was approaching the house on a motorcycle.

Jake jumped to his feet. "*Lieber Gott.*"

Lauren also rose. "It's another Mannhof. Do you believe it?"

"I guess I have to."

It *was* another Mannhof. Very much like Jake, but not exactly. It pulled right up to the terrace and stopped. The rider turned off the engine and set the kickstand. After dismounting, she removed her helmet and walked to Lauren, her hand extended.

"Claire Wilcox," the woman said. "I'm so glad we found you."

Lauren shook her hand. "I'm Lauren King."

"Yes, I know. We read about you in the newspapers."

"We?"

The other bike shifted into human form, going through the same process Jake did. Leather turned to skin, metal to bone and muscle. In a moment, a naked man stood there. Beautiful in his own way, but no more stunning than Jake.

Jake let out a whoop of surprise and delight as the other man approached him and wrapped him in a bear hug. The two of them launched into a conversation in German, far too fast for Lauren to follow.

Lauren looked at Claire Wilcox. "I thought there were more Mannhofs, but I didn't think I'd get to see one."

"I bought him a few months ago at auction. I knew at the time Kid Dagger already had one, but I wasn't sure where to look for him until the news hit of his arrest."

"So you came looking for us?"

"Of course. Wouldn't you?"

Lauren watched the two men. They acted like long-lost brothers who'd finally found each other. "Did you know Jake would be able to shift?"

"I was pretty sure. If he could, I needed to recruit you."

Lauren must have looked surprised, because Claire chuckled and unzipped a pocket in her leather jacket. She produced a business card and handed it to Lauren.

Lauren glanced at it. "You're a CEO?"

"Of a large company. I'm always looking for good people to work for me."

"Wow." Not the most profound thing to say, but it captured the situation pretty well.

"I'll give you jobs in my firm, and the four of us will work on a special project."

Saying wow again would definitely make Lauren sound language impaired, so she just stared at Claire.

"There are more Mannhofs out there," Claire said. "And special women who've proved worthy of such magical men."

"There must be."

"Let's find the rest of them."

"And when we do?" Lauren asked.

Claire gave her a knowing smile. "I imagine Klaus Mannhof has a grand plan for his creations. Let's discover what it is."

"Awesome!" Again, not what you normally said to a CEO, but heck... it *was* awesome.

"Will and I have an SUV at the motel," Claire said. "Why don't you and I ride our bikes back there and make some plans?"

Jake stopped talking to Will and turned to gaze at Lauren. Imagine. She had her family back. She had a job and a future full of adventure. And she had the love of the greatest man in the world. Awesome, indeed.

Claire turned to the men. "You two ready to go?"

Jake smiled. "Let's ride."

## **Alice Gaines**

Award winning author Alice Gaines has published several sensuous and erotic works. She prefers stories that stretch the imagination, highlighting the power of love and sex. Alice has a Ph.D. in psychology from U. C. Berkeley and lives in Oakland, California, with her collection of orchids and two pet corn snakes, Casper and Sheikh Yerbouti. Visit her website at <http://home.pacbell.net/halice/>.